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The Place, Space, and Practice of  
Andrew Wyeth's *Hay Ledge*

by

Edwin Rein Harvey

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History of Art

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Margaretta M. Lovell, Chair

Professor Timothy J. Clark

Professor David M. Henkin

Spring 2014

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by

Edwin Rein Harvey

Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Margaretta M. Lovell, Chair

The works of the American painter Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) have for many decades been subjects of contentious debate amongst historians and critics of art. The great majority of these scholars have tacitly agreed, however, that Wyeth's works are simple matters—that be they good or bad, “artistic” or “illustrative,” innovative or apish, “modern” or “traditional,” they are obviously or self-evidently so. Such beliefs are implied, at least, by the practice of withholding from publication the concrete observations about individual works upon which broad, totalizing claims about Wyeth and his practice have been reached.

Intending to correct this mistaken belief about the simplicity and uniformity of Wyeth's work, this dissertation enacts a sustained encounter with a single painting—*Hay Ledge* (1957)—working at length over the course of three close-knit chapters to demonstrate 1) the formal, conceptual, and sentimental depth of this particular work, 2) the fact that Wyeth's art practice changed over time, and 3) the complexity of the cultural contexts to which that practice responded and in which Wyeth's works in general, and *Hay Ledge* specifically, have been received and appraised. It thereby begins to bring Wyeth's practice into a more stable, balanced light, thus enabling scholars of art and culture more broadly to reconsider an historically significant phenomenon that they might previously have found too opaque or too polarizing to engage.

For CEH, who supported me from the very beginning, and  
in memory of Melanie Gadener, whose own promising  
dissertation was sadly left unfinished.

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	iv
INTRODUCTION	ix
1. CHRISTINA'S "WORLD"	1
2. PRACTICING <i>HAY LEDGE</i>	25
3. WYETH'S MAINE	71
CONCLUSION	98
ILLUSTRATIONS	101
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	169

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With finances in place, a dissertation becomes a matter of ideas. In terms of responsibility, those expressed herein are my own. In terms of origin, they come as much from other people as they do from me: specifically, the many committee members, peers, and professional colleagues who found this project worth critiquing and improving.

Margaretta Lovell was quite simply indefatigable in this regard, tirelessly reading draft upon draft and patiently reining me in from one quixotic conceptual digression after another. If not for her I'd still be out tilting at windmills. David Henkin asked precisely the right questions at the right times, over and over again; I'll never understand how he does this, but I'm glad that he does. Tim Clark, in whose seminar on "Surface, Space, and Standing" this project began, pulled no punches in his invaluable criticism, trusting that I'd be only grateful; I am. I can't claim to have done these three committee members justice in the following pages, but I have certainly enjoyed trying.

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Lastly, I am happily indebted to my family and friends, who were always there to remind about the larger world of which this project was a part and yet still encouraged me to see it through to the end. Thankyouplease!!!

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

- I.1. Andrew Wyeth, *Hay Ledge*, 1957. Tempera on panel, 21 ½ x 45 ¼ inches. Private Collection.
- I.2. Page 102 of the May 17, 1948 issue of *Life* magazine.
- I.3. Andrew Wyeth, *Karl*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 30 ½ x 23 ½ inches. Private Collection.
- I.4. N.C. Wyeth, *Columbus Discovers America*, 1942. Oil on panel, 27 x 25 ½ inches. United States Naval Academy Museum.
- I.5. N. C. Wyeth, *Columbus Discovers America*, c. 1942. Charcoal on paper, 45 ½ x 39 ½ inches. Private Collection.
- I.6. N.C. Wyeth, *The Wreck of “The Covenant”*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 40 ½ x 32 ¼ inches. Brandywine River Museum.
- I.7. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina’s World*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 32 ½ x 47 ¾ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- I.8. Andrew Wyeth, *Night Hauling*, 1944. Oil on panel, 23 x 37 inches. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.

### CHRISTINA’S “WORLD”

- 1.1. Andrew Wyeth, *Hay Ledge*, 1957. Tempera on panel, 21 ½ x 45 ¼ inches. Private Collection.
- 1.2. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina’s World*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 32 ½ x 47 ¾ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1.3. Detail of Figure 1.1.
- 1.4. Detail of Figure 1.1.
- 1.5. Detail of Figure 1.1.
- 1.6. Exterior view of the barn at the Olson House, Cushing, Maine. Digital photograph taken by the author in 2009.
- 1.7. Interior view of the barn at the Olson House, Cusing, Maine. Digital photograph taken by the author in 2009.



1.8. Andrew Wyeth, *The Rope*, 1957. Watercolor on paper, 20 x 12 inches. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

1.9. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957. Watercolor on paper, 21 ½ x 28 inches. Private collection.

1.10. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957. Pencil on paper, 21 x 27 inches. Private Collection.

1.11. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957 (Detail). Pencil on paper, 14 x 23 inches. Private Collection.

1.12. Detail of Figure 1.1.

1.13. Detail of Figure 1.1.

1.14. Detail of Figure 1.1.

1.15. Andrew Wyeth, *Hoffman's Slough*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 29 ¾ x 55 inches. Everson Museum of Art of Syracuse and Onandaga County.

1.16. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hoffman's Slough*, 1947. Watercolor on paper, 29 x 41 inches. Private Collection.

1.17. Detail of Figure 1.15.

1.18. Andrew Wyeth, *Coming Storm*, 1938. Watercolor on paper, 18 x 22 inches. Private Collection.

1.19. Andrew Wyeth, *Night Hauling*, 1944. Oil on panel, 23 x 37 inches. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.

1.20. Andrew Wyeth, *The Hunter*, 1943. Tempera on panel, 33 x 34 inches. Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio.

1.21. Andrew Wyeth, *Christmas Morning*, 1944. Tempera on panel, 23 ¾ x 38 ¾ inches. Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

#### PRACTICING *HAY LEDGE*

2.1. Andrew Wyeth, *Hay Ledge*, 1957. Tempera on panel, 21 ½ x 45 ¼ inches. Private Collection.

2.2. N.C. Wyeth, *Blubber Island*, 1938. Oil on panel, 25 x 40 inches. National Academy Museum, New York.

- 2.3. Rockwell Kent, *Afternoon on the Sea, Monhegan*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 34 x 44 inches. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.
- 2.4. William Hogarth, *The Painter and his Pug*, 1745. Oil on canvas, 35 x 27 inches. Tate Britain.
- 2.5. Detail of Figure 4.
- 2.6. Andrew Wyeth, *Study for Hay Ledge*, 1957. Watercolor on paper, 21 ½ x 28 inches. Private collection.
- 2.7. John Constable, *The Hay Wain*, 1821. Oil on canvas, 51 x 73 inches. The National Gallery, London.
- 2.8. Detail of Figure 6.
- 2.9. Andrew Wyeth, *Alvaro's Hayrack*, 1958. Watercolor on paper, 8 x 22 inches. Farnsworth Museum.
- 2.10. Andrew Wyeth, *Study for Hay Ledge, 1957 (Detail)*. Pencil on paper, 14 x 23 inches. Private Collection.
- 2.11. Andrew Wyeth, *Study for Hay Ledge, 1957*. Pencil on paper, 21 x 27 inches. Private Collection.
- 2.12. Andrew Wyeth, *The Rope*, 1957. Watercolor on paper, 20 x 12 inches. Worcester Art Museum.
- 2.13. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 32 ½ x 47 ¾ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 2.14. Andrew Wyeth, *Study for Christina's World, 1948*. Pencil on paper, 12 x 18 ¾ inches. Marunuma Art Park, Asaka, Japan.
- 2.15. Andrew Wyeth, *Egg Scale*, 1959. Watercolor on paper, 14 x 17 inches. Private Collection.
- 2.16. Lucian Freud, *Girl with a White Dog*, 1950-1. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches. Tate Britain.
- 2.17. Lucian Freud, *Francis Bacon*, 1952. Oil on copper, 7 x 5 inches. Tate Britain.
- 2.18. Andrew Wyeth, *Young Bull*, 1960. Watercolor on paper, 19 7/8 x 41 3/8 inches. Private Collection.
- 2.19. Andrew Wyeth, *Raccoon*, 1958. Tempera on panel, 48 x 48 inches. Brandywine River Museum.

- 2.20. Andrew Wyeth, *Miss Olson*, 1952. Tempera on panel, 25 x 28 inches. Private collection.
- 2.21. Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30, 1950)*, 1950. Enamel on canvas, 105 x 207 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 2.23. Andrew Wyeth, *Young America*, 1950. Tempera on panel, 32 1/2 x 45 1/4 inches. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.
- 2.22. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Brown Swiss*, 1957. Pencil on paper. As reproduced on page 55 of Thomas Hoving, *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

### WYETH'S MAINE

- 3.1. Andrew Wyeth, *Hay Ledge*, 1957. Tempera on panel, 21 1/2 x 45 1/4 inches. Private Collection.
- 3.2. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on board, 29 x 25 inches. Art Institute of Chicago.
- 3.3. Andrew Wyeth, *Winter, 1946*, 1946. Tempera on Panel, 31 3/8 x 48 inches. North Carolina Museum of Art.
- 3.4. Andrew Wyeth, *Hoffman's Slough*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 29 3/4 x 55 inches. Everson Museum of Art of Syracuse and Onandaga County.
- 3.5. Andrew Wyeth, *Snow Flurries*, 1953. Tempera on panel, 37 1/4 x 48 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 3.6. Andrew Wyeth, *Brown Swiss*, 1959. Tempera on Panel, 30 x 60 1/8 inches. Private Collection.
- 3.7. Andrew Wyeth, *Seed Corn*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 15 3/8 x 22 inches. Private Collection.
- 3.8. Andrew Wyeth, *Wind from the Sea*, 1947. Tempera on panel, 18 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches. Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst Massachusetts.
- 3.9. Andrew Wyeth, *Miss Olson*, 1952. Tempera on panel, 25 x 28 inches. Private collection.
- 3.10. Andrew Wyeth, *Weatherside*, 1965. Tempera on panel, 48 1/8 x 27 7/8 inches. Private Collection.

- 3.11. Andrew Wyeth, *River Cove*, 1958. Tempera on panel, 48 x 30 ¼ inches. Private collection.
- 3.12. Andrew Wyeth, *The Slip*, 1958. Dry brush on paper, 20 x 29 inches. Private Collection.
- 3.13. Andrew Wyeth, *Trodden Weed*, 1951. Tempera on panel, 20 x 18 ¼ inches. Private Collection.
- 3.14. Andrew Wyeth, *Faraway*, 1952. Drybrush on paper, 13 ¾ . 21 ½ inches. Private Collection.
- 3.15. Andrew Wyeth, *Groundhog Day*, 1959. Tempera on panel, 31 3/8 x 32 1/8 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- 3.16. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948. Tempera on panel, 32 ½ x 47 ¾ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

## INTRODUCTION

Andrew Newel Wyeth was an American painter born in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania in 1917. He drew and painted casually as a child and underwent formal artistic training as an adolescent. In his late teens he began to work professionally as a book illustrator, a magazine cover artist, and a maker of personally expressive, one-off paintings for individual sale to galleries and collectors. Wyeth was successful in all three pursuits. In his mid twenties, however, he would leave the former two behind in order to focus exclusively on the latter, working rapidly to build his reputation on the foundation of a well-received one-man show at the MacBeth gallery in New York City in 1938—on view were a series of watercolors (landscapes mostly), all of which sold within a matter of weeks. By the time of Wyeth's death in 2009 his paintings were selling at auction for millions of dollars, and they continue to be displayed prominently today in elite private collections and in major American museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Despite his seventy-odd years of continuous productivity and easy sales, there has long been disagreement amongst critics, historians, and the general public about precisely what sort of “artist” Wyeth was. This dissertation, “The Place, Space, and Practice of Andrew Wyeth’s *Hay Ledge*,” explores the origins of these disagreements and ultimately offers its own assessment of Wyeth’s art in terms of cultural production and historical significance. Rather than totalizing Wyeth’s practice, style, or oeuvre, as previous scholarship has done, this study sets apart a single work—*Hay Ledge*, a tempera painting from 1957—in order to demonstrate the diversity, complexity, and changes over time of his practice. (Fig. I.1)

Wyeth was the youngest child of Newel Convers Wyeth (1882-1945), a prolific illustrator of widely popular children’s adventure books, and he has been recognized by many people, for better and for worse, as his father’s artistic legacy. An article about the younger Wyeth in the May 17, 1948 issue of *Life* magazine conflated the practices of the two Wyeths through a juxtaposition of photographs even before its text had a chance to begin.<sup>1</sup> (Fig. I.2) Like father, like son, the twin pictures suggest: each shows a painter and his materials (palette, brushes, easel, paints) intervening between the lens of the camera and a finished painting. *Life*’s captions mention neither that Andrew painted *Karl* (1948) on speculation in matte-surfaced tempera nor that N.C., as Newel was popularly known, used refulgent, layered oils for his *Columbus Discovers America* (1942), which he intended for mass reproduction as part of a 1943 calendar titled “Flags in American History.”<sup>2</sup> (Figs. I.3- I.5) Without such distinctions in mind these two artists and their respective pictures look essentially the same, especially on *Life*’s glossy paper. And as well they should, at least according to the opening paragraph of the article’s text, which

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<sup>1</sup> “Andrew Wyeth: An American Realist Paints What He Sees,” *Life*, May 17, 1948, 102.

<sup>2</sup> For more on N.C.’s *Columbus Discovers America*, see Christine B. Podmaniczky, *N. C. Wyeth, A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings* (London: Scala, 2008), 689.

established an artistic lineage from Howard Pyle (the grandfather of Brandywine Valley illustration) to N.C. to Andrew.<sup>3</sup>

In 1967 the prominent art critic Lawrence Alloway reiterated this association between N.C.'s illustration and Andrew's painting:

[Andrew] Wyeth was trained by his father and his work is basically a continuation of his father's projection of unique fine art into mass distribution channels. Andrew Wyeth illustrates even when there is no extant text, even when the work is not intended for reproduction (though his dry, low-toned works reproduce well).<sup>4</sup>

Coloring Alloway's remark with disparagement was the implicit premise of a linear progression of artistic innovation, one which situated the illusionistic representation of literary content and visible nature in an early-modern past that had been supplanted (so modernist critics believed) by a modern era of material purity and aesthetic idealism.

Twenty years later Alloway's assertion was reiterated by a chorus of high-brow voices assembled by Douglas McGill in an article for *The New York Times*. Those quoted include Hilton Kramer, editor of *The New Criterion*, Robert Rosenblum, a New York University art historian, Edmund Pillsbury, director of the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and Henry Geldzahler, formerly a curator of modern art at the Met.<sup>5</sup> The year was 1987 and the occasion was a highly publicized traveling exhibition of Wyeth's works, which opened at the National Gallery of Art and toured for two years through prominent institutions in Boston, Los Angeles, Houston, and elsewhere. According to Pillsbury, "[Wyeth is] more of an illustrator than a great painter. ... He's a sentimental artist. His paintings tell stories. They're anecdotal, not profound; backward-looking and not forward-looking."<sup>6</sup> Naming some of those more "forward-looking" artists, Geldzahler put the matter even more bluntly: "In a world that has Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns and Willem de Kooning, you don't give Andrew Wyeth a one-man show."<sup>7</sup> "[Wyeth's art is] provincial," added Kramer, "it's sentimental, it's illustration and it's without substance. ... It's one of those illustrated dreams that enable people who don't like art to fantasize about not living in the 20th century."<sup>8</sup> Rosenblum was more equivocal than the others, but he, too, ultimately displaced Wyeth's practice from the present era to a more primitive past:

Wyeth needs to be looked at closely as simply the artist that he is rather than as a cunning demon whose grass-roots constituency would win a landslide election against the modernist party. Wyeth may be one of the

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<sup>3</sup> "Andrew Wyeth: An American Realist Paints What He Sees," 102.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Alloway, "The Other Andy: 'America's Most Popular Painter,'" *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 6 (April 1967), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas C. McGill, "'Helga' Show Renews Debate on Andrew Wyeth," *New York Times*, February 3, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

last authentic survivors of a very endangered 19th-century species whose lingering presence in our own desperately complicated century can be at once balm to the innocent and poison to the sophisticated.<sup>9</sup>

These critics' attempts to control the ongoing debate about Wyeth's practice were ultimately overwhelmed, however, for the show was well attended and Wyeth's works were as well supported as they were derided. Indeed McGill declared that Wyeth's Washington exhibition "has stirred a more intense debate among art professionals than any other museum show in recent memory."<sup>10</sup>

In all of these antagonistic claims about Wyeth from the later twentieth-century are nuggets of truth that ought not to be ignored. The wide availability of diminutive, glossy reproductions of Wyeth's works have spread false appearances of clarity, sharpness, and technical exactitude with regard to paintings which, when viewed directly, are as messy as they are precise. Indeed when people see Wyeth's pictures in person they often describe them as strange and abstract. By the same token—that is, on account of their engagements with both naturalism and abstraction, clarity and strangeness—Wyeth's paintings are vulnerable, in a quick, first-hand glance, to accusations of a slapdash eclecticism that is as shallow as it is clever.

In a longer view, however, Wyeth's works are equally describable as artistically innovative and lucidly expressive of a rich inner life, including the artist's perceptions of and responses to the various visual and material cultures in which he lived. The extended engagement with *Hay Ledge* recorded in the following chapters is intended in part to show that Wyeth's best works staked out an intriguing middle ground between expressive abstraction and earlier traditions of painting and illustration, an area of artistic endeavor that links Wyeth to equally understudied American and European contemporaries such as Jack Levine, Frank Auerbach, and Lucian Freud. It does so by taking up Rosenblum's suggestion to look "closely" at Wyeth and by revisiting Alloway's claim that Wyeth divorced the process of illustration from its transitive object but not from its populist milieu, arguing that Wyeth was at his best when he adapted the concept and techniques of illustration not only to show and reveal but also to deviate and obscure—as if, in some cases, to use illustration against itself in order authentically to represent his experiences of people, objects, environments, and ideas. Unsurprisingly then, this dissertation's primary mode of expression is enactment and demonstration: it works to reveal and explain the choices that Wyeth made about how, what, and why to paint. At stake will be our understanding of the opportunities and challenges that that this well informed, mid-twentieth-century American artist faced, for example, how to balance, on one hand, a demand for social engagement and pictorial accessibility with, on the other hand, a personal imperative toward privacy and environmental exclusivity and a modern artistic drive toward idealism and opaque materiality.

These examinations of Wyeth's practice are not intended to undercut the importance of early-twentieth-century practices of illustration within the history of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

American art. On the contrary, I hope to draw new scholarly attention to the continuing relevance of traditional art practices through the later twentieth century and up to the present day, as well as to encourage our histories of earlier artistic endeavors—be they illusionistic or abstract, speculative or bespoke, one-off or intended for reproduction—to move away from teleologies of mid-twentieth-century American modernism and toward more plural histories of individual artistic motivations, styles, theories, and intentions. N.C. would in fact make for a fascinating case study in this regard, for he was as intense about his “art” as he was successful in his illustrations, occasionally turning down book, calendar, and magazine commissions in order to work on stylized landscapes and genre scenes for juried exhibitions in Philadelphia and New York.<sup>11</sup> But even the oil originals for N.C.’s illustrations hang for good reason in museums and private collections, wherein they are appreciated in part for the broad, traceable strokes of paint that call attention to the artist’s conscious mediations between authors’ texts and readers’ recognitions.

Unfortunately, however, this dual appreciation of N.C.’s works as one-off oil paintings and prototype pictures has made it difficult to appreciate the subtlety of the younger Wyeth’s creative variations on his father’s practice, especially for beholders who share Alloway’s distaste for the idea of a middle ground between works of fine art and mass reproduced and widely distributed pictures. This tandem conflation—of N.C. with Andrew and of Art with Illustration—was enacted on the pages of *The Art Bulletin* in 2006. The context was an episode of that publication’s “Interventions” series, specifically, a methodological debate amongst a group of notable historians of American art.<sup>12</sup> Alexander Nemerov provided the opening argument in the form of a description of the of early-twentieth century American visual culture of fantasy and imagination within which N.C. produced his *Wreck of the Covenant* (1913)—a work that Nemerov rightly identified, albeit in passing, as a compositional inspiration for Andrew’s *Christina’s World* (1948). (Fig. I.6 & I.7) At issue for our purposes here is the fact that Nemerov used culturally loaded terms such as “painting,” “picture,” “illustration,” and “image” more or less interchangeably without acknowledging the period (or present day) distinctions between them. Among the discussants, Eric Rosenberg came closest to pointing out these problematic confluences. He suggested that beneath Nemerov’s explicit and compelling explanation of the visual cultures of reading and late-Romantic imagination was an implicit and more questionable claim about the irrelevance of medium and the practicalities of production in an historical moment that was as much early-Modern as late-Romantic.<sup>13</sup>

The Wyeth family legacy has, if nothing else, driven interest in Andrew’s biography at the expense of serious discernment of his work. The art critic Jay Jacobs lamented this interest in Wyeth’s celebrity in *Art in America* in 1967. Instead of arguing that Andrew’s works could stand on their own, however, Jacobs suggested that popular

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<sup>11</sup> N.C.’s biographer, David Michaelis, describes him as “forever split between illustration and easel painting,” a description that the middle chapters of Michaelis’s biography fully support. Michaelis, *N.C. Wyeth, a Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 315.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Nemerov, et al., “Interventions,” *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 1 (March 2006), 7-68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-33.



fascination with Andrew's life story and personality had caused valuable journalistic attention to be wasted upon undeserving works of art:<sup>14</sup>

[The] Wyeth legend [is] told and retold in almost the same words by *Time*, *Life*, *Reader's Digest*, *Woman's Day*, *Show*, *Harper's*, and *Horizon*: the child too frail to go to school; the loner communing with the mud and skies and compost heaps of Brandywine and Knox counties; the young apprentice painting out his grief after the death of his mentor-father in a tragic accident; the Hallowe'en masquer who through some rural alchemy performed beneath a harvest moon transmutes pigment and egg yolk into the odor of pumpkins and wood smoke; the Vespa-mounted rough rider; the plain-talking chauvinist who refuses to travel abroad and distrusts all things "Renoiresque and Frenchy;" the publicity-shy recluse (who seems to see nobody but journalists); the all-American grass-roots country boy who accepts and is accepted by Presidents and Negro handymen on terms of easy equality.<sup>15</sup>

According to Jacobs, consumer interest and critical engagement with this "legend" had buoyed Wyeth's reputation despite the fact that "formal criticism" of the artist's works should, had it ever rigorously been performed, have revealed them to be of little consequence in the contemporary art culture of post-World-War-II America.<sup>16</sup>

Even sympathetic accounts of Wyeth's practice have done little to disturb such beliefs, in large part because they have aimed more to be inclusive of the totality of Wyeth's oeuvre than to address the details and particularities of specific paintings and drawings. Wanda Corn's 1973 catalog essay, "The Art of Andrew Wyeth," as well her subsequent New York University Dissertation, "Andrew Wyeth: the Man, his Art, and his Audience" (1974), helped to concretize this convention of characterizing Wyeth's oeuvre en masse. Many of Corn's serial observations about Wyeth's pictorial tendencies and painterly tropes hold up well to scrutiny, especially in terms of Wyeth's studied manipulations of pictorial space. However, insofar as her analyses move quickly from work to work with only minimal description, Corn's two publications established a habit among Wyeth scholars of totalizing widely interpretable phenomena such as, for example, the most persistent aspects of Wyeth's practice over time and the stable essence of his personality.<sup>17</sup> Such big-picture concerns may be important, but without rigorous descriptions of the details within them they are unlikely to draw new consideration of

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<sup>14</sup> Jay Jacobs, "Andrew Wyeth: An Unsentimental Reappraisal," *Art in America* 55 (January/February 1967), 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Wanda Corn, "The Art of Andrew Wyeth," in *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat., ed. Wanda Corn (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1973), 93-166; and Corn, "Andrew Wyeth: the Man, his Art, and his Audience" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1974). Specifically in terms of Wyeth's representations of space, see Corn, "The Art of Andrew Wyeth," 104-116.

Wyeth's works from those scholars and critics of art—the overwhelming majority, as far as I can tell—who presently doubt that those works have much, if anything, to offer.

Adam Weinberg's "Terra Incognita: Redefining Wyeth's World," a catalog essay from 1998, is another example of an otherwise admirable art history of Wyeth's works that sacrifices specifics in the name of broad characterizations of the artist's oeuvre as a whole. Weinberg's study is promising insofar as it restricts itself to a single genre ("landscape") and works therein to identify the multitude of divergent "realisms" with which Wyeth experimented over the course of his career. Yet Weinberg spends no more than a few lines on any given work, and he even explicitly laments the brevity of his "summarizing" account.<sup>18</sup> While surveys such as Weinberg's and Corn's have developed terms and concepts by which those who are already familiar with Wyeth's works can better understand them and the practices that produced them, they ultimately offer little incentive for those who are skeptical of Wyeth, the celebrity, to confront the material and visual specifics of his individual works.

A pair of more recent studies from Nemerov and Randall C. Griffin have continued, albeit passively, to support Jacobs's claim about Wyeth's artistic irrelevance. Attending exclusively to the imagery in his paintings as present windows onto past cultures and world views, these two articles play down the significance of Wyeth's paintings as deliberate interpretations, alterations, or productions of culture. The first of these two texts was Griffin's 2010 study in *American Art*, "Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*: Normalizing the Abnormal Body," which brings a mid-century discourse on disability and bodily abnormality to bear on Wyeth's most famous work.<sup>19</sup> This study deserves praise for its novel perspective on a "clichéd" work of art, as well as for the conviction with which it positively remarks upon Wyeth's complex, insufficiently addressed artistic endeavors.<sup>20</sup> However, Griffin's essay fails to flesh out Wyeth's artistry; instead it ranges widely through social and cultural history. Thus his art-critical judgments require pre-existing sympathy from his readers, which cannot reasonably be expected of a present-day scholarly audience when Wyeth is the subject at hand.

The second article is Nemerov's brief but ambitious "The Glitter of *Night Hauling*: Andrew Wyeth in the 1940s," which appeared in *The Magazine Antiques* in 2012.<sup>21</sup> Nemerov treats *Night Hauling* (1944) as a state-side variation upon the visual culture of the aerial wars being waged in Europe and the Pacific. (Fig. I.8) As he often does, Nemerov makes a strong case here for the usefulness of works of art to scholars from various disciplines who study American popular culture, demonstrating how these works can be understood as gathering points for circulating imagery. In the process, however, he characterizes Wyeth as a passive and uncritical receptacle for this imagery,

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<sup>18</sup> Adam Weinberg, "Terra Incognita: Redefining Wyeth's World," in *Unknown Terrain: the Landscapes of Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat., ed. Beth Venn and Adam Weinberg (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1998), 14-35.

<sup>19</sup> Randall C. Griffin, "Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*: Normalizing the Abnormal Body," *American Art* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 30-49.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Nemerov, "The Glitter of *Night Hauling*: Andrew Wyeth in the 1940s," *The Magazine Antiques*, May/June 2012, 146-156.

as well as for various contemporary artistic styles, indicating that Wyeth's paintings drew upon but never innovated artistic movements and traditions (e.g., Surrealism or Howard Pyle's Brandywine Valley style of illustration).

On the whole then, Jacobs's declaration that Wyeth's works have escaped the "formal criticism" that would have laid bare their inadequacies remains largely unchallenged. Many books, articles, critiques, and catalog essays have dealt with Wyeth's life, his models, and his imagery, but his individual compositions, forms, and the material indices of his paint application have been addressed only cursorily. Moreover, the connections that are made from background information to the paintings themselves are typically implicit and imprecise, as if to avoid disturbing the primacy of the human interest appeal of the "Wyeth legend" and the fascinating people that Wyeth painted.<sup>22</sup> Tellingly, the many published reproductions of Wyeth's works are only rarely accompanied by details of his paintings or remarks upon the material and visual complexity that may have been lost in the process of reducing and reproducing them for publication.

The notable exception to this convention of brevity and reduction where Wyeth's individual works are concerned is Kathleen Foster's 2005 essay on *Groundhog Day* (1959), which patiently maintains a focus on that particular work as such—that is, not only as an artifact of visual culture, a reflection of history, or a representation of one of Wyeth's fascinating neighbors but also an index of an artistic thought process, an active assessment of available techniques and traditions, and a visual-material expression of personal perceptions and imagination.<sup>23</sup> Foster thus took an important step toward the validation of some of the intuitively compelling but ultimately insufficiently supported conclusions presented in the studies listed above. In doing so she began to remedy the visual-formal neglect that Jacobs rightly pointed out. Moreover, she began to debunk Jacobs's long un-refuted claim that close looking can sink the Wyeth ship.

Following Foster's lead in terms of a steady focus on a single work, this dissertation engages at length with *Hay Ledge*, amounting to a single essay that unfolds over the course of three close-knit chapters. The first of these, "Christina's 'World,'" reads *Hay Ledge* as a painterly demonstration of the subjectivity of spatial experience with regard to both pictorial illusions and everyday life. Describing this painting's indexical (i.e., material) and iconic (i.e., pictorial) prompts for its beholder to look and to think circumspectively, I argue that Wyeth aimed both to point out and to resist a twentieth-century-American trend toward rationalism, objectivity, and simplification that fit neither with his own practice of art nor with the daily, lived experiences of the people

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Frederick A. Sweet, ed., *Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1970); Thomas Hoving, "Andrew Wyeth," in N.C. Wyeth, et al., *An American Vision: Three Generations of Wyeth Art* exh. cat. (Chadds Ford: Brandywine River Museum, 1987), 118-123; Thomas Hoving, ed., *Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography* exh. cat. (Boston: Bulfinch Press and Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1995); Richard Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); and Gene Logsdon, *The Mother of All Arts: Agrarianism and the Creative Impulse* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Kathleen A. Foster, "Meaning and Medium in Wyeth's Art: Revisiting *Groundhog Day*," in *Andrew Wyeth: Memory & Magic* exh. cat., ed. Anne Classen Knutson (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2005), 85-102.

that he studied as models and cared for as friends—specifically, in this case, his neighbors in rural Maine, Christina and Alvaro Olson, whose personalities, routines, and inhabited spaces Wyeth had been studying and painting each summer since the mid-1940s. Rather than providing new knowledge about the Olson siblings and their farm, however, Chapter 1 works primarily to understand the *ways in which* Wyeth understood, sympathized with, and painted his carefully studied subject matter.

The phenomenological terms and concepts by which this first chapter understands the overlapping “worlds” of Wyeth and his model-friends come primarily from Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927). The central claims of this twentieth-century philosophy illuminate the painterly progression that Wyeth made toward *Hay Ledge*, which Chapter 1 identifies as a revision of Wyeth’s earlier and more famous *Christina’s World*. Specifically, it is argued that *Hay Ledge* more authentically represents in visual-material form the experience of relating cared-for objects within a subjectively constructed “space,” to the point at which a beholder can not only see Christina’s, Alvaro’s, and Wyeth’s intertwined worlds but can also experience for himself a sense of desire and thus a “world” of his own. With regard to Wyeth scholarship as a whole then, the descriptions of *Hay Ledge* and *Christina’s World* presented here make the case for a discernible change over time in terms of Wyeth’s approach to a more or less stable subject, and also, in this chapter’s first section especially, for the divergence of interpretations that can result from viewing Wyeth’s works in person and through reproduction.

Chapter 2, “Practicing *Hay Ledge*,” takes up Wyeth’s deliberate inhabitation of the aforementioned middle grounds between “illustration” and “painting,” modernism and tradition, and illusionism and surface decoration. Whereas Chapter 1 addresses the matter of Wyeth’s practice in terms of specific instances of paint handling and composition, this second chapter engages that practice more broadly, reading *Hay Ledge* as a nuanced demonstration of Wyeth’s inclusive embrace of his formal training in N.C.’s studio, his study of the works of American and European old masters, and his exposure to the innovations of the mid-twentieth-century avant-garde. The phenomenological matters of space and circumspection are recast here in terms of Wyeth’s intention, circa 1957, toward an ellipticality of style, form, and content that is found to be central to his theory of art. Assembled from published interviews and from *Hay Ledge* and other works, that theory, circa 1957, is boiled down to a thoughtfully applied (but nonetheless problematically cavalier) concept of artistic “freedom,” one which variously brought Wyeth close to and kept him at odds with the prevailing theories and methods of twentieth-century modernism.

This second chapter is the most historiographical of the three. It interweaves the history of Wyeth’s art practice with a more or less chronological survey of the reception of his work from the 1930s to the late 1960s, including the widely varying roles that Wyeth and his works were made to play within art-critical and art-historical debates about the “Americanness” of modernism and traditionalism. Anchoring all of these surveys to *Hay Ledge*, I argue that this particular painting can be read as an exhibition of its own history, and thus that it can, if we endeavor to engage it on its own terms, serve as a useful point of reference for larger, surrounding histories—of mid-twentieth-century

American art in general, for example, or of the evolution of the visual-artistic concept and practice of “illustration” in the dynamic artistic (and art-market) contexts of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The final chapter, “Wyeth’s Maine,” brings the discoveries of the previous two chapters together in terms of “place,” a concept that is broad and abstract enough to account all at once for Wyeth’s interests, vis-à-vis *Hay Ledge*, in matters of art practice and theory; social and pictorial space; and conditions of personal, cultural, and terrestrial-environmental locality. Place, I suggest, is the central, unifying theme of *Hay Ledge*, a work of art by which Wyeth localized his complex sense of being—by which, in other words, he created an enclosed, private *here* to which he was powerfully, confidently local. In so doing, I argue that Wyeth was also providing his beholder with an incipient *there*, the potential completion of which (through observation and interpretation) offers that beholder a sense of place of his own.

Place is thus not treated broadly here as a matter of regionalism or local community; nor is it merely a conceptual counter point to the matter of space—i.e., “place” as a function of specificity and tradition and “space” as the stuff of a homogeneous, modern universe. Such oppositional concepts of place are in play, to some degree, in Chapters 1 and 2, where contexts of need and desire give rise within a public, shared world to private, phenomenological “places” to which cared-for things seem naturally to belong. For example, we shall initially find the white dory in *Hay Ledge* to be “out of place” in the sense that it sits in the dry loft of a barn instead of in the sea for which it was designed and also “in space” insofar as that dory becomes, on the surface of *Hay Ledge*, a visual form with a distinctly aesthetic appeal. Chapter 3, by contrast, presents a more precise and specific concept of place, one pertaining directly to *Hay Ledge* and the practice that produced it. The terms and concepts by which this very particular sort of “place” is defined, and by which Wyeth’s development toward it is explained, come from a diverse group of thinkers whose ideas and motivations are found to be similar to Wyeth’s own, including Henry David Thoreau, Yi-Fu Tuan, Gaston Bachelard, and Timothy Oakes. This place-centric, unifying interpretation of *Hay Ledge*, with its recourse to the ideas of theorists beyond Wyeth himself, is intended to raise new possibilities for understanding the material and visual totality of *Hay Ledge* and the art practice that produced it, and thereby to provide new inroads to Wyeth’s art for scholars who have previously found it difficult or distasteful to discuss in conjunction with that of his contemporaries.

Finally, allow me to acknowledge not only that close looking has been essential to the research presented here but that lengthy passages of description will be encountered in the pages that follow, and moreover that instances of ambivalence and contradiction will be found within and between them. These internal disagreements are never intended to fool my reader or to catch him off-guard. They are meant instead to present with minimal reduction a series of complex and occasionally divergent ideas and phenomena that Wyeth’s practice engaged and that *Hay Ledge* represents. By enacting such complexities in a rational manner, I hope to recast Wyeth’s art as a newly stable point of reference in light of which to revise our broader histories of the art and visual cultures of mid-twentieth-century America. Indeed the ambivalences and contradictions contained herein

deliberately acknowledge the process by which my understanding of Wyeth's art practice has been reached, and I would hope that they make my assertions about that practice easier to accept and refute. For such is my purpose in this project as a whole insofar as the "purpose" of art history might be said to be that which arises between thesis and method: that is, the provocation of new problems, new questions, and new perspectives by way of traceable descriptions of works of art and novel analyses of prior problems already at hand.

## 1. CHRISTINA'S "WORLD"

*When we just look at things 'theoretically,' we lack an understanding of handiness. But association which makes use of things is not blind, it has its own way of seeing which guides our operations and gives them their specific thingly quality. ... The kind of seeing of this accommodation to things is called circumspection.<sup>1</sup>*

– Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927

Wyeth finished painting *Hay Ledge* in the summer of 1957, but he left it untitled until its first public exhibition the following spring. (Fig. 1.1) The show in which the work appeared, "Paintings & Sculpture by Nine Maine Artists," opened in June of 1958 at the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine. By then the anonymous painting had already been sold, and thus the Farnsworth had to borrow the work itself from one sort of owner and to learn its title from another. The former was Robert Frederick Woolworth—a Wall Street business man, a part-owner of the Detroit Tigers baseball franchise, an avid art collector, and later on, beginning in 1968, a New York gallery operator who dealt regularly in Wyeth's works—who purchased the painting from Wyeth soon after it was completed.<sup>2</sup> Woolworth never protested the belated title, at least not publically, but he had, for practical reasons, already come to label the work "Barn Loft," as indicated by his receipt for framing service from December 1957.<sup>3</sup>

*Hay Ledge's* early anonymity was similarly overcome by the critic Henry C. Pitz, who published an article on Wyeth in the November 1958 issue of the popular art magazine *American Artist*. A photographic reproduction of *Hay Ledge* figures prominently within the text, but its caption consists only of the simple, descriptive title

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time; a Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 65. "Der nur 'theoretisch' hinsehende Blick auf Dinge entbehrt des Verstehens von Zuhandenheit. Der gebrauchend-hantierende Umgang ist aber nicht blind, er hat seine eigene Sichtart, die das Hantieren führt und ihm seine spezifische Sicherheit verleiht. ... Die Sicht eines solchen Sichfügens ist die *Umsicht*." Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, vol. 2 of *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Provenance as established by the Office of Andrew Wyeth at the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. Biographical information about Woolworth can be found in his *New York Times* obituary from 13 April 2011. According to the Frick Collection in New York City, Woolworth helped Elmer Coe Kerr to found and operate the Coe Kerr Gallery in New York in 1968, which began as a gallery dedicated exclusively in Wyeth's works. The Frick Collection, "Archives Directory for the History of Collecting in America." Accessed October 8, 2013.

<http://research.frick.org/directoryweb/browserecord.php?action=browse&-recid=6344>.

<sup>3</sup> Woolworth's December 1957 receipt from M. Knoedler & Co. reads as follows: "Framing Wyeth tempera painting, #S3100 'Barn Loft.'" As reported by Mary Landa, Curator of Collections, the Office of Andrew Wyeth, Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, in an email to the author from 11 February 2013.

“Corner in the Barn.”<sup>4</sup> Presumably Pitz and his editors found out about the new, official title only after having sent the article to press.

Given Wyeth’s apparent reluctance to name the work, “Untitled” might have been a more appropriate label than either “Barn Loft” or “Corner in the Barn.” Perhaps, to Woolworth and Pitz, such a non-title felt ill-suited to an illustrative picture of the interior of a wooden barn. The 1950s were a decade in which “Untitled” (and variations thereof) was commonly applied as a provocative refusal of verbalization among Wyeth’s more mainstream modernist contemporaries. The painting soon to be known as “Hay Ledge” might therefore have struck Woolworth and Pitz as being rendered too traditionally to allow the work as a whole to stand apart from daily life and language as unnamable art. And indeed *Hay Ledge* is, as anyone who looks at it will see, an illustration of recognizable, everyday material culture more so than an expressive interrogation of medium, forms, and emotions.

Still, the lack of an immediate title raises a question that the belated, official title keeps subtly alive: could this picture be read, at least in part, as an attempt to strike a balance between divergent mid-twentieth-century art practices, that is, between modernism and traditional naturalism? And if so, why or to what end? Like “Barn Loft” and “Corner in the Barn,” “Hay Ledge” acknowledges the naturalistic style and everyday imagery of the painting—specifically, the loose pile of hay at the left—but it does so more equivocally than either of the former two titles. To what sort of “ledge” was Wyeth referring? And is it somewhere to be found within the painting? Or to ask the more ominous question: over what precipice might we, as beholders, be at risk of falling—or what willing leap are we being prompted to make?

Wyeth was asked about his ambiguously referential title in an interview with Thomas Hoving in 1975. His response did nothing to clarify the specific content or meaning that the name “Hay Ledge” calls out. “I called it ‘Hay Ledge,’” he claimed, “because there is a ledge off the Georges River called Hay Ledge. But, of course, that was a different type of hay ledge.”<sup>5</sup> Different from what, Wyeth left us asking?

Considering the possibility that this question matters more than its answer, if indeed there is a single, definitive answer to be found, the following pages examine *Hay Ledge* for signs of Wyeth having toed the edges of (and occasionally having lunged across) various stylistic, formal, and sentimental “ledges.” We shall find not only that he did so but that he seems to have intended to prompt us, as beholders, to do the same—that is, to ask questions, to experience ambivalence, to be on edge. Ultimately I shall argue that the style, form, and pictorial content of *Hay Ledge* variously work together and confront one another in order to express a complex idea (about personhood, situatedness, perception, aesthetics, and sociality) to which neither traditional illusionism nor any of the available methods of mid-century modernism alone was suited.

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<sup>4</sup> Henry C. Pitz, “Andrew Wyeth,” *American Artist* 22, no. 9 (November 1958), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Wyeth, interview by Thomas Hoving, in Hoving *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 165.



Written records, such as I embark on here, of extended, deliberate examinations of the form and content of Wyeth's individual works are exceedingly rare.<sup>6</sup> In the case of *Hay Ledge*, there are none at all. The reasons for this dearth of documented analyses are irreducible to the word-count limitations imposed by publishers and exhibition designers, who are themselves understandably bound by market conditions, including the limited patience and diverse interests of a broad readership and viewing public. In the case of Wyeth we can point rather toward the pair of common but questionable beliefs that I began to address in my introduction, and which I shall examine further in Chapter 2. The first is that Wyeth's practice was more or less static and monolithic, having changed little over the course of his long career, and therefore that discussions of his oeuvre as a totality are more productive than those of any individual works. The second is that that timeless practice is reducible, no matter how adventurous it may in some instances have been, to a Brandywine Valley tradition of illustration, reproduction, and mass distribution, and therefore that reproductions of Wyeth's works contain all of the significant form and content of the tempera originals.

"To judge Wyeth's work from reproduction is defensible on the grounds that that is precisely where his talent shines brightest."<sup>7</sup> This exemplary remark came from the critic Peter Schjeldahl in 1986. Preemptively disparaging the upcoming "Helga" exhibition at the National Gallery of Art (1987), Schjeldahl claimed not only that Wyeth worked within a regressive tradition of illustration but that his tempera originals actually benefited from reproduction:

Brian O'Doherty has termed him a maker of 'master images,' a phrase perfect for its suggestion of, among other things, handmade prototypes of mechanical mass production. Reproduction doesn't represent Wyeth's art so much as complete it, for instance by lending the sumptuousness of clay-coated paper to surfaces deadly dry in the original.<sup>8</sup>

Or consider Karen Rosenberg's October 2012 claim in the *New York Times* that the contemporary artist James Welling (b. 1951) has "capture[d] Wyeth-ness from every angle" in a series of photographs taken of the real world sites of Wyeth's inspiration and production.<sup>9</sup> Rosenberg was writing primarily about Welling but she raised a central question for the critical reception of Wyeth: can photography (and reproduction in general) ever represent the essence of a given painting practice without that practice

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<sup>6</sup> The notable exception is Kathleen Foster, "Meaning and Medium in Wyeth's Art: Revisiting *Groundhog Day*," in *Andrew Wyeth: Memory & Magic* exh. cat., ed. Anne Classen Knutson (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2006), 85-102.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Welcome to Helgaland," in *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978-1990*, ed. MaLin Wilson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 267. This critique was first published in 1986 during the lead-up to the "Helga" exhibition of 1987-88.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Rosenberg, "James Welling: 'Overflow,'" *New York Times*, 19 October 2012.

being essentially, even exclusively, photographic to begin with—or at least without there being something intentionally prototypical about the works that that practice produced? According to Schjeldahl, the answer would be no, which is to say that Rosenberg’s claim about Welling supports the idea that Wyeth’s works are indeed essentially photographic, that his medium was imagery at large rather than tempera, watercolor, pencil or any other material that he may have used.

The reduced scales and flattened surfaces of photographic reproductions do furnish Wyeth’s tempera paintings with an understandable appeal. In the case of *Hay Ledge*, they sharpen the visual realism of the painting’s imagery by diminishing differences between, on the one hand, instances of precise linear rendering and delicate modeling, and, on the other hand, passages of loose or more gestural brushwork (or palette knifing, finger smearing, or paint dripping, as the case may be).<sup>10</sup> For example, such tightened illusionism accentuates the rhythm of the curving planks that form the side of the boat, while also strengthening the contrast between the brightness of this vessel’s white paint and the darkness of the shady scene that surrounds it, the latter effect being especially exaggerated by glossy paper. All told, the boat springs forward and sustains our attention far more in reproduction than it does in the tempera original, thereby enabling *Hay Ledge*, despite the reality of its complexly textured surface, to exhibit exclusively the “image-making” for which Wyeth is known.<sup>11</sup>

When it is thusly ordered and unified around a primary pictorial object, *Hay Ledge* also comes to exemplify the other popularly understood component of a stereotypical “Wyeth:” the concise expression of homely, anti-modern sentiment. The refulgent skiff in *Hay Ledge* is in fact a dory, a type of rowing and sailing vessel long popular with fishermen and lobster hunters in coastal New England. It belonged to Alvaro Olson, Wyeth’s friend and neighbor in the remote and sparsely populated coastal town of Cushing, Maine. For most of his life, Wyeth recounted, Olson worked happily as a fisherman.<sup>12</sup> Eventually however, when his other family members passed away or moved on, he became the only caretaker available for his physically disabled sister, Christina. (Her pink dress and feeble forearm you may already know from Wyeth’s iconic 1948 painting *Christina’s World*. [Fig. 1.2]) In order to remain within sight and

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<sup>10</sup> Wyeth used many such techniques and tools to apply (and to remove) his paints. See Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 34-5; E. P. Richardson, “Andrew Wyeth,” *Atlantic Monthly* 213 (June 1964), 70-71; Richard Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth: an Interview,” *Life*, May 14, 1965, 97; “Andy’s World,” *Time*, 27 December 1963, 49; and Beth Venn, “Process of Invention: the Watercolors of Andrew Wyeth,” in *Unknown Terrain: the Landscapes of Andrew Wyeth*, exh. cat., ed. Beth Venn and Adam Weinberg (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1998), 46.

<sup>11</sup> In 1967 Lawrence Alloway characterized Wyeth as a “reflex-jabbing image-maker.” Alloway, “The Other Andy, ‘America’s Most Popular Painter,’” *Arts Magazine* 41 (April 1967), 22. For more on this common reduction of Wyeth’s paintings to pictures and images, see the introduction to this dissertation.

<sup>12</sup> Wyeth reported this story in interviews for a handful of different publications. The first, as far as I can tell, was a catalog entry in Edgar P. Richardson, ed., *Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1966), cat. 108. A later and more elaborate version can be found in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 165. For more on Alvaro Olson’s transition to and “dislike” of farming, see Betsy James Wyeth, *Christina’s World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 12 and 70.

earshot of the family farmhouse, Alvaro shifted his efforts permanently to farming, thereupon relegating his handsome dory to the dry, shady loft of his barn.

A handful of rustic textures and familiar icons of early-modern New England farm culture fill out this melancholy scene. Loose hay and humid, dusty air define a palpable space; ropes, hooks, and chains hang from rough hewn wooden rafters and guide our eyes through a series of recessive nooks and crannies; a scythe and a clam hod lie dormant beside the boat; and a chicken cage and a pair of oars project upward from within it. Outside the barn door, a sun-browned meadow bears two sets of well-worn tracks, neither of which lead anywhere in particular—perhaps down to the sea, or up to the farmhouse where Christina presumably waits. That intense summer sun also illuminates the interior of the barn and spot-lights the dory, thereby emphasizing the narrative content of the picture by indexing the fair weather in which the dory's disuse is most blatantly apparent. Here then, in a tidy reproduction, is a "Wyeth" of the sort that Schjeldahl seems to have had in mind: a charming illustration of the grounded humanity of life on a New England family farm.

Wyeth did complain now and then that his work was misunderstood. He remarked to E. P. Richardson in 1964 that "the danger of anything closely done is that people feel that the technical means are the end of the thing. [In my work, it's] just the beginning."<sup>13</sup> He then said to Richard Meryman in 1965 that "I know [my typical viewers] like to make me the American painter of the American scene, like Edward Hopper. Really, I've actually created my own little world..."<sup>14</sup> And he had told *Time* magazine in 1963 that "there are some people who like my work because they can see every blade of grass. They're seeing only one side of it. They don't see the tone. If you can combine realism and abstraction, you've got something terrific."<sup>15</sup>

Still, Wyeth never protested, specifically, the scaling down, glossing up, and mass-distribution of his tempera paintings. In fact he willingly provided interviews and commentary to accompany reproductions in numerous books and exhibition catalogs, including a handful that were edited or otherwise overseen by his wife and business manager, Betsy Wyeth (b. 1921). What we know about the Olson siblings, for example, we know mostly from the Wyeths themselves.<sup>16</sup> But neither Andrew nor Betsy ever corroborated the claims that Andrew painted his temperas with reproduction in mind, that reproduction somehow "completed" or "captured" them, or that they were nothing more than illustrations of stories like that of Alvaro Olson's sacrifice. Pictoriality, illusionism, and story-telling are crucial aspects of Wyeth's practice (about which I'll have much

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<sup>13</sup> Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," 69.

<sup>14</sup> Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth: an Interview," 110.

<sup>15</sup> "Andy's World," *Time*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to those sources mentioned above in note 12, which relate information about the Olsons directly to *Hay Ledge*, most scholarly and popular texts about Wyeth's work cite Andrew and/or Betsy on the general subjects of Christina and Alvaro Olson. As far as I can tell, the only published text on the subject of Wyeth or his work to present knowledge about the Olson siblings independently of any input from the Wyeths is Gene Logsdon, *Wyeth People* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971). Logsdon's book makes no specific mention of *Hay Ledge*.

more to say in Chapter 2), but as we now shall see, the works that that practice produced are nonetheless irreducible to “images.”

When one comes face to face with *Hay Ledge* as a tempera original, the central hanging rope initially stands out more prominently than the dory. Indeed the rope announces itself so emphatically that a beholder may mistake it, if only for an instant, for a distinct material object that exists within the real space between himself and the painting. This illusion results in part from the rope’s tonal contrast with the darkness behind it, and partly as well from the complex paint surface in this particular portion of the work. (Figs. 1.3 & 1.4) In order to thicken that surface Wyeth applied several layers of deep browns and blacks over his reddish under painting. He then exposed fragments of that russet substrate by scratching and gouging the darker paint above it. Finally, he added a thin layer of ochres and yellows in a combination of dry scumbles and precise, wetly-drawn lines which appear to hover above the pocketed paint beneath them, and hence the fleeting distinction between the delicate strands of the rope and the darkness of the picture behind it.

The ease with which we can explain this illusion indicates Wyeth’s intention for us to bring his painting process and the materiality of his paint surface to bear on the pictorial spaces and objects that that surface constructs. When seen at first glance from afar, the rope’s gratuitous demonstration of the magic of picturing provokes its beholder to approach the work and inspect it more closely. Seen from only a foot or two away, however, the surface of *Hay Ledge* rewards scrutiny not with a material record of a representational harmony between a virtuoso draftsman and his medium but rather with an index of an aggressive, even violent, examination of that medium’s strengths and weaknesses.

Tempera, in Wyeth’s case, is a purist’s blend of egg yolk, pigment, and distilled water, which he typically applied frugally because it is quick to dry and labor intensive to produce. When the distilled water evaporates it leaves behind a thin but dense, and therefore highly opaque, layer of pigment that mitigates the need for the thick, “high” lights that are common to oil painting.<sup>17</sup> However, the tempera medium also limits the achievable translucency of the paint surface—a limitation which compounds the restrictions that tempera’s rapid evaporation imposes on the feathering of gradients between colors and tones. So called “drying oils” are oppositely endowed: linseed oil and alkyd resins in fact evaporate relatively little during a lengthy drying process that is more accurately termed “setting.” Thus ever since the van Eyck brothers’ experiments with the subtle blending and modeling of minimally-pigmented layers of oil in the fifteenth

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<sup>17</sup> The yolk of one egg at a time must be coddled from hand to hand until all of the white has dripped away, at which point the vitelline membrane will be pierced with a needle in order to extract the oil. For more on Wyeth’s tempera technique, see Elaine de Kooning, “Andrew Wyeth Paints a Picture,” *Art News* 49, no. 1 (March, 1950), 54. On the characteristics and behavior of egg tempera, see Daniel Thompson, *The Practice of Tempera Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936); and Roger Fry, “Tempera Painting,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 7, no. 27 (June 1905), 175-76; and with specific regard to the twentieth-century American “revival” of tempera painting and technique, of which Wyeth and his brother-in-law, Peter Hurd, were principal figures, see Richard Boyle, et al., *Milk and Eggs: the American Revival of Tempera Painting 1930-1950* (Chadds Ford: Brandywine River Museum and University of Washington Press, 2002).

century, egg tempera has been an inferior medium where eye-catching illusionism is concerned. Yet the rope in *Hay Ledge* springs forward like a van Eyckian jewel, being propelled by a hard-worked sculpture of blacks and dark browns that constitutes a tangible space between the bright ochres and yellows above it and the rusty reds below. The rope's dramatic illusionism is ultimately its own undoing, however, for it calls attention temporarily away from the representational rope and toward the exaggerated mechanics of that illusion itself.

Settling into a comfortable viewing distance of three or four feet, or perhaps having left and then returned to the painting, and now being less easily charmed by the protruding rope, we encounter another, subtler perceptual curiosity. Depending upon our point of visual focus within the painting, as well as upon the angle at which we view it, the rope appears to vary in its position relative to the dory. Specifically, it appears in one view directly above the center of the dory, in another off the port side, and more often somewhere in between (i.e. directly above the port-side cap rail).

Wyeth did clarify a few things about of the rope's situation. It hangs from a metal hook which is embedded in the near side of a wooden beam, and we can be only slightly less certain that that beam runs parallel to another similarly sized beam beneath it. We can estimate as well that the base of the dory is recessed from the near edge of this lower beam—that is, from the near edge of the loft—by at least the twelve or so inches that its port side flares out from bottom plank to cap rail.<sup>18</sup> (The aforementioned scythe and clam hod occupy, and thus intuitively demonstrate, this foot of pictorial depth. [Fig. 1.5]) Thus it would seem that the rope hangs at least partially above the beam on which these tools of farming and fishing sit, and partly above the dusty, airy space between the loft and the foreground, which is to say that rational inspection confirms the “in between” option and thereby suggests that we write off the rope's pictorial instability as a result of insignificant optical distortions. But is the skeletal structure of the barn in *Hay Ledge* as reasonable as our analytical inspection assumes it to be? What is the girth of this lower beam, and is it equal to that of the upper one? How precisely aligned is the one with the other?

These increasingly dogged questions about the spatial relations between the rope and the dory warrant answers because they speak as well to the mystery of our own implicit presence in the barn. Here again it is important to distinguish between *Hay Ledge* and its reproductions. Such questions might never arise when viewing a diminished and flattened version of *Hay Ledge*—including, of course, my own Figure 1—for the process of reproduction would have artificially stabilized the light conditions and stand point within which we could experience the work; moreover, page-sized pictures are easy to manipulate, and thus to objectify—that is, both literally and figuratively to hold apart from ourselves. By contrast, *Hay Ledge* itself measures forty-five inches across, making it a good deal wider than an average human torso, but narrower than a pair of outstretched arms. When seen within the dynamic optical context of first-hand beholding, with its shifting stand point and light conditions, this human-sized work of art encourages

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<sup>18</sup> On the typical measurements of bank dories such as this one, see John Gardner, *The Dory Book* (Mystic: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1987), 146.

projective bodily immersion within the enclosed, unpopulated interior space that it constructs. The warm, earthy colors of the paint surface support this invitation. So, too, do *Hay Ledge*'s uncanny representations of textures and atmosphere, which function as crucial components of the welcoming naturalism with which Wyeth depicted this rustic space. Together these material, stylistic, chromatic, and iconographic aspects of the work play directly to our presumptions about that Brandywine Valley tradition of sentimental pictorialism. Specifically, they put us in mind not of modernist critiques of space and vision, but rather of academic realism and imaginative Romantic immersion, thereby rekindling our faith in the coherent, universal, and beholder-centric space that was recovered from classical antiquity during the Renaissance and infused with ideological importance over the course of the Enlightenment, but which came under attack in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Hay Ledge* itself, I am suggesting, promotes our futile efforts to resolve the impossible spatial puzzles that it ironically constructs.

The foreground, if we can call it that, is one of these puzzles. It includes nothing more concrete or measurable than a triangular area of darkness at the lower right, a loose pile of hay at the left, and, at the center, yet another rough, weighty beam with an unseen end. Without a stable anchor point by which to situate ourselves in space then, and yet with so much encouragement toward a general sense of situated-ness, we scrutinize the far corner of the barn that we can see across the way, hoping that it might offer clues to as to the skeletal structure of the foreground, or at least that it will offer some reassurance that this barn has a coherent structure at all.

We find, however, that this more distant portion of the barn is also, like the foreground, only partially described. As noted above, *Hay Ledge*'s paint surface becomes exceedingly dark and roughly textured toward its geometrical center, and thus the far corner of the barn, where we expect its two visible walls to meet, is ultimately unrecognizable as a figurative object. The materiality of the painting thus asserts itself precisely where the space of this pictorial barn ought most deeply to recede. Thus, perhaps not coincidentally, *Hay Ledge*'s most deliberate and convincing differentiation between itself and the real-world building that it might naively be said to reproduce takes place precisely in the formerly eponymous "corner in the barn."

Direct examination of Alvaro Olson's barn reveals that its internal framework is predictably rectangular throughout. Thanks to the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland Maine, which maintains the Olson house and barn as a visitable historic site, one can inspect first-hand the beams, walls, loft, and corner that correspond with those that appear in *Hay Ledge*.<sup>19</sup> (Figs. 1.6 & 1.7) Also available for analysis are Wyeth's preliminary studies of this interior space. They include both pencil and watercolor sketches and verbal notations, all of which represent the barn objectively and clearly. (Figs. 1.8 – 1.11) Moreover, these studies demonstrate the rigorous preparatory work that enabled Wyeth to represent certain fragments of the barn equally clearly in *Hay Ledge*.

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<sup>19</sup> The Farnsworth Museum in Rockland Maine maintains the barn as part of the Olson House Historic Site in Cushing, Maine. I am grateful to the generous, accommodating docent, Suzanne Hollstein, who granted me extended access to the interior of the barn in August of 2009.

The wall above the barn door, for example, is represented quite naturalistically by a much thinner paint surface than that which we encounter at the center of *Hay Ledge*. Indeed the total effect of the elegantly thin, confidently applied mid-range tones in this middle-right portion of the painting (about which I shall have more to say in Chapter 3) is a fair credit to Wyeth's popular reputation as a skilled draftsman and disciplined colorist. And thus we have to ask: could an artist who evidently drew Olson's barn with precision in other works, and indeed painted certain parts of that barn quite clearly in *Hay Ledge*, have been incapable of rendering the far corner in a smoothly naturalistic way? I think not, and suggest instead that Wyeth intended, for one reason or another, to interfere with our perceptions of orthogonal recession and our assumptions about spatial order.

This particular disturbance of *Hay Ledge*'s linear-perspectival illusionism (we shall come to others) also further distorts the appearance of the hanging rope, which it causes to collapse or to flatten out into a kind of picture within a larger picture. At first glance from across a room or a gallery space, the rope protrudes like a picture *on* a picture. But from a more conventional viewing distance, the rope takes on the appearance of a two-dimensional image that occurs *within* a constructed three-dimensional space. Moreover, the form of the rope itself resists our attempts to assimilate it into the larger pictorial space of the barn. Toward its center, the tight wind of its strands gives it a notable corporeality, to which the beholder is bound to respond with intuitive perceptions of space. Yet each of the visible, curving portions of this body both yields to and fragments another, making the rope difficult to maintain in the mind's eye as a bodily whole, and thereby begging the beholder to disbelieve in that space that his intuition is so quick to perceive. Knots can be rational and purposeful to a fisherman—likewise a wooden frame to a farmer and linear perspective to a painter—but the tangle of rope in *Hay Ledge* is no icon of leverage and harnessed friction. The block-and-tackle on the right makes the point by contrast: these disciplined lengths of rope lead directly from the right edge of *Hay Ledge* to the pulley and back again, visually opposing the untraceable knot that hangs much closer to the center.

A similar counterpoint to the confounding space the rope can be found in the warm-hued chicken cage, which expands outward from the geometric center of *Hay Ledge*'s paint surface. "I am measurable, therefore I am," this three-dimensional grid seems to be saying as it emerges from the painting's obscured Cartesian origin. (Fig. 1.12) It promises to resolve the spatial dissonance and ambiguity that surrounds it, but like the idle dory in which it sits, this unifying grid is destined to remain only one of *Hay Ledge*'s many fascinating distractions. The central rope therefore seems to be *Hay Ledge*'s central metaphor, at least in terms of space and pictoriality. Its striking illusionism draws our attention to its simultaneous fraying and involution, as well as to the artistry and the medium that constitute it, but under scrutiny it wavers, flattens, and disintegrates into indices of the process of painting itself. Thus the rope distills the complex assembly of differentiable components of the acts of painting and beholding into a single visual-material form, the central one, in fact, by which this work demands to be understood. The rope, like *Hay Ledge* as a whole, is a reluctant totality: a process, a narrative, an object, a picture, and a playful artistic will, each of which paradoxically asserts itself in its dutiful manifestations of the others.

To meet *Hay Ledge*'s demand that we attempt at length (and yet with little hope of success) to resolve the divergent spatialities of the rope—its illusionism and materiality, its coherence and disintegration—is to suspend our powers of reason and informed recognition in favor of visual and sentimental confusion. And perhaps suspension is precisely the point. Olson, who enjoyed fishing and suffered farming, “grounded” his dory most decisively by hoisting it up into a space of display—that is, into a space of disengagement, disuse, and detachment in which he would *see* it but not otherwise engage it each time he entered the barn. Olson, in other words, took an instrument (a thing with which to work) and reduced it to an object to inspect—not unlike *Hay Ledge* itself when compressed into the glossy page of a book, wherein it can be viewed without the bothers of complexity and variability. The block-and-tackle is significant here again, this time narrating the dory's dis-play by calling attention to the deliberate, intelligent action that was required to lift such a heavy wooden vessel aloft. Wyeth's disturbances of the conventions of pictorio-spatial order might thus be said to serve the same sentimental or narrative end as that of *Hay Ledge*'s more naturalistic and illusionistic aspects.

Verticality, suspension, and height are typically important concepts for a painter and his first-hand beholders, and *Hay Ledge* brings these mutual concerns to the fore. The height of the dory is also, as best we can determine, the height from which Wyeth studied this scene in Olson's barn. (The upper surfaces of the wooden planks of the loft are visible, but the inside of the dory is not.) The vertical position of the dory is also therefore the implied eye-level to which the wall-mounted *Hay Ledge* encourages its standing beholder to adjust—by going up on tip-toes, hunching down, or bending at the waist. But can we also situate ourselves absolutely in terms of height within the barn as a whole? How high up from the unseen floor of the barn are we and the dory?

A wooden handle, presumably for some sort of shovel or fork, begins to measure this height. It leans against the barn wall beneath the loft and to the left of the open doorway. (Fig. 1.13) However, like all of *Hay Ledge*'s erstwhile yardsticks, it is designed to disappoint; its upper end disintegrates into anamorphic smears of paint and the pictorial shadows and dusty atmosphere that they represent, while its lower end is blocked from view by the wooden beam in the foreground. Ironically then, this ostensibly vertical form measures the distance across the paint surface from the foreground to the middle ground of the loft and yet fails to tell us anything about the illusionistic height of the dory from the ground below. Indeed most of *Hay Ledge*'s farm tools are, for us, only instruments of confusion—in addition to the wooden handle, for example, there is the scythe beneath the dory, the blade of which disappears into the picture's illusions of shadows and overlapping forms, and the block-and-tackle, whose ropes overreach the framed space of the painting.

The ceiling of the barn is obscured as well, and thus *Hay Ledge*'s architectural interior comes to seem like a floating collection of indeterminately joined posts, beams, planks, and pictures. The rope, as we have seen already, is one of these nested “pictures.” The dark triangular abstraction in the right foreground is another. The landscape on the right side of the painting is a third. A series of wooden beams constitute a rustic frame around this vignette of grass and dirt, which they sever from both the unseen floor of the



barn and the sky that presumably exists above it, an isolation the significance of which we shall explore more fully in Chapter 3. This landscape is thus especially difficult for us to orient as a primarily horizontal plane, a section of the earth's surface, and we therefore struggle to assimilate it as such into the pictorial space of *Hay Ledge* as a whole, interpreting it instead as the surface of a painted "landscape" hanging vertically within the barn rather than as a ground plane extending horizontally beyond it.

The titular "hay ledge," too, encourages our sense of spatial fragmentation. By foreshortening a variable form, Wyeth invited us to puzzle over the degree to which that nonetheless commonplace form (the loosely piled hay) is foreshortened. On one hand, the hay concretizes the orthogonal depth between the splintering wooden beam in the foreground and the middle-ground mow, to use the more traditional agrarian term for a loft designed primarily for the storage of dried hay—a quick step across and we're there. On the other hand, this brown and ochre form fails to *measure* that orthogonal depth, and neither does it confirm the presence of any tangible "ledge" either beneath or within itself. An opposing beam, which runs directly above the doorway, confirms that there is, in the piled hay, an orthogonal depth to be measured. Consistently with the rest of the picture, however, the full extent of this beam itself is cropped and therefore impossible to judge. The title of the painting thus directs us to discover that the intuitively nearby dory is unknowably (or at least immeasurably, and perhaps un-walkably) far away.

Groundedness then—in its many senses of disuse, locality, dependency, and figural and bodily stability—is a concept that *Hay Ledge* works at length to bring forcibly to mind, in many instances through provocative juxtapositions and elisions. The idle dory rests comfortably on the flat, stable planks of the loft, while to the right of this supportive platform we glimpse an icon of the solid surface of the earth itself, and yet no such stable base is to be found directly below us, or indeed beneath the barn as a whole. We are thus made to ponder these many notions of "ground" and "groundedness" from (and by way of) an ironically *ungrounded* point of view.<sup>20</sup>

If *Hay Ledge* were Wyeth's only surviving work, such indeterminacy of pictorial space as we have encountered thus far could be interpreted as a failure of representation. Circa 1957 it could have been understood as well as a timid engagement with modernist deconstructionism or anti-pictorialism. Much of Wyeth's oeuvre, however, especially his pencil and watercolor studies, reveals him to have been fully capable of rendering coherent and unambiguous pictorial scenes when he desired to do so, and his own verbal explanations of his practice, to which we shall turn in Chapter 2, assure us that he held a deep, traditionalist commitment to the accurate representation of his subjects. A more plausible explanation for all of this pictorial and artistic confusion therefore lies with the painting's complex and multi-layered subject itself—one from which the artist is difficult to distinguish: Alvaro Olson's shelving of his dory, Christina's physical disability, and

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<sup>20</sup> My attention, here and throughout, to matters of groundedness, verticality, and stability are both inspired and informed by T. J. Clark's considerations of related concerns in the works of Pieter Breugel, Nicolas Poussin, Paolo Veronese, and others, as presented in "Painting at Ground Level," a series of essays delivered as the *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* at Princeton University in April of 2002. The texts of these lectures are available online at [http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/c/clark\\_2002.pdf](http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/c/clark_2002.pdf). Accessed December 18, 2013.

Wyeth's familiarity, sympathy, and friendship with both people, as well as his aesthetic and material-cultural fascinations with the worlds in which they lived. *Hay Ledge*, I shall now go on to argue, not only presents this complex subject to view but also offers some degree of its human figures' thoughts and emotions for its beholder to experience directly.

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"The objective distances of objectively present things do not coincide with the remoteness and nearness of what is at hand within the world."<sup>21</sup> Thus does Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) provide us with language by which to describe the spatial conundrum that Wyeth constructed with his ambiguously foreshortened "hay ledge," which appears to make its own distinction between "objective distance" and "nearness." The piled hay does seem to be concretely present when glimpsed within the periphery of one's vision—for example, while looking more directly at the hanging rope or the open doorway. When we turn to look directly at the hay, however, the strokes, smudges, and drizzles of tempera that compose it become difficult to read altogether as a curved, porous, and wispy plane that measures the distance between us and the dory. We can, however overlook this painterly abstraction in an absolute, binary shift of visual attention from one pictorial location (the foreground) to another (the middle ground of the loft). It might be said, then, that insofar as the hay ledge mediates between the foreground and the dory, it is not so much there to be traced or followed as it is to be abruptly crossed over—as in the case of an upper edge of a vertical plane that we approach on a path perpendicular both to the plane itself and to the arc of that edge—say, the face of a cliff, and more specifically, that "ledge off the Georges River" to which Wyeth referred in his 1970 equivocation of his chosen title.

*Hay Ledge* stresses these ideas of crossing-over and abrupt relocation by contrast, specifically by juxtaposing the spatially unstable pile of hay with a curiously high-toned pair of parallel tracks through the browning grass outside of the barn door. (Fig. 1.14) Whereas the hay ledge at once constitutes and collapses an intuitively apparent distance between two concrete points of focus (the wooden beam in the foreground and the loft in the middle ground), the tracks across the landscape do the opposite, demonstrating a wholly traceable distance across a continuous, planar surface from nowhere to nowhere else. Indeed this lack of meaningful termini focuses our attention directly on the acts of following, tracing, and traversing themselves, acts to which the "hay ledge" cues our intuition even while it stymies our powers of reason.

The leap, as it were, from *Hay Ledge*'s presentation of a contrast between pictorial relocation and the covering of linear-perspectival distance to a particular sentence from *Being and Time* becomes more reasonable the closer we look at each of these two works, which appear to offer compatible conceptions of conscious, embodied

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<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 99. "Die objektiven Abstände vohandener Dinge decken sich nicht mit Entferntheit und Nähe des innerweltlich Zuhandenen." Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 142.

existence. “An ‘objectively’ long path,” Heidegger wrote, “can be shorter than an ‘objectively’ much shorter path which is perhaps an ‘onerous one’ and strikes one as infinitely long. *When it ‘strikes’ one thus...the actual world is first truly at hand.*”<sup>22</sup> Heidegger’s “*actual world*” (the italics are his own) is a world in which a living thing’s orientation in space is a function of a willful continuity between that living thing and the various other phenomena that it perceives. Geometry, in such a world, is therefore not simply a system of objective measure by which to understand a homogeneous space that exists prior to and independently of a theorizing subject. Instead it is the documentation of a given subject’s formations of space, and thus specifically of an *a posteriori* space which the subject produces in order to accomplish its various ends. This is all to say that Heidegger’s “being” is fundamentally a matter of need and desire. Thus to be is always to “there-be,” where “there” is the context of any given need—and hence *Being and Time*’s utilization of the German word *Dasein*, a designation for that which exists simultaneously as and in such a context. Heidegger’s recourse to the additional concept of “time” arises naturally from the futurity inherent in the potentiality of this need-fulfillment paradigm: to define being as the experience of need is to presuppose the temporality (i.e., the sequentiality) of a change in condition from needful to fulfilled.

Refusing to presuppose “space,” and treating it instead as a secondary relation that *Dasein* constructs for the purpose of responding to need, *Being and Time* goes on to explain that any purely theoretical objectification of space would be a denial of that space’s constructedness—that is, its contingency upon the shifting interests and motivations of needful *Daseins*. Indeed to objectify anything in an exclusively theoretical, exploratory mode, one in which the given thing becomes a collection of individually meaningless measurable qualities with no direct bearing on *Dasein*, is to sever (*fernen*) that thing from *Dasein*.<sup>23</sup> It is to mistake a constructed thing (literally, a thing-*with*-structure) for a structure that exists independently. Such a severance amounts, in the end, to an artificial dissociation of that inspected thing from the need that begets awareness of it in the first place.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Heidegger’s italicization of the remark quoted above, “*the actual world is first truly at hand,*” suggests that he believed that these severances—i.e., theorizations of erstwhile “objects” that are artificially detached from the viewing subject, and especially severances of space itself—had come to seem quite natural and necessary to most people by the mid-twentieth century, and thus that one’s acknowledgement of the true contingency of space could come as a startling revelation in everyday life.

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<sup>22</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 98-99. “Ein ‘objektiv’ langer Weg kann kürzer sein als ein ‘objektiv’ sehr kurzer, der vielleicht ein ‘schwerer Gang’ ist und einem unendlich lang verkommt. *In solchem Vorkommen’ aber ist die jeweilige Welt erst eigentlich zuhanden.*” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 142.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger explains this particular usage of “*fernen*” in a discussion of various forms of distance and nearness. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 140. Indeed Stambaugh translates “*fernen*” directly as “to distance.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion of the central argument of *Being and Time* with specific regard to Heidegger’s ideas about space, place, severance, distance, and nearness, see Edward Casey, “Proceeding to Place by Indirection,” in Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 243-284; and Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: a Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

Wyeth seems to have come to a similar revelation while working in 1948 on a painting titled *Hoffman's Slough*. Having begun this work with a watercolor study of a valley near his winter home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Wyeth took a particular interest in a large pool of standing water (i.e., a “slough”), which, in the final tempera painting, he morphed into the shape of an arrow. (Figs. 1.15 - 1.17) This arrow is particularly striking on account of the balance that it maintains between expressive abstraction, diagrammaticism, and naturalistic realism: the “arrow” that exists as paint on the surface of *Hoffman's Slough* is hardly an arrow at all, and yet as a pictorial object within a constructed space it is easily recognizable not only as an arrow but one the distorted appearance of which is determined by the acute angle at which we see it from a nearby hilltop. That is to say that Wyeth represented the pool of water in such a way as to suggest that, if this water were seen from a bird's eye view, it would resolve into a more or less symmetrical, highly diagrammatical, and altogether *unnatural* icon of directionality. Thus there are three “arrows” in play here—the ideal form that we cannot see but which our powers of reason may reconstruct, the distorted but naturalistic form that we intuitively behold, and the more or less unrecognizable form that we finally discover in the material paint surface. Which of these arrows, if any, we recognize at a given moment depends entirely upon our interests and motivations in beholding the painting. Indeed an “arrow” may not be noticed at all upon first glance—it is also, after all, a body of water—but this delayed effect is all the more reason to acknowledge that *Hoffman's Slough* hangs before its beholder as a revelation in waiting. Like *Hay Ledge*, it prompts the beholder of an unremarkable vignette to acknowledge the complex motivations that any instance of conscious beholding requires. At the very least, this “arrow” indicates an instance of Wyeth's conscious consideration of the complex process by which people not only perceive spaces but also construct and project them.

Similar considerations would be made elsewhere as the century wore on. In the work of Cold-War era thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Daniel Boorstin, and Guy Debord, they took the form of exclamations about the dangers of false perceptions during the course of everyday life.<sup>25</sup> “The social control of space [by elite individuals and institutions] weighs heavy indeed,” Lefebvre decried, “upon all those consumers who fail to reject the familiarity of everyday life.”<sup>26</sup> Blending Heideggerian concepts with Marxist intent, Lefebvre pointed up a dangerous modern conflation between “representations of space” and “representational spaces,” the former being constructed illusions of a ubiquitous and *a priori* space, and the latter being naturally occurring *a posteriori* spaces that arise within the lived experiences of individuals.<sup>27</sup> Heidegger's “need” becomes a Lefebvrian “logic” upon which all “representational spaces” depend, as well as by which all institutionally constructed “representations of space” should eventually to be broken down when the “logic” of organic need is found to run counter to

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: a Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), first published in 1961; Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), first published in French in 1967; and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), first published in French in 1974.

<sup>26</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> For Lefebvre's definitions of “representations of space” and “representational spaces,” see *ibid.*, 39-42.

the secondary logic of rational design.<sup>28</sup> Lefebvre thus warned that the “users” of these “representations of space” were failing to recognize them as such; having invested themselves so heavily in these illusions of space that they began to need them, these “users” were now continually and unwittingly reconstructing and maintaining them as “representational spaces.”<sup>29</sup> In hindsight, such exhortations to attend to the institutional control of modern spatial experience can inspire dramatic readings of all kinds of mid-century engagements with space and perspective—Lefebvre’s claims especially, given the contention with which he expressed them.

*Hay Ledge*’s hanging rope, for example, which is at once round and flat, illusory and material, corporeal and fragmentary, and which yet occurs initially as a choate object in real space, would seem to encourage precisely the perceptual error with which *The Production of Space* was centrally concerned. “In this [hybrid] space is a trap,” Lefebvre wrote.<sup>30</sup> The same might be said of the involutions of the rope in *Hay Ledge*, which make the contrasting rectilinearity of chicken cage particularly appealing—and specifically, reassuring: here is a construction designed both to imprison and protect. But this cage is only one of many direct illustrations of simple, tangible aspects of spatiality into which the confounding space of the rope is parsed. The schematic road to nowhere in the landscape is another such illustration; the foreshortened pile of hay is a third. These symbolic spatial forms—the cage as classical geometry, the tracks as modern rationality, the hay ledge as a phenomenological collapse of the distance between subject and object, medium and picture—together lay bare the artifice of the ostensibly *a priori* space which *Hay Ledge* seems, in a first presumptive glance, to depict. That is, *Hay Ledge*’s parsing of space reveals the rope’s illusionism and the barn scene’s pictoriality for what they are. In doing so, this deconstructive aspect of the painting as a whole builds upon the polyvalence of the arrow in *Hoffman’s Slough*. Specifically, it reminds us that the pigmented egg tempera surface of *Hay Ledge*, which both manifests and obscures these constructions of space, is itself a distinct social space of interpersonal exchange, one which Wyeth initially produced and which his painting’s beholder sustains.

Thus *Hay Ledge* is indeed a Lefebvrian “trap,” but with a dissembled mechanism that enables its prey to come and go. It draws our attention to some of the raw components of spatiality, but it never sounds a culture-critical alarm. The writhings of the rope are quietly betrayed by the weightlessness of that rope’s frayed ends, which gracefully dissolve into a heavy, dusty air in which wisps of loose hay float lithely about.

In its back-and-forth between coherence and disintegration, and in its wavering retreat from illusory projection, this rope continually reminds us that *Hay Ledge* never settles into any formal, narrative, or pictorial extremes. Wyeth, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, was more concerned with asking questions than with answering them, and more specifically, of raising questions by the construction of pictorial problems that his beholder, if he looks closely and patiently enough, will observe and be tempted to ponder.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>29</sup> In terms of “users,” see *ibid.*, 233.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

The dory, too, both invites and evades thoughtful interpretation. To see it reduced to an immobile storage container in the loft of Olson's barn is to sympathize with this would-be fisherman's self-sacrificial refusal of the dory's original role in his "world" of need and desire. Having once been a fisherman, Olson became a farmer, trading his dory for the scythe that rests ominously beside it. Recall that this reaper's tool also distances us from the dory: all told it is a subtly powerful symbol of both death as severance and severance as death.

*Hay Ledge*, however, makes no explicit mention, titular or otherwise, of brotherly sacrifice. On the contrary, the crest of its foreshortened pile of hay appears, in juxtaposition to the dory, as a rolling wave, one that animates the dory's sharp, curving stem and reinvests it with sea-faring purpose—a stem, moreover, which is set upright in perfect profile and spot-lit to the same degree to which the blade of the scythe is laid down and obscured.

*Being and Time* explains the dory's appearance within a middle ground between the polar states of meaningfully, instrumentally present and randomly occurrent:

Useful things have their *place*, or else they 'lie around,' which is fundamentally different from merely occurring in a random spatial position. The actual place is defined as the place of this useful thing for... in terms of a totality of the interconnected places of the context of useful things at hand in the surrounding world. Place and the multiplicity of places must not be interpreted as the where of a random objective presence of things. Place is always the definite 'over there' and the 'there' of a useful thing *belonging there*. Actual belonging there corresponds to the useful character of what is at hand, that is, to its relevant belonging to a totality of useful things.<sup>31</sup>

The ellipsis is Heidegger's own. It stands both visually and textually in place of the presumable but unspecified context of need that he believed to be fundamental to being, and thus to interpretation and representation—that is, the universal but variable predicate to which he referred elsewhere as "the manifold of references of the 'in-order-to.'"<sup>32</sup> The dory in *Hay Ledge* can thus be interpreted as a "useful thing" that is simply misplaced. Even while removed from the sea, it can bring its native marine context to mind. By looking through and around the dory we can find a watery wave in a pile of dry, rustling hay, and likewise find in the loft of a barn not an awkwardly shaped wooden storage

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<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 95. "Das Zeug hat seinen *Platz*, oder aber es 'liegt herum,' was von einem puren Vorkommen an einer beliebigen Raumstelle grundsätzlich zu unterscheiden ist. Der jeweilige Platz bestimmt sich als Platz dieses Zeugs zu... aus einem Ganzen der aufeinander ausgerichteten Plätze des umweltlich zuhanden Zeugzusammenhangs. Der Plätze und die Platzmannigfaltigkeit dürfen nicht als das Wo eines beliebigen Vorhandenseins der Dinge ausgelegt werden. Der Platz ist je das bestimmte 'Dort' und 'Da' des *Hingehörens* eines Zeugs. Die jeweilige Hingehörigkeit eines Zeugganzen liegt aber als Bedingung ihrer Möglichkeit zugrunde das Wohin überhaupt, in das hinein einem Zeugzusammenhang die Platzganzheit angewiesen wird." Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 137.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 65.

vessel, a purely aesthetic form, or an elegant watercraft, but rather all of the above. According to Heidegger “the kind of seeing of this accommodation to things is called *circumspection*,”<sup>33</sup> a way of seeing in which Olson’s vessel “lies around,” as if in contextual limbo, at the margins of *Hay Ledge*’s illustrative pictoriality. The dory brings the context of Olson’s former, favored occupation to mind insofar as we are compelled to think about and to imagine the need-fulfillment relations that defined it.

The deliberate subtlety of *Hay Ledge*’s phenomenological distinction between something that “lies around” in an exotic context and something that merely occurs as a severed object in homogeneous *a priori* space becomes clear in a comparison between this 1957 painting and Wyeth’s more famous *Christina’s World* (1948).<sup>34</sup> The subject and characters of this earlier work are essentially the same as those of *Hay Ledge*: the noble, disabled Christina, her heroic caretaking brother, their fascinated artist/friend, and of course the barn itself, which we see from within when beholding *Hay Ledge* and from without in the case of *Christina’s World*. Indeed the direction of our gaze is essentially the same in both pictures: in the 1948 painting we look north-northeast toward the south-west wall of the barn (which stands a stone’s throw west-northwest of the farmhouse), while in *Hay Ledge* we look in essentially the same direction (north-northeast) toward the corner where the northeastern and northwestern walls of the barn come together. Also like *Hay Ledge*, *Christina’s World* narrates a conflict between disability and desire, displacing its barn and farmhouse (i.e., shelter) from the crawling figure in the foreground in a similar way to that in which *Hay Ledge*’s beholder is situated in a precarious foreground at an immeasurable distance from the solid flooring of the loft that supports the dory. The open hillside between Christina and the two buildings on the horizon appears to be walkable for an average person (as evidenced quite concretely by the parallel tracks that enter from the right and follow a fence-line up the hill). But for the crawling Christina such a traversal would be “onerous” and perhaps even “infinitely long.” Focusing her vision on faraway shelter, she at once overlooks the incalculable distance before her and palpates the ground at her knees, thereby experiencing that Heideggerian moment in which her “*actual world is first truly at hand*.”<sup>35</sup>

However, Wyeth compromised the phenomenology of *Christina’s World* by providing its beholder with a raised viewpoint from which he can too easily objectify the

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<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> In terms of “occurrence,” I have in mind here the Heideggerian term “*Vorhandenheit*,” which refers to the appearance of something in a theoretical or objectifying view. Such occurrent present-at-handness (the opposite of the ready-to-handness of Heidegger’s “*Zuhandenheit*”) is associated, for example, with conspicuousness, un-usability, and malfunction: “When we discover [the] unusability [of a thing that has ceased to function properly], the thing becomes conspicuous. *Conspicuousness* presents the thing at hand in a certain unhandiness.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68. “In solchem Entdecken der Unverwendbarkeit fällt das Zeug auf. Das Auffallen gibt das zuhandene Zeug in einer gewissen Unzuhandenheit.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 98. For further explanation of Heidegger’s use of the idea of “occurrence,” see see Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall, “Martin Heidegger: an Introduction to His Thought, Work, and Life,” in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1-15, and especially 3-4.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 99. “*Die jeweilige Welt erst eigentlich zuhanden [ist]*.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 142.

central character's needs together with that character herself. That is, *Christina's World* ultimately holds its viewer apart from the practical appeal of its sheltering farmhouse and the challenge posed by its overwhelming hillside, as well as from the figure of Christina herself, whose groundedness he observes superhumanly (let alone without human disability) from above. Contrary to their significances to Christina as shelter and an onerous path thereto, the farmhouse and the hillside exist for the viewer as bracketed icons, respectively, of pastoral life and objective space. Christina herself, meanwhile, is regrettably more than a guiding figure whose point of view, and whose subjectivity, we can share; she is rather a gravity-bound object over which we look with a privileged, hovering, theorizing gaze. Thus her "world" is literally "at hand" for her and yet out of reach of the beholder, who can only look dispassionately and analytically at a world that is decisively severed from his own: Christina's body is a unit of measure by which we are invited to theorize and objectify the space in which she lives (and thus to hold that space problematically apart from ourselves). We see, measure, and analyze her disability rather than sympathizing with her embodied, grounded gaze.

*Being and Time* explicitly addressed the limitations which this kind of focused, objective inspection promotes in the context of the perception and analysis of "space:"

Where space is discovered non-circumspectly by just looking at it, the regions of the surrounding world get neutralized to pure dimensions. The places and the totality of places of useful things at hand...are reduced to a multiplicity of positions for random things. The spatiality of innerworldly things at hand thus loses its character of relevance. The world loses its specific character of aroundness...<sup>36</sup>

*Christina's World* ironically encourages such a "neutralization" of the viewer's perspective in its very portrayal of the "aroundness" or the "relevance" of Christina's needful being. The objectivity of its representation of space ultimately prevents the beholder from immersing himself imaginatively within the pictured woman's world.

The stakes of such distance were high to Heidegger and Wyeth alike. For Heidegger, the failures of previous attempts to understand the likes of "being," "space," and "time" were rooted in false and ignorant detachments from the very things being theorized and (falsely, or at least artificially) understood. Wyeth, meanwhile, was faced with his own, lived involvement in the subjects that he painted, that is, with the emotions and memories that drove him to perceive and then to paint what he did. *Christina's World* is a failure in this regard, for it illustrates disability and solitude without enacting the sympathy that Wyeth felt toward this particular figure, thus suggesting that he was more dispassionate about Christina and the landscape over which she crawled than he actually

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<sup>36</sup> Heidegger, 104. "Das umsichtsfreie, nur noch hinsehende Entdecken des Raumes neutralisiert die umweltlichen Gegenden zu den reinen Dimensionen. Die Plätze und die unsichtig orientierte Platzgantheit des zuhandenen Zeugs sinken zu einer Stellenmannigfaltigkeit für beliebige Dinge zusammen. Die Räumlichkeit des innerweltlich Zuhandenen verliert mit diesem ihren Bewandtnischarakter. Die Welt geht des spezifisch Umhaften verlustig..." Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 150.



was (a matter of a sense of environmental or placial belonging that we shall take up in depth in Chapter 3).

*Hay Ledge*, meanwhile, preserves such aroundness by enacting it more so than displaying it. Aroundness and relevance are not the subjects of *Hay Ledge* like they are of *Christina's World*; instead they are the *ways in which* the rope, the dory, the landscape, the piled hay, and the paint surface are presented to view. Looking back upon his most famous painting in 1961, Wyeth verbally confirmed the visual-artistic demonstration that *Hay Ledge* had already made: "I think perhaps it would have been possible to have painted just that field and have you *sense* Christina without her being there."<sup>37</sup> To look at the field of grass that is visible through the opening in the side of the barn in *Hay Ledge* is to see the vast, empty hillside from *Christina's World* in the searching, sublime way that Christina presumably saw it herself. Similarly, the dory, at once afloat on a sea of nearby hay and grounded on a loft some immeasurable distance away, is the beholder's, Alvaro's, and Wyeth's own desirable but unreachable shelter. Rather than simply reversing the perspective of *Christina's World*—i.e., situating the beholder near the barn or the house and having him look back down the hill toward the sea—*Hay Ledge* situates its beholder *in* the barn, gives him reason to search around for stability (both pictorial and stylistic), and then attunes him to the contingencies of the spaces within which he might achieve it.

The language of twentieth-century phenomenology thus lends itself particularly well to an understanding of *Hay Ledge's* invitation to engage in such a variously circumspective and projective mode of beholding, with its collapse of subject and object, its embrace of irreducible complexity, and its attunement to the interests and motivations of conscious being. Indeed I have drawn upon the rigorous arguments, definitions of terms, and rhetorical style of *Being and Time* partly in order to show that *Hay Ledge*, too, is marked by an unrelenting density of expression that rewards sustained and repeated engagement with its poetic play with language and visuality and with its provocative intermingling of obscure abstraction and concrete illustration (additional instances of which are described in Chapters 2 and 3).

This stylistic accord between *Hay Ledge* and *Being and Time* might even be said to warrant further research and investigation in order either to establish or to rule out more concrete historical connections. Heidegger's ideas and the Continental tradition in general were manifesting across the Atlantic in various cultural forms by the 1950s, and the easy association between *Hay Ledge* and *Being and Time* seems to indicate a shared intellectual outlook among a handful of notable mid-century contemporaries of Wyeth for whom Heidegger's work was particularly important.<sup>38</sup> Lefebvre is one. The philosopher Gaston Bachelard and the humanistic geographers Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph are others, all of whom were reading Heidegger and thinking phenomenologically while

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<sup>37</sup> Wyeth, interview by George Plimpton and Donald Stewart in 1961, as quoted in Adam Weinberg, "Terra Incognita: Redefining Wyeth's World," in *Unknown Terrain: the Landscapes of Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat., ed. Beth Venn and Adam Weinberg (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1998), 20.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Woessner, *Heidegger in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). The first English translation of *Being and Time* did not appear until 1962, but according to Woessner, by the 1950s its ideas were already circulating in the United States in various academic and popular cultural forms.

producing their own new ideas about matters of space, locality, and place. To the best of my knowledge, Wyeth never engaged with Heidegger's or these other thinkers' books and essays directly; nor did he ever express familiarity with "phenomenology" as such—neither before the production of *Hay Ledge* nor even after one of those books, Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976), mentioned Wyeth's work explicitly.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, we have begun to see that Wyeth shared with the Continental tradition its practice of scrutinizing typically unacknowledged premises of everyday being.

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Let us return then, on the way to a conclusion, to Woolworth's and Pitz's improvisational titles for *Hay Ledge*. In light of the formal analyses and phenomenological concepts presented above, these two labels can be read as attempts to come sympathetically, albeit concisely, to terms with this visually and sentimentally confounding work of art. "Barn Loft" and "Corner in the Barn" both admit that this painting represents the interior of a barn with a high degree of naturalism, and yet both titles avoid making *Hay Ledge* into a sentimental scene or a specifically recognizable site. Without knowledge of the Olson siblings there is no immediate indication as to why any given beholder should care about this collection of beams and planks, tools and ropes, dory and landscape; nor is there any clear indication about how that beholder should prioritize these things in terms of visual attention or linear "reading." Wyeth's own title helped to solidify this lack of pictorial grammar not only by confirming Pitz's and Woolworth's initial impressions that pointing-out, recognizing, and engaging are appropriate actions to take when presented with a picture of such readily recognizable things but also by avoiding privileging anything in particular—"hay" is certainly one of those easily recognizable things, but a "hay ledge" is not—and thus leaving that final act of selection and discernment for the beholder to carry out for himself. And indeed Woolworth's and Pitz's titles suggest that they did just that, pointing, respectively, to the loft on the left side of the picture and the corner at its center.

Pitz and Woolworth were both correct, in any case, about the fact that "untitled" would have been an inappropriate label, one that would have urged the beholder, *à la* modernism, to resist any urge to recognize, name, and describe. *Hay Ledge's* initial illusionism and its revelation over time of Wyeth's humanistic, seemingly phenomenological world view ultimately distinguish his practice from the predominant American artistic and philosophical currents of the later 1940s and 1950s—i.e., the strictly analytical, empirical, and anti-metaphysical Anglo-American tradition in philosophy and the idealistic modernisms of the fine arts. "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought," announced Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko in a

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<sup>39</sup> Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 52-53. I take up Relph's reference to Wyeth at the beginning of Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

quintessentially mid-century modernist statement for the *New York Times* in 1943.<sup>40</sup> “We are for the larger shape,” they continued, “because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.”<sup>41</sup> Whereas we have seen in the preceding pages (and will continue to see in the following chapters) that Wyeth aptly diverted the beholder’s attention to the material paint surface in *Hay Ledge*, we have found no evidence to suggest that he espoused the modernist principle of “the simple expression of the complex thought.” On the contrary, Wyeth would declare in 1975 that he had painted in accordance with a belief that “The simpler the thing, the more complex it is bound to be.”<sup>42</sup> Rothko, with whom Wyeth had been in communication in the 1960s, appears to have appreciated this contra-modernist maintenance of complexity, having remarked circa 1973 that “Wyeth is about the pursuit of strangeness.”<sup>43</sup>

In order to believe more securely in the purposiveness of *Hay Ledge*’s subtle spatial obscurities and stylistic inconsistencies, we can distinguish them from the more starkly provocative stylistic experiments and more sensational images that Wyeth was producing during earlier phases of his career. In addition to the rigid objectivity of *Christina’s World* and the indulgent imposition of abstraction in *Hoffman’s Slough*, we can look, for example, at Wyeth’s watercolors from the late 1930s, which are highly energetic and free-wheeling, products of a precocious adolescence that Wyeth would self-criticize later on as “all swish and swash.”<sup>44</sup> (Fig. 1.18) Other relevant examples in terms of style and composition include *Night Hauling* (1944), in which innumerable dabs of bright white paint stand at once supernaturally and representationally apart from an otherwise darkly painted scene under the guise of marine bioluminescence, and *The Hunter* (1943), with its blatantly surface-oriented arrangement of the leaves, branches, and bark of a sycamore tree. (Figs. 1.19 & 1.20)

In terms of subject matter, we can look to the overtly surrealist *Christmas Morning* (1944), in which an ethereal human figure reclines in a landscape while its body is caressed by a pair of thorny stems. (Fig. 1.21) Here the distinction between Wyeth’s earlier works and *Hay Ledge* becomes especially important, for we could fairly characterize *Hay Ledge* as a straight-faced illustration of an *irrationally* interpreted scene,

<sup>40</sup> Gottlieb and Rothko in a letter to the *New York Times* from 7 June 1943, as quoted in Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 75.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Wyeth, interview by Thomas Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Rothko, interview by Brian O’Doherty, in O’Doherty, *The Voice and the Myth: American Masters* (New York: Universe Books, 1988), 231. Additionally, John Wilmerding has suggested a link between Wyeth and Rothko circa 1960, writing that “Wyeth spoke with Rothko [circa 1960] about the spiritual content of their art.” Wilmerding, introduction to Knutson, ed., *Andrew Wyeth*, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Wyeth, speaking to Richard Meryman in 1965 about his early-career technique: “I was just a clever watercolorist—lots of swish and swash.” Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 108. For more on Wyeth’s early career exposure to and interests in surrealism and abstraction see Michael Taylor, “Between Realism and Surrealism: The Early Work of Andrew Wyeth,” in Knutson, ed., *Andrew Wyeth*, 36-40; Wanda Corn, “The Art of Andrew Wyeth,” in *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat., ed. Wanda Corn (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1973), 142-3; and Alexander Nemerov, “The Glitter of *Night Hauling*: Andrew Wyeth in the 1940s,” *The Magazine Antiques*, May/June 2012, 147.

part conscious perception and part unconscious projection, and thus we could find a continuation of Wyeth's earlier interest in Surrealism—in the form, perhaps, of what Alfred Barr described in 1942 as “magic realism:” the painterly practice of “mak[ing] plausible and convincing [an] improbable, dreamlike or fantastic vision.”<sup>45</sup> (In fact a selection of Wyeth's works were included in the “American Realists and Magic Realists” exhibition organized by Dorothy Miller at the Barr-directed Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1943.<sup>46</sup>) However, such a claim would have to be qualified by an acknowledgment that *Hay Ledge*'s basic imagery—its wooden beams and planks, its ropes and tools, its piled hay—is simply too sober and predictable with regard to the interior of a small New England barn to be bound up with the psycho-sexual hyperbole that was central to Surrealism and its more tempered descendent, magic realism—for example, those thorny fingers that at once threaten and tickle an anthropomorphic fog in the case of *Christmas Morning*. Indeed Wyeth may well have intended the everyday familiarity of *Hay Ledge*'s recognizable forms and objects to shield it from easy associations with pre-War artistic movements and styles, or at least from his own earlier and more blatant experiments with them.

But such a qualification is not meant to deny altogether that *Hay Ledge*'s pictures of homely material culture are presented in an ironic and provocative mode. On the contrary, the subtlety of *Hay Ledge*'s surreality and abstractionism has here been read as a deliberate cue, from Wyeth to his beholder, toward the projection of associations between objects and their many possible uses and meanings. The distinction between Wyeth's earlier works and *Hay Ledge* is thus a matter of purpose and degree: to follow this painting's lead, which this chapter has attempted to do, is to maintain a dynamic gaze upon a static scene, endlessly recognizing its superficially simple component parts. Unlike the more spectacular elements of Wyeth's earlier works, *Hay Ledge*'s surface decorations and instances of pictorial obscurity and incoherence lie quietly in waiting for the viewer's gaze, and thus this later work enacts, more patiently and sincerely than the likes of *Night Hauling* and *Christmas Morning*, Wyeth's belief, as quoted above, that “The simpler the thing, the more complex it is bound to be.”<sup>47</sup>

The dark triangular shape in the lower right corner is one example of *Hay Ledge*'s latent abstraction. The round dabs and droplets of white paint on the frame of the barn door provide another. There is also the thick, rough texture of the paint surface above the dory, with its cryptic window onto *Hay Ledge*'s red under-painting, as well as the white vessel itself as a high-toned compositional counterpoint to the brightly lit field of grass. None of these compositional elements of the work demands the beholder's attention, but all of them reward it. The same is true of the ambiguously foreshortened pile of hay, the obscured corner, ceiling, and floor of the barn, and the unexplained emergence of a pair

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<sup>45</sup> Alfred H. Barr, as quoted in Dorothy C. Miller's foreword to Miller and Barr, eds., *American Realists and Magic Realists*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 5.

<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Lincoln Kirstein, in his introduction to the catalog for this exhibition, associated Wyeth's style with surrealism, pointing out that, while none of the contemporary “magic realist” artists in the show were “member[s] of the official Surrealist group,” they did borrow from their “methods.” Kirstein, introduction to *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Wyeth, interview by Thomas Hoving, in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 101.

of tracks from the center of the grassy field. Indeed only the prominently illusionistic rope leaps out at first glance, whereas everything else in *Hay Ledge*—its recognizable things, its abstract forms, its surface textures, and its compositional arrangements and harmonies—stand equally behind such that any and all might be discovered in the longer, more searching gaze that Wyeth seems to have intended his puzzling reference to a “hay ledge” to inspire.

Without acknowledging that Wyeth’s painting practice changed over time—that he was experimenting freely in the 1930s and ‘40s with styles and techniques that he would begin to put more judiciously to use in the 1950s—we would be at a loss to explain the oddity of *Hay Ledge*’s pictorial spaces and the role that Wyeth intended them to play in the expression of his perceptions of the Olsons and their farm. Indeed we might simply think less of Wyeth’s skills as a draftsman and therefore go on preferring, as Schjeldahl recommended, to view his works in reproduction, dismissing the “strangeness” of *Hay Ledge* (to borrow that very appropriate term from Rothko) as either a timid reinvestment in Surrealism or a sub-par attempt at nineteenth-century academic realism. Reproductions of *Hay Ledge* do, after all, get it almost right: they visualize the Olsons’ barn, including Alvaro’s idle dory, quite sharply and clearly. But they also make Wyeth out to be a more mechanical and dispassionate artist than he really was, as if he thought himself to be separable from the scene that he painted. When instead we behold *Hay Ledge* itself in light of the change over time of Wyeth’s practice we see a rich and challenging picture that recalls *Christina’s World* and Wyeth’s other earlier pictures but also stands apart from them (and to my mind, above them). Instead of observing the barn at the top of the hill we exist along with it. Rather than conceptualizing the impossibility of Christina reaching her visually proximate shelter, we feel a Heideggerian “nearness” (*Nähe*) to a useful vessel that is intuitively close by but also immeasurably out of reach. Instead of empathizing with Christina’s inability to stand and walk, we look for and fail to find a floor or any other kind stable footing on which our own bodies can move. Rather than celebrating or pitying Alvaro’s choice to take up farming and ground his dory, we puzzle over the odd situation of a sea-worthy dory in the loft of a barn and in a subtly incoherent pictorial space. Standing before *Christina’s World*, we see; faced with *Hay Ledge*, we wonder.

Objectification and sensationalism occasionally crept back into Wyeth’s painting after this creative high point had passed—beginning most notably in the 1970s, the decade in which Wyeth admitted to growing tired of his own practice and began to work for many years in secret on a series of intense, finely wrought figure studies (many of them erotic nudes) of his youthful female neighbor, Helga Testorf. Not coincidentally, the prior decade (the 1960s) had seen both the misguided popularity of his imagery and the negative criticism of his practice reach their most fevered peaks.<sup>48</sup> Circa 1957, however, Wyeth still had the energy and confidence necessary to risk professional failure

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<sup>48</sup> Chapter 2 of this dissertation elaborates upon this transitional moment in Wyeth’s life, as well as upon the variously pro- and anti-Wyeth fervor of the 1960s. Wyeth’s biographer, Richard Meryman, also associates the onset of Wyeth’s artistic fatigue with the passing of Christina and Alvaro Olson, Wyeth’s long-time friends and models, who died only a month apart from one another in the winter of 1967-68. Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 302-308.

by homing in on the overlap between the many artistic styles, methods, and imperatives which he had encountered in previous decades. Art market demand for his paintings increased steadily over the course of the 1950s, and thus Wyeth may well have come to believe that he no longer had to beg for his viewer's attention and instead could assume and exploit it, using his pictures to raise nuanced questions about matters of space, art, and humanity that the more declarative (but ultimately less assured) earlier works had only begun to acknowledge.<sup>49</sup> It is to these matters of demand, criticism, art, and humanism that we now turn in Chapter 2.

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<sup>49</sup> Wyeth's increasing popularity and financial gain over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, which I examine in the introduction to and the second chapter of this dissertation, is summarized in John Canaday's "The Wyeth Menace," *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1967.

## 2. PRACTICING HAY LEDGE

*Art, to me, is seeing.*<sup>1</sup>

– Andrew Wyeth in conversation  
with Thomas Hoving in 1975

Wyeth was at the height of his powers in 1957. As this chapter will show, demand for his works had risen steadily over the course of the previous twenty years; the wave of strongly negative criticism and academic-art-historical dismissal that would plague him in the 1960s had yet to begin; he was exposed to and felt free to embrace many of the stylistic and theoretical principles of twentieth-century modernism even while maintaining traditional draftsmanship and naturalism as essential components of his painting practice; and he had (as will be explained in greater depth in Chapter 3) developed an intimate familiarity with a particular collection of subject matter that provided him with continuous artistic inspiration—to wit, his neighbors, the Olsons and the Kuerners, and the landscapes and material cultures of their respective farms in Cushing, Maine and Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

*Hay Ledge* hangs today as a record of this particularly fruitful moment during which Wyeth was experimenting freely and productively with various visual, material, and sentimental possibilities. (Fig. 2.1) Indeed it can be read as a kind of public exhibition of its own creation, that is, of the complex art-historical and cultural-historical conditions that made it possible and to which it responded. Additionally, as one of Wyeth's most creative and carefully executed paintings from this particularly productive phase of his career to be exhibited publically over the following ten to fifteen years, *Hay Ledge* can also guide us through a long overdue reassessment of the criticism of Wyeth's practice from the 1960s, which contributed heavily the reputation by which that practice is still known today.

With such opportunities in mind, this chapter and the next work together to situate *Hay Ledge* within the biographical, intellectual, and artistic contexts that most strongly defined Wyeth's mid-century historical moments from his time as an eager young student in his father's studio in the early 1930s through his expression of fatigue with his own practice at the end of the 1960s. Rather than being about Wyeth himself, however, these two chapters attend primarily to Wyeth's painting (and most specifically, to his production of *Hay Ledge*), as well as to how his painting practice has been received and understood. Definitions of period-specific terms will be essential in this regard. The present chapter in particular asks: how did Wyeth and the people around him conceive of such things as “painting,” “illustration,” “abstraction,” and “realism,” and what bearing

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Wyeth, interview by Thomas Hoving in 1975, in Hoving, *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 176.

did these concepts have upon Wyeth's overarching theory of "art" as "seeing?" Its sources, in addition to *Hay Ledge* and a handful of Wyeth's other works, include the period texts that most closely surrounded these works, including biographical materials such as interviews and letters, and also the criticism and history that appeared in contemporary newspapers, magazines, and books. Together these sources show that Wyeth painted *Hay Ledge* in an effort to respond as best he could to a world fraught with appealing yet seemingly irreconcilable ideals, each of which meant something different from one decade to the next: tradition and modernism; American exceptionalism and continuity with the Western tradition; universal aesthetics and individual taste; and the advancement of bourgeois culture and the stability of middle class life.

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Wyeth's father, Newell Convers Wyeth, was an "illustrator" who yearned to be a "painter," and more specifically, one who could "escape the shackles of tradition and evolve something modern."<sup>2</sup> "I don't want to be rated as an *illustrator trying to paint*," N.C. exclaimed in 1915, "but as a *painter* who has shaken the dust of the illustrator from his heels!"<sup>3</sup> Italics and twinned exclamation marks are common among N.C.'s letters from the 1910s. They express the passion for which this popularly beloved, but also privately frustrated, draftsman was known. In a 1914 letter to his friend and fellow illustrator Sidney Chase, for example, N.C. fitfully lamented having "*bitched* myself with accursed *success* in *skin-deep* pictures and illustrations."<sup>4</sup>

Describing his situation more thoroughly (and more politely) in a letter to his mother in 1919, N.C. wrote of his

desire for more personal and therefore more powerful expression [than his illustration jobs allowed]...If papa once saw the distinction between illustration and painting, and would compare the idealism which lies behind these arts, he would understand my eagerness, which appeals to him, I'm afraid, as a mere manifestation of impractical restlessness.<sup>5</sup>

Continuing on in the same letter, he claimed that pre-Renaissance art

amounted to illustration and nothing more—these early examples remain with us today as a matter of historic interest and not artistic. But since the development of the painter's art into the higher forms of expression...the

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<sup>2</sup> N.C. Wyeth, in a letter to his brother on January 18, 1915, in Betsy James Wyeth, ed., *The Wyeths: the Letters of N.C. Wyeth, 1901-1945* (Boston: Gambit, 1971), 484.

<sup>3</sup> N.C. Wyeth, in a letter to his mother on September 13, 1915, in *ibid.*, 502.

<sup>4</sup> N.C. Wyeth, in a letter to Sidney Chase on April 15, 1914, in *ibid.*, 458.

<sup>5</sup> N.C. Wyeth, in a letter to his mother on October 12, 1919, in *ibid.*, 628.



result is of one fundamental trait—an uncontrollable desire to express one's personal feelings toward life.<sup>6</sup>

The problem, as N.C. seems to have understood it, was that illustration was restrictive: the need to make a given illustration appeal to a wide audience required that it accord with the majority taste in terms of format and style, and also that it make the most obvious choices in terms of content. In other words, the artist's "personal feelings toward" the text being illustrated had to be withheld wherever those feelings might have conflicted with the feelings of the typical consumer. And of course the text to be illustrated was selected by a market-driven publisher rather than by the illustrator himself, who may therefore have had no interest beyond financial gain (i.e., no artistic or "painterly" interest) in engaging that particular text in the first place.

Strictly speaking then, illustration itself was not to blame for N.C.'s suffering, for his concerns about "illustration and nothing more" were rooted less in the general concept of illustration and more in the parameters of its execution—specifically, in N.C.'s case, in the pursuit of high-fidelity accords between word and image at the cost of the artistic integrity with which the images were "painted." In 1922 N.C. confirmed this interpretation of his distaste for a particularly apish sort of illustration by intimating the possibility of a more liberally expressive but nonetheless still illustrative alternative: "I am thoroughly stirred up over *Moby Dick*," he wrote in another letter to Chase, a classmate with whom he had trained in Howard Pyle's studio, "I want very much to [illustrate *Moby Dick*], not as the regulation Xmas book such as I have been doing for years, but different in format and quite different in dramatic approach."<sup>7</sup> "Unregulated" illustration was thus something different from illustration of the art-before-the-Renaissance variety. It was rather akin to "painting" insofar as it could treat its source material (in this case the text of a novel) as a point of departure for the presentation of one's own feelings. Moreover, if the "dramatic approach" were unfettered by the demands of popular taste, such an illustration might even constitute something "modern."

N.C. never followed through with his plan to illustrate *Moby Dick*, so we are left to wonder about how his pictures would have looked and what they would have added to Melville's text. However, N.C. did pursue other forms of "painting" over the course of his life. According to Andrew, "My father was going through a terrific transformation in the period when I was forming. He was studying Cézanne and the modern French."<sup>8</sup> During the summers of the 1930s, N.C. left his Brandywine Valley workshop and traveled to Maine to paint pictures intended for exhibition as self-expressive works of fine art. His *Blubber Island* (1938), for example, was included in the annual contemporary art exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in the winter of 1939. (Fig. 2.2) In fact it was praised by C. H. Bonte of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as "glowing with color and simple in its makeup as a Rockwell Kent," a reference that turns out to have been well informed, for N.C. admired Kent's

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> N.C. Wyeth, in a letter to Sidney Chase on August 3, 1922, in Wyeth, *The Wyeths*, 694.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Wyeth, interview by Edgar P. Richardson in 1964, in Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1964, 68.

works (Andrew Wyeth revealed as much in a letter to Kent many years later in 1969), and his *Blubber Island* indeed bears a strong resemblance to Kent's *Afternoon on the Sea, Monhegan* (1907).<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 2.3) Perhaps most significantly, both artists—Kent and N.C.—were known to be straddling the painter-illustrator divide.<sup>10</sup>

However, while Kent progressed steadily over the course of his career toward a reputation as an autonomous, self-expressive artist, N.C. did not. Desiring a comfortable lifestyle for himself and his family, he maintained (and continued to lament) “illustration and nothing more” as his primary occupation until his sudden death at a railroad crossing in 1945.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1930s N.C. began to train Andrew to follow in his financially profitable but artistically unsatisfying footsteps. However, he soon began to sense his son's own desire to turn away from bespoke illustration and toward the practice of more exclusively self-directed “painting.” As Wyeth put it in an undated quotation from Richard Meryman's 1996 biography, “My father must have realized that illustration wasn't my ability. Early [one morning in 1936, the day after I had been deliberating about whether or not to accept an illustration commission from Little, Brown, and

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<sup>9</sup> C. H. Bonte, “[The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts's] 134th Annual: Fine New Wine in Old Bottles,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 29, 1939. I am grateful to Christine Podmaniczky of the Brandywine River Museum for her assistance with research into the connections between Kent and N.C. For more on N.C.'s *Blubber Island*, see Podmaniczky, *N. C. Wyeth, Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings* (London: Scala, 2008), 771-772. For N.C.'s “admiration” of Kent, see the letter from Andrew Wyeth to Rockwell Kent dated 23 October 1969, in the “Rockwell Kent Papers,” *Archives of American Art*, Reel 5248, Frames 290-1. Accessed December 18, 2013. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/Wyeth-Andrew-and-Jamie--223485>.

Additionally, according to an inventory maintained by the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, N.C. owned a copy of Kent's *Rockwellkentiana* (1933), which expounded Kent's theories on art and included a color lithograph of *Afternoon on the Sea, Monhegan*. The two men, who were born the same year in 1882, also shared an artistic interest in the visual culture of Russian folk art, which they each cultivated through parallel friendships with the art collector and critic Christian Brinton. See Podmaniczky, *Catalogue Raisonné*, 749-50; additionally, for Andrew Wyeth's 1936 portrait of Brinton, see figure 18 in Michael Taylor's “Between Realism and Surrealism: The Early Work of Andrew Wyeth,” in *Andrew Wyeth: Memory & Magic* exh. cat., ed. Anne Classen Knutson (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2006), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Kent illustrated *Moby Dick* for Random House in the late 1920s, but only after acquiring full control over decisions about the format and style of his pictures, as well as over the size, font, set, and spacing of the text, along with the type of paper and ink to be used. That is, there was to be nothing slavish about that particular act of “illustration.” Kent, *It's Me, Oh Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1955), 438. Additionally, writing about his early-career work as a draftsman, he professed that “I might have taken great pleasure in [architectural rendering], had I not loved painting more; for whatever is less good than something better is not good enough.” *Ibid.*, 277. Elsewhere he referred to his early architectural work as labor on a “chain gang,” and described it as well as “a waste of time, a waste of life.” *Ibid.*, 273-74.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Meryman writes briefly about N.C.'s conflicting interests in morality and material comfort, noting his expenditures on improvements to his Chadds Ford house, a waterfront vacation house in coastal Maine with a boat and dock, a Cadillac, a tennis court, and lavish parties for all sorts of occasions. According to Meryman, “N.C. complained of the din in his head from warring factions. One was ‘the desire to live simply, serenely, morally, and to develop my talent to its highest state for its own sake.’ The other was ‘personal ambition and gain.’” Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 79-81.

Company,] I was conscious of this big figure standing over the bed. It was Pa, and he said, ‘Andy, it’s ridiculous for you to [illustrate] that book. Turn it down and go to Maine. I will support you. Go up there and paint like hell.’”<sup>12</sup> Henceforth N.C. worked to shelter his student-son from the conflicts of occupational interest with which he himself would continue to struggle. Most significantly he provided a paternal blessing and financial support, precisely that which he himself had lacked.

N.C.’s sudden death in 1945 prompted Andrew most definitively to embrace the kind of “serious” art practice that N.C. had encouraged him to pursue. “When he died...I had this terrific urge to prove that what he had started in me was not in vain—to really do something serious and not play around with it...”<sup>13</sup> This was Andrew looking back during an interview in 1965. He had expressed a similar sentiment in 1953, recalling that “I got more depth and mood in my work by my father’s death. I [now] see into things more than I ever could before. An experience like that galvanizes you—you’ve got to come through from then on, or never.”<sup>14</sup> However, seriousness, for Andrew, did not mean abandoning the techniques of illustration altogether but rather carving out a tenuous but fascinating middle ground *between* painting and illustration, developing a practice that was expressive and self-directed but nonetheless still concerned with recognizable imagery that could be meaningful for a broad, popular audience.

Ironically, however, it was only *until* 1945 that Wyeth’s commitment to serious art was recognized by a majority of his critics. Doris Brian, for example, wrote in *ARTnews* in 1941 that “Wyeth learned what his illustrator father could teach him about drawing and technique, and then [he] set about finding his own things to say.”<sup>15</sup> After World War II, critical affirmation of the seriousness of Wyeth’s art waned and the illustrative aspects of his practice came to be used as evidence for claims that he pandered to low-brow and conservative taste, that is, that instead of “finding his own things to say,” as Brian put it, he rather reiterated N.C.’s practice in an unoriginal manner.

By the 1960s this negative view of the illustrative aspects of Wyeth’s practice would become especially intense. Jay Jacobs, for example, asserted in 1967 that “Wyeth’s vocabulary is largely the vocabulary of commercial illustration, not serious painting...”<sup>16</sup> Katherine Kuh agreed in 1968, cautioning her readers that “Wyeth’s painted reports of local events were conceived as glorified illustrations.... To confuse them with an art that is an extension of life is a mistake.”<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Alloway joined this chiding chorus as well, as evidenced already in this dissertation’s introduction. Deigning to address what the *New York Times* critic John Canaday had cheekily termed the “Wyeth

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Wyeth, as quoted in *ibid.*, 108.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Wyeth, interview by Richard Meryman in 1965, in Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth: an Interview,” *Life*, May 14, 1965, 108.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Wyeth, interview by Aline Louchheim in 1953, in Louchheim, “Wyeth—Conservative Avant-Gardist,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 1953, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Doris Brian, “Watercolor’s White Knight: Andrew Wyeth,” *Artnews* 40 (October 15, 1941), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Jay Jacobs, “Andrew Wyeth: an Unsentimental Reappraisal,” *Art in America* 55, no. 1 (January/February 1967), 31.

<sup>17</sup> Katherine Kuh, “Why Wyeth?” in *The Saturday Evening Review*, October 26, 1968, 26-29.

Menace,” Alloway claimed in 1967 that Wyeth’s paintings are examples “of illustration as art, and of old-fashioned culture as a whole.”<sup>18</sup>

Turning his attention from Wyeth’s works to Wyeth himself, Alloway went on to explain that “Wyeth was trained by his father and his work is basically a continuation of his father’s projection of unique fine art into mass distribution channels. Andrew Wyeth illustrates even when there is no extant text, even when the work is not intended for reproduction...”<sup>19</sup> The phrasing of this particular remark is intriguing, for it can be taken (deviously, I admit) to suggest the possibility of a compromise between modern “fine art” and traditional “illustration,” or of Wyeth indeed having indeed found “his own things to say” despite continuing to work in a recognizably illustrative mode. Specifically, Alloway’s statement introduced the idea of “illustrating” nothing in particular, and perhaps even of indexing the techniques of illustration without actually illustrating at all.

And if Wyeth indeed practiced such a form of art, could we not characterize him as something of a modernist after all? He might at least be considered an imperfect exemplar of what Clement Greenberg referred to as the “avant-garde,” those financially secure painters and poets whose art does not depict or describe “nature” but instead creates something independent from it by “imitate[ing]...the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves.”<sup>20</sup> Is Greenberg’s “nature” (that which is “given, increate”) not a fair, albeit tenuous, substitute for “extant text” in Alloway’s critique? Alloway meant the opposite, of course: that Wyeth pictured nature *instead* of the images and ideas created already by texts, that is, that Wyeth merely traded one “increate” thing for another. Moreover, the larger context of Alloway’s essay as a whole clarifies his claim that Wyeth executed his imitations in a conservative, traditional manner, and therefore that there was nothing modern or avant-garde about him. But might the truth about Wyeth’s practice fall somewhere in between: that he intended the likes of *Hay Ledge* to depict a novel and unique “nature” of which he understood himself, his gaze, and his act of painting to be creative, founding parts?

Alloway, Jacobs, and Kuh seem to have had in mind a very particular sort of “illustration,” one which serves to clarify things, to stabilize appearances; one whose bringing-to-light is a matter of rendering a visible, static object that can be studied, understood, and agreed upon. Such an illustration is one the success of which depends upon the recognizability of the thing being illustrated—that is, the ease with which the viewer can relate it to the “text” or to the “nature” that it represents. I gather that these critics had in mind the likes of J. J. Audubon’s birds, Thomas Eakins’s cadaver studies,

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<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Alloway, “The Other Andy: ‘America’s Most Popular Painter,’” *Arts Magazine* 41 (April 1967), 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> In his 1939 history of the “avant-garde,” Greenberg wrote that the latest incarnation of the “avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. ... But the absolute is the absolute, and the poet or artist, being what he is, cherishes certain relative values more than others. ... And so he turns out to be imitating, not God...but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves.” Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944*, vol. 1 of *Clement Greenberg: the Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 8.

and of course N.C. Wyeth's popularly beloved portrayals of literary characters. For Greenberg it was the cover images of the *Saturday Evening Post*, which were intended to disambiguate and stabilize normative American culture in order to feed it back to its confused, hungry self.<sup>21</sup>

Yet Hillis Miller reminds us that illustration does not need to be so transparent in its representation of that which it brings to light, and moreover that such transparency may be altogether impossible to attain.<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger's *Holzwege* provided Miller with an instructive metaphor that bears repeating.<sup>23</sup> A lumberman's path into the heart of a forest can appear to others to lead in a specific direction and yet to end before arriving at any tangible destination. So it is with illustrations, which can lead their viewers into the forests of ideas evoked by texts but never quite to the texts themselves. Indeed according to Miller all illustrations act in this manner whether the artist, writer, or publisher intends them to or not: a picture can gesture toward the ideas and imagery described by a text but it will also inevitably disturb or distort them. He cites a handful of story tellers and thinkers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (the "aura"-deprived moderns of Walter Benjamin's "age of mechanical reproducibility") who thought so too, and who thus found the relationship between visual media and text to be variously symbiotic and parasitic.<sup>24</sup>

Elaborating his description of the fruitful but tenuous relationship between word and image, and more broadly between any sort of "illustration" (or representation) and its object, Miller explains that the specific ideas or images illuminated by a picture can never be fully distinguished from that picture itself: every illustration to some degree "brings its own light to light."<sup>25</sup> And this, I think, is a crucial aspect of what Wyeth had in mind when he stated, as quoted at the outset of this chapter, that "Art, to me, is seeing."<sup>26</sup> It is a special case of a general idea widely held by those that work at the margins of various

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<sup>21</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 6. Jennifer Greenhill has explored the change over time of Norman Rockwell's covers images for the *Saturday Evening Post*, noting that in the 1940s he was already dissatisfied with some aspects of American life, but that he painted the rosy, vanilla picture of it that his editors demanded in order to maintain his job and income. By the 1950s, however, his pictures began to subtly assert his views on subjects such as racial inequality at the risk of popular and managerial disapproval. See Greenhill, *The View from Outside: Rockwell and Race in 1950, American Art* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 70-95.

<sup>22</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Illustration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 61-111, and especially 70 and 102.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. "Holzwege" is the title that Heidegger gave to a collection of essays first published in 1950, including his oft cited "The Origin of the Work of Art." As an epigraph to the volume as a whole, he wrote, "Holz lautet ein alter Name für Wald. Im Holz sind Wege, die meist verwachsen jäh im Unbegangenen aufhören. / Sie heißen Holzwege. / Jeder verläuft gesondert, aber im selben Wald. Oft scheint es, als gleiche einer dem anderen. Doch es scheint nur so. / Holzmacher und Waldhüter kennen die Wege. Sie wissen, was es heißt, auf einem Holzweg zu sein." Heidegger, *Holzwege*, vol. 5 of Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), epigraph. *Holzwege* is available in English as *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Miller, *Illustration*, 61 ff.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>26</sup> Wyeth as cited above, note 1.

disciplines, fields, and media. In the words of Terry Eagleton, “Interests are *constitutive* of knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> Or as the art historian Darcy Grimaldo Grisby puts it, “Every representation is an interpretation.”<sup>28</sup> Art, for Wyeth, was seeing because seeing was necessarily creating. A close look at his paintings from the late 1950s reveals that, for all of their charming illusionism, they offer very little by way of straightforward views of stabilized objects. Moreover, the views that they do offer are roundabout, shifting, and interrupted. They often bring things to light only to hide them from view. *Hay Ledge*’s sunlit but truncated landscape exemplifies this kind of ironically unrevealing sort of illumination. The path defined by its parallel s-curved tracks, which seem to end without explanation, is another more metaphorical example, one akin to a *Holzweg* in Heidegger’s metaphorical use of that term: the empty or non-existent destination is a kind of “opening” onto an awareness of subjective, interpretive being. Additionally, we shall come to see that *Hay Ledge*’s dory, in its shady, disorienting surroundings, can be read as an allegory of this same idea, that is, of the truth of illustration itself as a complex and self-conflicted mode of representation.

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These descriptions of *Hay Ledge* should sound familiar from Chapter 1, which argued that to behold *Hay Ledge* in person is to see around the dory that appears so prominent in reproduction. More broadly that previous chapter looked circumspectively at a seemingly unified picture to discover the complex, multifaceted work of art of which that picture is only a part. In one view we saw an illustrator’s dory in an old-timey barn: the dory as a point of narrative or sentimental focus, Alvaro Olson’s grounded dory, the pitiful dory displaced from its worldly purpose and rendered as such with the deft naturalism of a virtuoso draftsman. In another view we saw the painter’s dory: the dory as tempera, pigment, and form, which was also the dory not relegated to a loft but rather afloat in waves of ochre paint that return it to the sea. All told, *Hay Ledge* presents each of these many dories in and amongst the others, and in doing so it demonstrates the dependence of recognition, objectification, measurement, and theorization upon ever changing states of desire and motivation.

As the above quotations from Kuh, Alloway, and Jacobs have already begun to demonstrate, Wyeth conceived this complex picture of Olson’s sacrifice (and of Christina’s “world”) amidst an art culture that held the painting of pure forms and emotions at odds with the illusionistic depiction of everyday life and material culture. Twentieth-century modernists experimented with non-figurative (or non-objective) aspects of painting in part for this reason, namely that serious, artful painting was doomed to failure so long as it tried to express the same kinds of ideas, thoughts, and images as writing, and therefore that it ought to focus instead on that which it alone can

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<sup>27</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 14.

<sup>28</sup> Darcy Grimaldo Grisby in a lecture presented at the University of California, Berkeley on 20 January 2009 for an undergraduate course titled “Western Art from the Renaissance to the Present.”

do: presenting form, color, tone, and materiality as such instead of using those things to produce illusions that literally draw beholders' attentions away from those media themselves and toward some kind of literary or sentimental content. This particular form of realism or authenticity seemed to afford a uniquely painterly "extension of life" (to borrow a term from Kuh), as opposed to hazy representations of life as it already is. Wyeth seems to have believed, however, that he could integrate the two, or at least that he could embrace the opacity of representation from which "illustration" can never fully escape. Moreover, this chapter, as it begins to elaborate these modernist pursuits and Wyeth's complex responses to them, will show that he did so with less naiveté than most critics and historians have assigned him.

Wyeth's critics from the late 1930s through the 1960s tended to interpret his work as being paradigmatic of one side or the other—of freely expressive abstractionism until the early 1940s, and thereafter of traditional, academic, illustrative depiction. But according to an editorial preface to Jacobs's essay, which appeared in *Art in America* in 1967, the stakes of such assessments transcended Wyeth and his works, which were merely one of many grounds on which an ideological battle was being waged between a cultural avant-garde and the traditions against which it rebelled. According to the editors, a recent uptick in adverse criticism of Wyeth's work

points up a situation unique in the history of the arts—a profound dichotomy between the humanist tradition and its philosophical antithesis, which sparks so many of today's cultural manifestations. Wyeth's work is obviously of sufficient stature to stand on its own merits, but the attitude that it expresses is under fierce attack. The fight is well worth watching, and the case of the minority opinion, so succinctly stated on the following pages [in Jacobs essay], demonstrates that the outcome is very much in the balance.<sup>29</sup>

Here, in a nut shell, was the challenge that Wyeth faced in the 1950s and '60s: popular approbation for an illustrative art practice that professional critics tended to deride. Jacobs summed it up in a single sentence in which he ridiculed both Wyeth and his admiring audience: "One of the more persistent myths surrounding Wyeth has to do with his 'astonishing technical proficiency'—a proficiency that is largely in the eyes of those shell-shocked modern beholders who have forgotten what a lot of justly disremembered nineteenth-century painting looked like."<sup>30</sup>

Four years prior to Jacobs's critique, which was written on the occasion of a major retrospective of Wyeth's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, President John Kennedy had given voice to the silent majority (to those "shell-shocked modern beholders") by awarding Wyeth a Presidential Medal of Freedom. In a solemn ceremony at the White House less than a month after Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Wyeth accepted the nation's highest civilian honor from President

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<sup>29</sup> Editorial preface to Jacobs, "Andrew Wyeth," 24.

<sup>30</sup> Jacobs, "Andrew Wyeth," 30.

Lyndon Johnson, who stoked the cultural fire by declaring that Wyeth had, “in the great humanist tradition, illuminated and clarified the verities and delights of everyday life.”<sup>31</sup> Johnson’s speech writers were no doubt aware of how thin a line they were asking him to walk between “illuminated” and “illustrated.” Moreover, “tradition” was, by definition, anathema to the tenets of modernism, and Johnson’s assumption of the “great[ness]” of “humanism” had been questioned repeatedly since the early twentieth century in terms of whether or not art should be socially or politically meaningful at all, a question raised explicitly by the editors of *Art in America* four years later.

It was during this transition from critical darling of the early 1940s to populist bane in the later 1960s that Wyeth painted *Hay Ledge*, a work interpreted here as a manifestation of his own belief in the viability of a synthetic “art”-as-“seeing,” an art that cuts pathways into forests of ideas in which nature, word, and image all circulate but never meet. *Hay Ledge* put such an art to work, and also on display, exhibiting the complexity of Wyeth’s practice for his beholders to experience for themselves. With the visual analyses of Chapter 1 now fading from view, a brief enactment of such a beholder’s experience is in order.

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In his interview with Thomas Hoving in 1975, Wyeth described Olson’s boat as “that beautiful white Penobscot dory [that] sat up in that loft, in the hay....for years.”<sup>32</sup> In accord with this description, *Hay Ledge* presents Olson’s vessel as a found object with a notable visual appeal—as a piece of smoothed driftwood, we might say: laid aground at low tide, its salty patina shimmers beneath a bleaching sun. In fact driftwood would be right at home in Wyeth’s “Maine,” a summertime landscape that was loose, thin, and fleeting in comparison to the weight and structure of his winter home of “Pennsylvania:”

Maine to me is almost like going on the surface of the moon. I feel things are just hanging on the surface and that it’s all going to blow away. In Maine, everything seems to be dwindling with terrific speed. In Pennsylvania, there’s a substantial foundation underneath, of depths of dirt and earth. Up in Maine I feel it’s all dry bones and desiccated sinews. That’s actually the difference between the two places to me.<sup>33</sup>

*Hay Ledge*’s “beautiful” dory, as Wyeth described it to Hoving, is an icon of this dry, rustling landscape, which it signifies in tonal harmony with the sun-burnt grass of the meadow beyond the barn door. Indeed Wyeth’s imagination turned Olson’s empty barn into a studio-gallery in which the driftwood dory is both discovered and artfully displayed: spot-lit at eye-level, it delights our shaded gaze with its visual form. The

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<sup>31</sup> President Johnson’s citation of Wyeth on 6 December 1963, as quoted in “Freedom Medal Citations,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1963, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 165.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Wyeth, as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 171.



curving stem answers the straight line of the stern, and each flattens out into a tidy silhouette against the darkness beside and behind it. The middle of the dory's port side, meanwhile flares out in a pleasing Hogarthian curve to catch the raking sunlight. The handle of the scythe that sits before the dory cues our minds to such conventional decorative arrangements, for it cleverly imitates the "line of beauty and grace" that projects from the painter's palette in Hogarth's *The Painter and his Pug* (1745).<sup>34</sup> (Figs. 2.4 & 2.5) The blade of this scythe is hidden in shadow as if to emphasize the grace of the handle over the practical value of the tool as a whole.

A rope attached to the dory's bow provides another harmonious counterpart to the dory's graceful lines. Indeed in nautical terms this rope becomes a "line," and more specifically a "painter." Wyeth was surely fluent with such terminology, and he no doubt grasped the dual significance of these terms in the parallel contexts of boating and visual art, for he had learned to operate dories as a teen, he owned one himself as an adult, and he had pictured them in his works many times prior to his production of *Hay Ledge*.<sup>35</sup> In his 1975 interview with Hoving, he identified the skiff in Olson's barn quite specifically as a "Penobscot dory," that is, a vessel local not only to New England but designed and built precisely in mid-coastal Maine.

In light of Wyeth's familiarity with dories, we might note as well an absence of visible oarlocks, those crucial mechanical components without which a dory is largely inoperable. Like the hidden blade of the scythe to its visible handle, oarlocks would have disrupted the dory's gently curving form and thus buried its beauty beneath a burden of purpose. True, oarlocks are nowhere to be found in Wyeth's initial watercolor study of this particular vessel, but neither are its oars nor the rope that hangs above it, both of which ultimately came to figure prominently in the final design. (Fig. 2.6) (The chicken cage, the scythe, and the clam hod, by contrast, were present from the beginning.)

By 1957 Wyeth in fact had a longstanding painterly fascination with oarlocks, which do appear in most of his other dory pictures. When he first began to experiment with tempera in the 1930s (he was in his late teens), Wyeth wrote excitedly to his father explaining that this novel medium allowed him "to paint a pair of oarlocks with the cord that's tied to the thwarts and really make you feel the truth, the absolute quality of a worn piece of metal, make it really as it is, to express all of Maine."<sup>36</sup> So while he may not actively have painted the oarlocks out, he had at some level to resist an illustrative predisposition toward painting them in.

Despite its impractical beauty, however, Olson's Penobscot dory seems to be retired only temporarily. Sheltered together with the hay in the mow, it has neither been sold nor dismantled for its wood. Instead it exists in a state of permanent storage, at once

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<sup>34</sup> The phrase "line of beauty and grace" is inscribed onto the painting itself. It is also the subject of Hogarth's 1753 treatise, *The Analysis of Beauty*. Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, ed. Ronald Paulson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Wyeth learned to boat as a teen in Maine with a local friend named Walt Anderson. Meryman, *Secret Life*, 109 and opp. 294 (text accompanying color plate *Adrift*). Wyeth painted dories belonging to Anderson, Olson, another Mainer named Henry Teel, and himself. See, for examples, *Maine Fisherman* (1936), *The White Dory* (1944), *Young Fisherman and Dory* (1944), and *Henry's Dory* (1950).

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Wyeth as quoted in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth*, 120.

a formal aesthetic object on display and a misplaced instrument that brings to mind a place and context where it is not: namely, the waters of the St. Georges River and Muscongus Bay, where “ropes” become “lines” of the nautical sort, and where dories are not aesthetic objects but functional vessels. Or so Wyeth’s curiously titled picture would have us believe: the wave-like appearance of the “hay ledge” activates the dory’s sharp stem, thereby rinsing this fisherman’s tool of its farmer’s neglect and its artist’s aesthetics.

*Hay Ledge*, in this dialectical interpretation, begs comparison with another British painting, John Constable’s *Hay Wain* (1821). (Fig. 2.7) Both pictures are rural scenes of displacement provocatively portrayed: the former pictures a marine vessel grounded amongst a pile of hay, while the latter depicts a wagon being pulled against a watery current. Notice also the skiff in *Hay Wain* that idles comfortably like a fish-in-water in contrast to the awkwardly rolling wagon: it appears along the right edge of the picture, and it bears a strong resemblance to the dory in *Hay Ledge*. (Fig. 2.8) Moreover *Hay Wain*’s marginal skiff calls another of Wyeth’s works to mind: *Alvaro’s Hayrack*, a watercolor painted in 1958, within a year of the production of *Hay Ledge*. (Fig. 2.9) In this third painting a cart roughly equivalent to the one in *Hay Wain* stands unused on the very edge of the bank of a river; its wheels, only halfway visible above a sloping ground plane, appear mostly in silhouette against a background of high-toned water. All three of these pictures thus appear to play similar games with situation and practical context behind veils of picturesque pastoralism and aesthetic delight.

N.C. and Andrew Wyeth both admired Constable, our historical understanding of whom has recently been revised by the close analyses of Ray Lambert.<sup>37</sup> Constable, as Lambert explains, achieved canonical status as a painter despite his apparent provinciality—indeed by portraying his East-Anglian home of Dedham Vale in “six-footers” intended for exhibition in London. His fame thus set an important precedent for Wyeth, whose similarly sized pictures of rural Pennsylvania and Maine were exhibited to popular acclaim in the museums of America’s largest cities. Moreover, as this dissertation attempts to do with Wyeth, so has Lambert’s book shown the perennially localized Constable to have been well aware of and responsive to the modern art theories of his time. Constable was not, Lambert argues, so isolationist in his approach to scene painting as previous critics and historians have made him out to be.<sup>38</sup> Nor, as we are beginning to see, was Wyeth.

A sense of purpose returns, however, as we recognize that Wyeth’s artful staging ironically presents Olson’s idle dory also as a fulfillment of the need for a lone boatman to fish the rocky New England shore. Indeed *Hay Ledge* might be understood to illustrate

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<sup>37</sup> N.C. referred to Constable in positive terms in at least two of his letters, one of which records his impressions of painting encountered first hand. See N.C. Wyeth’s letter to his brother, Stimson, on February 1, 1912, and another letter to his friend, Sidney Chase, on February 3, 1921, in Wyeth, *The Wyeths*, 404 and 672. Andrew kept a book on Constable in his studio library, as reported by Ed Sozanski, “Andrew Wyeth’s Chadds Ford Studio Open to Visitors,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 1, 2012, WEB Edition. Accessed via LexisNexis Academic on December 13, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Ray Lambert, *John Constable and the Theory of Landscape Painting* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

the very concept or ideal of “dory” more so than the particular one that sat unused in Olson’s barn, for it profiles this specialized skiff’s come-along stern and wave-cutting stem; it highlights the dory’s flaring, buoyant sides; and it exhibits the stable footing that this vessel affords to a fisherman by aligning the bottom planks flush with the boards of the loft (an accord that marks yet another alteration from the initial watercolor).<sup>39</sup> Here, if anywhere, Wyeth may have been gesturing toward his father’s profession of “illustration and nothing more.” But by emphasizing the suitability of this vessel to its sea-faring purpose is Wyeth’s illustration not turning our attention from one kind of “beauty” to another? Having begun with eighteenth-century aesthetics, with the “beauties” of Hogarth, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant, which were defined in large part through opposition to notions of “goodness,” “fitness,” and “proportion,” are we not now revisiting Platonic notions of “beauty” (*kalon*) that in fact overlap with the “admirability” of a proportioned thing well suited to a given purpose, or of the admirability of any “form” in its ideal state?<sup>40</sup> Having lost sight of the driftwood’s purposeless rhythms, harmonies, and grace, are we not now attending instead to the elegance of the dory’s carefully engineered design?

This to-and-fro will continue as long as we care to pursue it. Let us return then, to an examination of the intentions behind it. We shall find that this plurality of valid interpretations of a single picture can be read as an allegory of Wyeth’s struggle to define himself as an artist within the rapidly changing cultures of the 1940s and ‘50s.

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The idea of a studio-gallery, a hybrid space in which art is both produced and displayed, and thus a space in which production itself is open to view and in which viewing can constitute production, was known to Wyeth from his childhood in the form of his father’s grand studio in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. “It was the day of show-place studios,” said Andrew in 1953.<sup>41</sup> He was referring to his father’s era in which

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<sup>39</sup> The representational dory in *Hay Ledge* indeed resembles descriptions and schematic drawings of a “bank dory,” a craft the design of which was specialized for service as a short-range fishing vessel in New England over the course of the nineteenth century, though dories in general have roots extending centuries farther back in both North America and Europe. A good source on this history, including a schematic drawing of such a dory in profile (i.e., an elevation view, to borrow the term from architectural drafting) is John Gardner, *The Dory Book* (Mystic: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1987), especially Chapters 3 and 10.

<sup>40</sup> For further explanation of these terms and ideas, see Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), especially 35-74; Edmund Burke, “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful,” in Charles Harrison, et al., eds., *Art in Theory, 1648-1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 516-526; and Nickolas Pappas, “Plato’s Aesthetics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. Accessed December 13, 2013. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/plato-aesthetics/>.

<sup>41</sup> Louchheim, “Wyeth,” 55. N.C.’s studio, along with the family house next to which it sits, is preserved and open to the public under the administration of the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

the studio was an all-important thing, like Frederic Remington's studio, or Sargent's studio, or Hassam's studio, where they had drapery and formal objects around....[My father's studio was paradigmatic of] the big studio, the mystic *salon* that becomes some sort of affected heart of creativity where you have afternoon teas to show off your new work that is draped and then dramatically unveiled.<sup>42</sup>

In 1932, Wyeth began to study formally in this busy studio, which stood only a stone's throw from the Wyeth family house. Live models arrived, posed, and departed; friends and clients visited to view works in progress and recently completed. All the while N.C.'s students—there were others in addition to Andrew and his siblings—were hard at work, being subjected, as Andrew recalled in 1955, to “incessant drilling in drawing and construction.”<sup>43</sup>

Prior to Andrew becoming a student, however, N.C.'s studio served primarily as a playground for his youngest son, who was home-schooled and often left alone to explore not only the studio but also the landscape surrounding it (leading Andrew to develop the taste for solitude and deep, imaginative thought that we shall explore in greater depth in Chapter 3). There were exotic objects of all sorts that N.C. had gathered over the years as study materials for his book illustrations, and for Andrew such things became aids to immersive play. “My father's studio was jammed with curious objects,” Wyeth recalled, “It was marvelous.”<sup>44</sup> Early-modern Japanese muskets leaned against a wall; a full-size Native American birch bark canoe hung from wooden rafters above a tall, open-plan workspace.<sup>45</sup> According to Aline Loucheim, a *New York Times Magazine* reporter who interviewed Andrew in Chadds Ford in 1953, there was a “vast panoply of props,” including “pistols from the Spanish Armada, Daniel Boone's gun, a pirate's chest [and] an elaborate array of costumes.”<sup>46</sup> Additionally, a pair of large windows provided abundant natural light and views of the landscape that lay beyond the studio walls.<sup>47</sup> In contrast to the curios contained within, this outside world was distinctly familiar: rolling hills, crop fields, and pastures, interspersed with rivers, creeks, and stands of stout-trunked deciduous trees, and all marked here and there by white farmhouses and wood and barbed-wire fences. These typical elements of the Brandywine Valley landscape would appear repeatedly in Andrew's works throughout the course of his career—though rarely straightforwardly or unimaginatively. Instead they tended to be subtly surreal and abstracted, as if seen by a child playing make-believe in his father's “marvelous”

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<sup>42</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Lloyd Goodrich, “Andrew Wyeth,” *Art in America* 43 (October 1955), 9.

<sup>44</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> The canoe hung ten feet off the ground within a twenty-five foot vertical space, and it still remains there today. For more about the architecture of the studio, see the Brandywine River Museum's “National Historical Landmark Nomination” of “Wyeth, N.C., House and Studio,” which is on file with the National Park Service in the United States Department of the Interior. The application was submitted by Robert Wise and Christine Podmaniczky on April 22, 1997, and is available via the National Park Service website: <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/nhls/text/97001680.pdf> Accessed December 13, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Loucheim, “Wyeth,” 55.

<sup>47</sup> Views as experienced in a first-person visit to the structure in question, and also as described in *ibid*.

workspace, a space in which exotic props and pictures framed views of a local reality which, in turn, illuminated a world of fantasy within.

It should come as no surprise then, that Wyeth took a special interest in Olson's dory, which was held aloft by wooden beams and sun-lit from below like the birch bark canoe in his father's studio.

Sometimes the sun would come up and reflect up under [the dory] through the hay. There were some boards with openings in them to hold up the hay and the sun would come through and hit the boat. It was almost like the phosphorescence that you get in the sea water.<sup>48</sup>

In moments such as these in which a boat floated high above a wave of loose hay, and in which sunlight took on the appearance of marine phosphorescence, everything in Olson's barn might well have become a prop or a framing device as Wyeth's memories of his youth bore down upon his perception of Olson's barn. The open doorway would have been especially rich with cognitive associations: like the windows in N.C.'s studio, this doorway illuminated a studio-gallery within and also framed a local reality of dry summer grass without. On the left was a thing of beauty, staged and ready for both study and display. On the right was a tidy representation of coastal Maine: Wyeth's other half-home, that warm, sunny world of "dry bones and desiccated sinews," a world of fleeting "surfaces" as opposed to the "substantial foundation [of] depths of dirt and earth" that defined his perception of Pennsylvania.<sup>49</sup>

In Maine, "studio" did not just frame local reality but rather merged with it. Together at the family vacation home in Port Clyde in the 1930s, N.C. and Andrew would leave the traditional structure and professional community of the Pennsylvania studio behind—and even complain when visitors threatened to impose that community upon them.<sup>50</sup> Instead they would venture out into the warm summer air to unfold their travel easels and paint directly from the landscape, including the local people and built structures that occupied it. Moreover, as Andrew grew into an adult over the course of the 1930s, he began to spend time in Maine without his father, and thus he found himself enjoying an artistic liberation that was in many ways inseparable from a personal one.<sup>51</sup>

It seems only natural then that Andrew increasingly brought his Maine practice back to Pennsylvania, rambling across the farms in his rural neighborhood with his pencils, papers, and watercolors, and paying little mind to cold and foul weather. In January of 1957 he would report in a letter to one of his collectors that "I have been

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<sup>48</sup> Andrew Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 165.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Wyeth, as cited above, note 33.

<sup>50</sup> In terms of being annoyed by visitors, see N.C.'s letter to his daughter, Henriette, from September 9, 1936, as reproduced in Wyeth, *The Wyeths*, 762: "Unfortunately '8 Bells and Studio' [an informal reference to Wyeth's home in Port Clyde, Maine] is becoming too well known, and a more or less steady flow of visiting so-called artists are dropping in to and fro Monhegan. We've got to pass a law! Andy threatens to move over to Blubber Butt."

<sup>51</sup> For an overview of this adolescent moment of liberation as documented by N.C., see his letters from 1936-39 in Wyeth, *The Wyeths*, 755-788. See also Meryman's narrative of this florescence in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth*, 107-18.

taking long walks over the winter hills [in Pennsylvania]. This is my time of year now and I spend all my time out in it. How I wish I could really get this down in paint.”<sup>52</sup> He was referring to the dead of winter during which others tended to stay inside, and thus during which he had the Pennsylvania landscape—unclothed by summer foliage, and thus revealing its “depths of dirt and earth”—all to himself.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed Andrew was beginning to conceive of “studio” as “where I’m working, wherever I am. I have drawings, studies, [and] pictures sitting all over the place.”<sup>54</sup> This was not simply to say that he produced and then abandoned his works across the countryside but rather that he had many sites of production to which he might return at any time. In Chadds Ford he would set up his easel and store his drawing in the house of his permitting neighbors, Anna and Karl Kuerner. In Maine, in addition to doing drawings and watercolors in the Olsons’ barn, he used an upstairs room in their house to paint his temperas, on which he would work incrementally over periods of many months.

The practices that Andrew developed as a student within the liberal artistic context of Maine finally came to be at odds with the use of a “show-place studio” like that of his father: “I couldn’t work [in my father’s studio now]. I’d feel lost.”<sup>55</sup> Thus did Wyeth explain his feelings to Louchheim, who described a room that Wyeth used exclusively for painting in his own house as “small, sparse and severely uncluttered.”<sup>56</sup> In terms of feeling “lost,” I gather that Wyeth was referring in part to all of the many visual, social, and professional distractions that largely defined N.C.’s studio, as well as to his father’s sudden passing in 1945, which must have left a sizeable void in that space in which N.C. had previously been the center of attention. The serious, personally expressive, and high-brow-market-driven art practice that N.C. and Andrew had pursued together in the open-world studio of Maine was one that Andrew could continue on his own; the grandiose, mass-market-driven artifice of N.C.’s studio was not.

This is not to say, however, that Wyeth abandoned the idea of his father’s studio-gallery altogether. While clutter, affect, and death constituted destructive distractions that Wyeth had come to associate with his father’s studio, there were also more positive forms of loss that he learned there and would carry with him after he left. As a child, for example, he embraced distraction in terms of loss-*qua*-escape, playfully circumventing reality by immersing himself amongst exotic costumes and props.<sup>57</sup> There was also that matter of “incessant drilling in drawing and construction,” which offered its own, very intense form of immersion.

At one point in Andrew’s training, N.C. hung a human skeleton for his son to draw. After Andrew had mastered it, having drawn it “hundreds of times from every

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<sup>52</sup> Andrew Wyeth, in a letter to W. E. Phelps from January 27, 1957, as reproduced in Agnes Mongen, ed., *Andrew Wyeth: Dry Brush and Pencil Drawings* exh. cat. (Boston: Fogg Art Museum, 1963), text accompanying cat. 38.

<sup>53</sup> Wyeth as cited above, note 33. Additionally, Wyeth’s perambulations, observations, and *plein-air* representations of the winter landscape are spelled out in greater depth in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Wyeth, as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Wyeth, as quoted in Louchheim, “Wyeth,” 55.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Wyeth’s solitary, imaginative play in his father’s studio is recounted in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth*, 53-55.

conceivable angle,” the skeleton was hidden away and the precocious student was directed to re-draw it numerous times from memory, again from “from all angles.”<sup>58</sup> The skeleton having been mastered twice over, the exercise continued with live models: “[My father] would have me make drawings from the model, then turn my back and draw it from memory. ... ‘Andy,’ he said to me, ‘I want you to learn to draw so that when you want to express yourself, you won’t fumble.’”<sup>59</sup> In these moments Wyeth was learning to study a given object with such intensity that he could hold it “so deeply within my memory”—this is Wyeth in conversation with Hoving in 1975—“that when I started to paint it, it was there in my mind more vividly perhaps than if it were physically present.”<sup>60</sup> These words ring true with another statement made to Louchheim, in which Wyeth claimed to do “dozens and dozens of careful precise drawings” of a given subject, but that, once he began a tempera representation of that subject, he “never look[ed] at them.”<sup>61</sup> Taken together, these remarks suggest that Wyeth, a viewing subject, became one with his object by pushing the process of objectification to a practical extreme, and thus that he “lost” himself (or rather the independence of his subject position) along the way.

Concluding one of the remarks quoted above from 1975—“My studio is... wherever I am. I have drawings... sitting all over the place”—Wyeth added that “I like loose ends. It’s part of my creativity. I don’t think I exist really as a person, particularly. I really don’t, and I’d rather not.”<sup>62</sup> And here he is again in *Life* magazine in 1965: “I wish I could paint without me existing – that just my hands were there.”<sup>63</sup> Wyeth’s object-absorptive studies were thus bound up with a delightful feeling of non-existence not altogether different from the immersive play that he enjoyed as a child.

Nor, however, was Wyeth’s desire to get out of his own way, as it were, entirely new and unique amongst creative artists in the twentieth century. In terms of poetry, for example, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) had a well known interest in “automatic writing;” likewise Robert Frost (1874-1963), who was friendly with Wyeth, had told the painter in a private conversation that his most famous poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” was written quickly and effortlessly in a sudden, unexpected burst of creativity.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Wyeth, as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Wyeth as quoted in Richardson, “Andrew Wyeth,” 68. Wyeth also recalled to Meryman that “It was a terrible shock to me [when N.C. began to make me practice drawing with strict discipline]. I wanted to express *myself*. Sitting down and drawing cubes drove me up a tree. But my father believed in it. And I believed in it. You have to know the rules in order to break them.” Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth*, 101-2.

<sup>60</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Louchheim, “Wyeth,” 58.

<sup>62</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 42.

<sup>63</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 114.

<sup>64</sup> On Yeats and “automatic writing, see Margaret Mills Harper, “Yeats and the Occult,” in *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 144-166. With regard to Frost, Wyeth recalled to Hoving in 1975 that he was “talking to Robert Frost about a poem of his [‘Stopping by Woods...’] that is so beautifully written, it is considered by some to be actually perfect. ... And I asked him, ‘You must have work a long time on that.’ ... He said, ‘Andy, I’ll tell you about that. I’d been writing a very complicated, long-drawn-out poem, almost a story type of poem entitled ‘The Death of the Hired Man.’ I had finished at two o’clock in the morning. It was a hot

*Hay Ledge*, however, lends credibility to Wyeth's suspiciously hyperbolic and fashionable remarks, which is to say that this work appears to have been produced in accordance with ironically creative sorts of loss, distraction, and displacement. As explained at length in Chapter 1, *Hay Ledge* is nothing if not a collection of alternately appealing, puzzling, and threatening distractions, around and through each of which we are invited to pursue the others. The dory, for example, appears off to the left, almost as a visual aside. And in Olson's barn the dory *was* an aside: it was displaced from the sea to the loft of a barn in the height of summer, stored above ground and mostly out of the way, and yet where it could, if the light was right, test the discipline of the gaze of a former fisherman who turned reluctantly, albeit altruistically, to farming. The rest of the painting complies with this balance between focus and distraction, offering alternative illustrative focal points at which the dory either fades into the periphery or undergoes a change of appearance and meaning. The billowing pile of hay is one such intentional distraction, iconically in terms of its wave-like form, and also materially in terms of the self-insistent, action-painterly strokes of tempera that compose it. The enigmatic hanging rope, which we came initially to know and to see around in the previous chapter, is another such distraction. The roughly bracketed landscape beyond the barn door is a third. There are also the richly illustrated textures of the barn itself, deft imitations of nature that no doubt baited Wyeth's "shell-shocked modern beholders:" worn paint, splintering wood, dusty air, and cold, dark metal hooks, all of which Wyeth did indeed work hard to represent with impressive naturalism, as any survey of his drawings and watercolors is bound to reveal. For example, Wyeth's pencil drawings of the block-and-tackle, the scythe, and the tracks across the landscape, as well as his written descriptions of the chromatic values of specific portions of the wood interior of the barn (e.g., "warm," "slightly warm," and "←cooler – Than This→") suggest an artist working with a level of intensity that resulted in a temporary loss of any sense of self beyond that which existed solely as a response to the world around it.<sup>65</sup> (Figs. 2.10 & 2.11)

*Hay Ledge* encourages *us*, meanwhile, to rediscover the dory repeatedly in the course of exploring the barn that Wyeth so carefully depicted. To see the dory de-centered and disguised, and yet, in many ways, appealing or captivating, is to work to maintain our focus upon it, and thus to share in the seminal stage—"seeing"—of Wyeth's art practice. It is also, therefore, to experience a conflation of the various hybrid studio-galleries in which Wyeth played, trained, and worked from his childhood to the later 1950s. These were spaces in which illustration became serious art; painting became illustrative; reality was circumscribed and shot through by fantasy; and loss was gain. My case has yet fully to be made, however. There is additional, corroborating textual evidence to present on the matter of Wyeth's art-as-seeing, evidence that leads us also into related questions of how that art was received and how responsive it was to other art practices of its time.

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August night, and I was exhausted. [Then the other poem] came to me in a flash! I wrote it on an envelope I had in my pocket, and I only changed one word. It came out just like that." Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 30.

<sup>65</sup> These particular drawings and notations are reproduced in Betsy James Wyeth, *Christina's World: Paintings and Pre-Studies of Andrew Wyeth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 66 and 68.



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Wyeth claimed to have little control over when and where he would find something deserving of his intense scrutiny. “Wyeth waits for weeks or even months until a subject ‘hits’ him,” reported Elaine de Kooning to the readers of *Art News* in 1950.<sup>66</sup> “Every so often,” Wyeth would later clarify in a 1965 interview with Meryman for *Life* magazine, “I’ll catch, out of the corner of my eye, off balance, a flash impression of something—a spark of excitement.”<sup>67</sup> He would then cling tightly to his memory of whatever it was that struck him as he began a process of representing it. “My struggle,” he explained to Meryman, “is to preserve that abstract flash—like something you caught out of the corner of your eye, but in [a] picture you can look at it directly.”<sup>68</sup> The dory in *Hay Ledge*, at once hidden away in the loft of a barn and spot-lit by the sun, is a fine example of such an “abstract flash.” But in order fully to understand why this is so, we shall have to understand what exactly Wyeth meant by “abstract,” a hot-button term for an American painter active in the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s.

On one hand, Wyeth would abstract a familiar thing into an unfamiliar apparition of color, shape, and tone—and in this aspect of his abstraction he fell in line with many other artists from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries—James Whistler, Georgia O’Keefe, and Franz Kline, to name a few whose works he was likely to have known either first-hand or through reproduction. Simultaneously on the other hand, he would analyze the very familiarity of that familiar thing, exploring and elaborating the fragmentary thoughts and memories that afforded his recognition (i.e., that enabled him to perceive a given collection of phenomena as something that he already knew).

Combining comments Wyeth made to Meryman with her own observations of Wyeth’s works, Wanda Corn has documented several instances of this latter sort of “abstraction,” which implicates a broad range of personal memories involving not only sight and sound but also smell and touch, as well as local and regional historical knowledge of the areas of the Brandywine Valley in Pennsylvania and the Port Clyde and Rockland areas of coastal Maine where Wyeth’s abstract flashes were most often experienced.<sup>69</sup> These two types of abstraction (formal and mnemonic) always happened in concert with one another, however, and indeed part of Wyeth’s “struggle” seems to have been to maintain the balance between them.

“If I get the emotion of something I want to paint,” Wyeth said to Louchheim 1953, “it stays in my mind. I dream about it and think about it.”<sup>70</sup> Emotion, in this case, is

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<sup>66</sup> Elaine de Kooning, “Andrew Wyeth Paints a Picture,” *Art News* 49, no. 1 (March 1950), 39.

<sup>67</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 93.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>69</sup> Wanda Corn, “Andrew Wyeth: the Man, his Art, and his Audience” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1974), 127-48, especially 144. For a specific example see also Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 142: “[While painting *Wood Stove* (1962)] I was interested in the plate metal of the stove that gives off a hollow sound and feeling. This again goes back to my interest in metals and sounds. . . . In addition, it was at that time that the house [in which I painted *Wood Stove*] was deteriorating very quickly. Windowpanes were dropping out and there were terrific drafts in it.”

<sup>70</sup> Louchheim, “Wyeth,” 58.

the lasting mental object or impression resulting from an initial “abstract flash.” Wyeth’s artistic emotions could linger and grow as the above-described process of elaboration ran its course, but he treated them cautiously because he believed that they were always potentially fleeting: “I may even go into my studio and put down one or two lines—as if to protect the emotion—and put it away and then glance at it from time to time.”<sup>71</sup> Specifically, Wyeth’s emotions had to be “protected” from himself, for he aimed ultimately to bring them to light as subjects and surface compositions for paintings and drawings. Thus he resorted to furtive circumspections of his own works-in-progress, as if to recreate the feeling of looking “out of the corner of your eye.” “You’ve got to watch out,” Wyeth cautioned Meryman, “[that] the mind doesn’t take over the emotion.”<sup>72</sup> “Glancing,” then, was seeing without being seen seeing: fearing that his own rationalizing mind might at any moment concretize and deaden his inspiration, Wyeth attempted to evade his own cognitive supervision of his visual perception. When he failed to do so, the original emotion “disintegrat[ed] and [went] to nothing – which so often happens. Vacuum – I call it blank brains.”<sup>73</sup>

Wyeth elaborated further on the behaviors he employed to guard his “emotions” during the initial phases of representing them visually:

I might lay it in with a few strokes when you’d least suspect—just before I have to go somewhere.... Then I’ll leave it very rough and rush off, before I start to manipulate it. I want to be sure of putting it down rather dully, so that I’m getting at the problem without all the niceties of artistic thought.... I might put one line [on an otherwise blank panel]. I don’t want to put too much down because it’ll freeze the idea. I want to keep it fluid—be able to dream about it.<sup>74</sup>

Irrational, primal action is directly opposed here to rational, learned (re)cognition. Specifically, the latter threatened always to drown out the former. Both were requisite to Wyeth’s practice, however, for he aimed to produce works of visual art that could bring together “abstraction and the real:”

[If you] combine the two, bring in the new with the traditional[, then] you can’t beat it. I believe, however, that I don’t want to let the one take over the other. I try for an equal balance. If somehow I can, before I leave this earth, combine my absolutely mad freedom and excitement with truth, then I will have done something. I don’t know if I can do it, probably never will, but it’s certainly a marvelous challenge to me. ... I want the object to be there in my paintings, perhaps in all of its smallest detail, not as a *tour de force*, but naturally, in such a way that I have backed into it.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 108.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>75</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 22.

Part of the “challenge” that Wyeth faced was that each of these imperatives required rational, skillful manipulation of a pencil or a brush. For even the most purely non-objective aspects of Wyeth’s emotions had roots in prior visual experiences of “abstract flash[es]” just as much as they did in the immediate present of an engagement with his medium. Thus some degree of illustration (i.e., imitation) was required in order to manifest those emotions as works of art.

Beginning in the 1950s, Wyeth’s “protection” of his “emotions” extended also into the future. That is, he began to resist the conventional illustrative process of working through sketches and drawings with a final, large-scale composition in mind. “In the past [Wyeth] used to become increasingly precise in his successive sketches, developing a complete plan intricately detailed in a dry-brush watercolor,” wrote de Kooning in *Art News*, “but he has abandoned this practice, realizing that his temperas were, in this case, simply copies of the final sketch.”<sup>76</sup> This denial of teleological sequencing was an important statement for an illustrator’s son to make, and even better that it was made through the voice of the wife of Willem de Kooning, a prominent post-War modernist.

Important, of course, because Wyeth’s father was not only an illustrator by trade but one who, as we saw above, dated the birth of “painting” (i.e., serious, personally expressive art) to the Renaissance, the moment in which the craft of developing finished “paintings” from preparatory “studies” was indeed refined to an “art” upon which the French and English royal academies were later founded, and against which the nineteenth-century avant-garde would rebel. Andrew’s *The Rope* (1957) is a stunning watercolor in its own right. Yet anyone assuming his simplistic, uncritical employment of traditional illustrative practices could easily overlook it as a “study” for *Hay Ledge*, one to be valued only as an index of a teleological creativity founded upon a Michelangelo-like mastery of *disegno*. (Fig. 2.12) In fact, however, works such as *The Rope* were studies of the various elements of a given abstracted perception rather than preparations for an imminent tempera painting, being intended to strengthen Wyeth’s emotion more through open exploration than through a concretion or stabilization of its form, structure, or meaning. “If it’s all just a placid development, to hell with that. You’ll get a normal, regular painting,” Wyeth exclaimed to Meryman, one burdened with “niceties” that compromise the integrity of the initial “abstract flash” that inspired it.<sup>77</sup>

I doubt that Wyeth never snuck so much as a peek at his drawings or watercolors after beginning a tempera of a directly related subject. But I nonetheless accept that, while painting a tempera of a subject he had drawn and painted many times already, he felt free to improvise and adjust his imagery as the new medium, scale, and dimensions required. Some of Wyeth’s early temperas were composed in pencil on paper and then scaled up through the use of a superimposed grid—*Christina’s World* (1948) is a known example. (Figs. 2.13 & 2.14) I have seen no evidence to suggest, however, that such mechanical processes of reproduction continued after de Kooning’s declaration in 1950 that Wyeth had liberated his temperas from his drawings, and likewise, therefore, that he

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<sup>76</sup> De Kooning, “Andrew Wyeth,” 54.

<sup>77</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 108.

had freed his drawings from subjugation to future temperas. In fact Wyeth has claimed to have stopped short of tempera paintings altogether in many cases, having decided that a given drawing or watercolor had already taken his emotion as far as it could go. “I go as far as I feel right [about a given subject] and then drop it. I’m washed up. I drain myself of every ounce of what I feel about the thing and that’s that.”<sup>78</sup> The subject of Wyeth’s *Egg Scale*, for example, a watercolor from 1958, “was going to be a painting, and I don’t know what happened. It never panned out.”<sup>79</sup> (Fig. 2.15)

Perhaps then, the distinction being drawn here would best be phrased in terms of the difference between “illustration” and “illustration and nothing more.” The latter begins and proceeds with an endpoint in mind, with the artist moving deliberately through necessary sketches and studies toward what Wyeth referred to as a “normal, regular painting”—or as N.C. put it, a painting for “a regulation Xmas book.”<sup>80</sup> Illustration conceived broadly is more akin to a casual walk along a *Holzweg*, a path with no anticipated end or destination save for that which may by chance be discovered along the way, and which may as well never be reached at all. Thus it comes as no surprise that Wyeth’s “struggle” to represent his abstract perceptions through the acts of drawing and painting led him to utilize both figuration and abstractionism in terms of his designs and compositions. When it came to his tempera paintings, he was, after all, aiming to work from memory in a state of non-existence in which “emotion” was the only reality that he would allow his carefully honed realist techniques to depict.

And yet, while no critic has ever denied Wyeth’s competence in terms of draftsmanship or paint handling, few have taken seriously his assertions that his true end was always abstraction. “I’m a pure abstractionist in my thought,” Wyeth declared quite plainly for *Time* in 1963.<sup>81</sup> “I’m no more like a realist, such as Eakins or Copley,” he continued, “than I’m like the man in the moon.”<sup>82</sup>

There is, of course, an element of dramatic refutation in this statement, which Wyeth reiterated for *Life* in 1965:

A lot of people say I’ve brought realism back—they try to tie me up with Eakins and Winslow Homer. To my mind, they are mistaken. I honestly consider myself an abstractionist. Eakins’ figures actually breathe in the frame. My people, my objects breathe in a different way; there’s another core—an excitement that’s definitely abstract.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 30. For additional discussion by Wyeth of his resistance to presumptions about specific media being likely endpoints for given subjects, see *ibid.*, 31-6. See also Beth Venn, “Process of Invention: the Watercolors of Andrew Wyeth,” in *Unknown Terrain: the Landscapes of Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat., ed. Beth Venn and Adam Weinberg (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1998), 45.

<sup>79</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 123.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew as cited above, note 77; and N.C. as cited above, note 6.

<sup>81</sup> Wyeth as quoted in “Andy’s World,” *Time*, December 27, 1963, 51.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 93.

These rebuttals of critics' attempts to label him a realist appear to have been intended to correct misunderstandings of his practice and his works, specifically those that focused too heavily on their figurative and illusionistic aspects and not enough on the chromatic and abstract-formal elements of their overall compositions. "The danger of anything closely done," Wyeth lamented to E. P. Richardson in an interview for *The Atlantic* that went to press in 1964, "is that people feel that the technical means are the end of the thing. [In my work, it's] just the beginning."<sup>84</sup> Wyeth's Eakins was direct and forcibly clear, whereas his own works are often only superficially clear. That is, they use instances of illusionism as points of false entry into private places, narratives, and emotions. We shall explore examples of such instances in *Hay Ledge*, *River Cove* (1958), *Brown Swiss* (1957), and *Groundhog Day* (1959) in Chapter 3. All of these pictures are highly illusionistic, and yet each becomes more opaque and abstracted the longer its representational content is pursued, an effect of which Wyeth was well aware: "I think a lot of people get to my work through the back door. They're attracted to the realism, then [they] begin to feel the abstraction."<sup>85</sup> In fact Wyeth regretted that in some cases people never made it to the abstraction, sensing in those cases that he had only himself to blame: "Anyone who paints objects is in a very dangerous position. When I am misunderstood, I think I have failed. I never have any doubt about the object; I doubt the way I have done it."<sup>86</sup>

Corn has claimed that Wyeth's paintings of human figures, in particular, often "miss" the delicate balance that he aimed to maintain between illusionistic clarity and provocative obscurity.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps this is because Wyeth typically did very little *with* his human figures, which seem awkwardly to occupy pictures that might work better without them, or which take the form of elaborate "studies" rather than statements of personal artistic truth. That is, the figures are too objective, too documentary, too transparent: the bodies and personalities are too present as themselves rather than as perceptions abstracted by Wyeth's mind and hands.

By contrast, Wyeth's European contemporary, Lucian Freud, succeeded more often with human figure painting precisely where Wyeth did not. Pictures such as *Girl with a White Dog* (1950) and *Francis Bacon* (1952) are at once stylized, distorted, and uncannily realistic. (Figs. 2.16 & 2.17) They thus suggest that Freud was willing to do with human subjects that which Wyeth found it much easier to do with architecture, landscapes, and even animals. See, for example, the architectonic standing bull in *Young Bull* (1960), around which an entire farm appears to be built. (Fig. 2.18) Or consider the lean Coon hounds that bring attention to and yet hardly distract from the shallow pictorial space of *Racoon* (1958), a space defined by rustic, palette-knifed arrangements of stone, wood, sunlight, and metal chains.<sup>88</sup> (Fig. 2.19) One of these animals pulls its chain

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<sup>84</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," 69.

<sup>85</sup> Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," 115.

<sup>86</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," 68.

<sup>87</sup> Corn, "Andrew Wyeth," 173.

<sup>88</sup> Tempera is typically applied thinly with brushes, but Wyeth's range of techniques and tools with this particular medium was uncommonly broad, as we have seen already in Chapter 1. In the case of *Racoon*, the use of a palette knife is self evident upon direct inspection of the paint surface, especially that portion of

taught; another leaves its own chain slack; together they point out the tugs-of-war between forms and objects and between imitation and expressionism that some of Wyeth's most successful pictures are about.

Freud wrote in 1954 that

Since the model [that the artist] so faithfully copies is not going to be hung up next to the picture, since the picture is going to be there on its own, it is of no interest whether it is an accurate copy of the model. ... The model should only serve the very private function for the painter of providing the starting point for his excitement. The picture is *all* he feels about it, *all* he thinks worth preserving of it, *all* he invests it with. ... The aura given out by a person or object is as much a part of them as their flesh. The effect that they make in space is as bound up with them as might be their color or smell.<sup>89</sup>

Wyeth would no doubt have agreed. In his own words, "A human being within an environment is a reflection of all the aspects of that environment."<sup>90</sup> Likewise his landscapes had more to do with the unseen people that lived in them than with any kind of topographical fidelity (a matter which shall be addressed in depth in Chapter 3). It is proof of Wyeth's similarity to Freud that, as Wyeth put it, "People are so often disappointed when they see a place I've painted a picture of. ... I know they like to make me the American painter of the American scene.... Really, I've actually created my own little world."<sup>91</sup>

Wyeth did succeed now and then with his figure paintings. *Miss Olson* (1952) is one of his best, partly because the figure neither overwhelms nor escapes Wyeth's stated interests in abstraction and surface composition, even while it remains essential to the work as a whole. (Fig. 2.20) Christina's form is essential, in this case, to the picture's illusion of the shallow, austere space in which she appears—though not in the architectonic way in which the bull stands as a corner stone for the constructed space of *Young Bull*. The figure of Christina is integral instead to a shallow space like that of *Racoon*, except that this space, being a part of "Maine" instead of "Pennsylvania," is more superficial and wispy: the woman's flesh and hair are drawn from the same burnt-orange and pink palette as the walls behind her, and the same goes for the dress she wears and the small cat that she holds in her right hand. Seemingly unruly and curiously thin

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which represents the stone wall behind the dogs. Wyeth also confirmed this impression explicitly, as explained in the audio description of this work provided by the Brandywine River Museum's official Audio Tour. Internet: [http://www.brandywinemuseum.org/audio/audiotours\\_racoon.html](http://www.brandywinemuseum.org/audio/audiotours_racoon.html). Accessed 12 April 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Lucian Freud, "Some Thoughts on Painting," *Encounter* 10 (July 1954), 24.

<sup>90</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," 110. Wyeth did contradict himself a few times with regard to his nativist interest in American scenery and those who have painted it. As Corn has shown, Wyeth attended to the works of Winslow Homer and Edward Hopper, holding a particularly strong admiration for the former. Corn, "Andrew Wyeth," 23. The balance of Wyeth's many remarks, however, lean more toward the gist of the remark quoted above.

strands of paint somehow bring these same forms together across the surface of the picture: the cat's fur, Christina's hair and eyelashes, the threads within the seam of her dress, the fibers of the fraying rope above and to the right of her head, and the peeling wallpaper at the left. This space and the figure that occupy it are remarkably convincing, and yet it is hard to believe that anyone other than Wyeth himself could have seen it the way that he painted it.

So if Wyeth had desired to emulate Eakins altogether, perhaps he was prepared to do so. What is more Eakins, after all, than "incessant drilling in drawing and construction?"<sup>92</sup> But instead of looking at *Miss Olson* and seeing a twentieth-century Eakins, would it not be more appropriate to rename this picture "Arrangement in Pink and Brown," and thus to read it as a latter-day reconciliation of Eakins and Whistler? Reconciliation, at any rate, is precisely the point—it is the measure of success that seems most appropriate for Wyeth's eclectic practice. His words and pictures suggest that he pursued an art practice that transcended distinctions between Eakins and Whistler, and likewise between nineteenth-century academic and mid-twentieth-century avant-garde, one that incorporated as well a Robert Henri era confluence of art practice and daily life, thanks in part to advice from N.C.<sup>93</sup> Which is to say that Wyeth wanted, often to a fault, to have everything at once: realism, immediacy, pure form, sentiment, emotional expression, and just about anything else that might fall within the capacious domain of "seeing." "My theory," Wyeth declared, while reflecting upon his artistic beliefs in 1975, "is to have no theories at all. I don't think you should tie yourself up. I don't think you can be fenced in [and still succeed with art]."<sup>94</sup>

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In the late 1950s this stylistic variety made for thin art-appreciative ice. Clement Greenberg's "American-Type' Painting" had made the case in 1955 that "modern art," which is to say recent or contemporary "serious art," had a great deal to do with fencing in.<sup>95</sup> Greenberg argued that the Abstract Expressionists, whom he claimed to be the first

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<sup>92</sup> On Eakins as a practitioner of rigorous, architectonic life drawings and linear-perspectival, geometric-concept-driven constructions of pictorial space, see Kathleen A. Foster, *Thomas Eakins rediscovered: Charles Bregler's Thomas Eakins collection at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); see also Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>93</sup> On N.C.'s belief about the importance overlapping "art" with "life," see Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 40: "My father always said that living and the painter shouldn't be separated, they should be together. It's like eating and breathing and sleeping. Not something you denote as art and do elsewhere. It should all be together." For a broader view of such a belief in the early-twentieth-century American moment of Robert Henri and the Ashcan School, see Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>94</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 30.

<sup>95</sup> The quoted terms in this sentence come from Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," first published in *Partisan Review* in 1955 and reproduced in John O'Brian, ed., *Affirmations and Refusals 1950-1956*, vol. 3 of *Clement Greenberg: the Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 217-36.

American artists to be taken seriously by the Europeans, were leading the post-war continuation of Western art's abandonment of its own conventions. Most specifically, these "American-type" painters were purging pictoriality of the last and most ingrained vestiges of illusionism (e.g., a reliance on tonal contrasts, even in already abstract compositions). Ultimately, Greenberg wrote, this American "'advanced' art" was pushing pictoriality as close as it could go to pure "decoration" while still remaining apart from it (i.e., still asserting its independence from anything which it might be taken to decorate).<sup>96</sup> Given that Wyeth's practice was explicitly more inclusive than exclusive, it was only a matter of course for Greenberg to identify him specifically as one of the Abstract Expressionists' "competitors for the attention of the American art public."<sup>97</sup>

In light of such critical-historical claims, the name "Eakins" became a code word for traditionalist, anti-modernist, and kitsch. Writing in *The Atlantic* in 1964, Richardson described this situation quite bluntly: "Twentieth-century theory says that this is the age of abstraction, that the observation of nature is finished as a source of painting; therefore, an artist like Wyeth has no right to exist."<sup>98</sup>

Curiously, however *Time* magazine's 1963 article about Wyeth attempted to bridge the modernist-Wyeth divide—that is, to accept the Abstract Expressionists and Wyeth alike as "serious" contemporary American painters. During World War II, the unaccredited essay explained, when "U.S. art was at a virtual standstill, Wyeth churned out vigorous, splashy watercolors that explored flattened space, joyous color and jumpy line in such a way that they could have marked him as a nascent abstract expressionist."<sup>99</sup> *Time* even went so far as to characterize Wyeth in terms that can only have recalled its own 1956 article, "The Wild Ones," which played up Harold Rosenberg's "action painter" interpretation of Jackson Pollock, whom *Time* dubbed "Jack the Dripper:"

'He looks like he's in a battle,' says painter Peter Hurd, [Wyeth's] brother-in-law. 'He stabs at the work as if with a stiletto, dabbing with a bit of Kleenex, slashing with a razor blade.' The watercolors materialize by the hundreds, spatter with a bravura immediacy.<sup>100</sup>

The primal animality of Wyeth's practice is made explicit when the article goes on to explain that Wyeth allowed his dog to join in the fray, shaking its coat in close proximity to the works and spraying them with dirt and grime.<sup>101</sup>

Wyeth subsequently confirmed his tendency toward frenzied engagements with his media, acknowledging to Meryman in 1965 that "My wild side that's really me comes out in my watercolors."<sup>102</sup> He added elsewhere that "I can't stand those smooth things

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>98</sup> Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," 62.

<sup>99</sup> "Andy's World," *Time*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 49. "The Wild Ones," *Time*, February 20, 1956, 72-76. Rosenberg first published the term "Action Painters" in a December 1952 essay for *ARTnews* titled "The American Action Painters."

<sup>101</sup> "Andy's World," *Time*, 49.

<sup>102</sup> Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," 108.



done in a studio with a hair dryer to dry your washes. My best watercolors are when there's scratches and spit and mud, gobs of paint and crap over them. I might as well be in an orgasm when I get going."<sup>103</sup> Enthusiasm and sexuality also blended together with violence in Wyeth's use of pencil, which he likened to fencing and riflery: his descriptions of his pencil work include close groupings of such phrases as "drawn into the thing penetratingly," "press down on the pencil so strongly that perhaps the lead will break, in order to emphasize my emotional impact with the object," and "when you thrust you've got to put your heart and soul into it and then, in a split second, withdraw."<sup>104</sup>

"Withdraw" may in fact be the key term here. *Time's* reconciliatory intentions notwithstanding, Wyeth never limited himself to wild abandon altogether. Neither, for that matter, did Pollock: the balance and power of works such as *Autumn Rhythm* (1950), taken together with Hans Namuth's photographs and films of Pollock's process and the artist's own, stoic descriptions of his method, suggest instead that he continually confronted his unrelenting and "wild" painterly impulses rather than giving them free rein.<sup>105</sup> (Fig. 2.21) Wyeth's "bravura immediacy" likewise never fully overwhelmed or displaced the objects of his representations.

However, Wyeth did at times align himself partially with modernism and against contemporary realism. "I agree with Pollock, and Kline, and de Kooning," said Wyeth to Richardson in *The Atlantic*,

that there must be no laws: there must be complete freedom. But they lack the object. I'd like to have the effect of complete freedom, but I also want the object. I'd like to paint the thing just as it might happen to look as you walked by. I don't mean a snapshot; it's more than just a glimpse – but I love that quality of the unexpected.<sup>106</sup>

So Wyeth desired freedom from tradition and convention, and likewise freedom from obligation to financiers. But he drew a hard line when it came to self-imposed artistic limitation, preferring instead choice, option, and opportunity.

Among the three modernists that Wyeth named in the *Atlantic* interview, textual evidence suggests that he bore a much closer resemblance to de Kooning than he did to Pollock. Like Wyeth, de Kooning maintained an interest in "the object" despite his prominence as a member of the so-called New York School. Commenting on de Kooning's *Women* paintings, Greenberg wrote in "American-type' Painting" that "de Kooning proposes a synthesis of modernism and tradition," and that he never quite "tears himself away from the human figure, [or] from the modeling of it for which his gifts for

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<sup>103</sup> Andrew Wyeth sometime after 1964, as quoted in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth*, 111.

<sup>104</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 31.

<sup>105</sup> For more on Pollock's artistic negotiations between harnessed and wild, conscious and unconscious, see T. J. Clark, "The Unhappy Consciousness," in Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 299-369.

<sup>106</sup> Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," 68.

line and shading so richly equip him.”<sup>107</sup> De Kooning himself said to David Sylvester in 1963 that

I don't really feel like a non-objective painter at all. Today, some artists feel they have to go back to the figure, and that word 'figure' becomes such a ridiculous omen... It's really absurd to make an image, like a human image, with paint, today, when you think about it, since we have this problem of doing or not doing it. But then all of a sudden it was even more absurd not to do it.<sup>108</sup>

Perhaps this was part of what Wyeth had in mind when he stated in 1965, seemingly outlandishly, that “I think today the abstractionists are the conservatives and I'm the modernist.”<sup>109</sup>

Seemingly outlandishly, I say, because Wyeth lacked the credibility as an abstractionist that allowed de Kooning to get away with such stylistic twists and turns. Wyeth's pictures were much more naturalistic, and moreover, he was the reclusive son of a rural “illustrator” and not a cosmopolitan European living and working in New York City—though his paintings were certainly shown in and purchased by that city's museums, galleries, and wealthy private collectors. Nevertheless the two artists were not so far apart. Consider this additional remark from de Kooning's interview with Sylvester:

Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's...very tiny, content. ... This content could take care of almost anything that could happen. I still have it now from fleeting things – like when one passes something, and it makes an impression, a simple stuff [*sic*].<sup>110</sup>

Reading literally, we might say that for de Kooning “content” was a “glimpse,” whereas for Wyeth it was more than that: “it's more than just a glimpse.” But the essences of these two utterances bring them together despite the verbiage that holds them apart. For Wyeth, as quoted further above, content began with an “impression,” an “abstract flash,” “like something you caught out of the corner of your eye.”<sup>111</sup> Here, if ever, are distinct verbal “illustrations” of a single, albeit expansive, idea. Wyeth's and de Kooning's remarks, we might say, are two *Holzwege* in a single forest: each dead-ends many miles away from the other, but they intersect here and there along the way.

In terms of realism, Wyeth asserted that “realist artists today are caricaturing the truth.”<sup>112</sup> Clearly then, he felt the need to defend his own, self-professedly more rigorous and abstracting practice from comparisons with superficially similar ones. “Life to me is

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<sup>107</sup> Greenberg, “‘American-Type’ Painting,” 221.

<sup>108</sup> Willem de Kooning in conversation with David Sylvester in 1963, as quoted in Thomas B. Hess, ed., *Willem de Kooning* exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 148.

<sup>109</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 121.

<sup>110</sup> Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, 148.

<sup>111</sup> Wyeth quotations as cited above, notes 67 and 68.

<sup>112</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 114.

more serious than that,” he continued. “I detest the sweetness I see in so much realistic painting. Awful.”<sup>113</sup> Wyeth’s contemporary, Eric Sloan, can stand in for the “awful” realists that Wyeth had in mind. Both artists painted northeastern American rural scenery and landscapes, but Sloan’s pictures are openly nostalgic and sentimental in keeping with his avowed traditionalism.<sup>114</sup> In contrast, Wyeth’s are considerably more opaque, and at times threatening, with their metal hooks, barbed wire, animal carcasses in various stages of butchery, jagged logs, and taut chains, much of which may well have been intended toacerbate a style that fell too close to the “sweetness” of that of Sloan and others like him.<sup>115</sup> Wyeth also, as we shall see in Chapter 3, eschewed many of the conventional aspects of realist landscapes, especially in the later 1950s, cropping out the sky and its expressive clouds, evacuating his landscapes of human figures and live animals, and rotating his viewing angles downward to withhold any privileged, picturesque prospects of terrestrial space.

“The abstractionists obliterate the object because it’s one way of escaping perfunctory picturesqueness,” Wyeth continued on from the previous quotation.<sup>116</sup> “Then it’s easier because you don’t have that goddamn thing of subject matter, an object standing in your way. You’ve just got color and mood.”<sup>117</sup> Thus did Wyeth move directly toward modernism in his distancing from contemporary realism. “But,” he continued, “I’d never be satisfied with just that. Why can’t we have reality too, so we can understand it? Does it have to be gibberish?”<sup>118</sup> His pictures, despite their occasional threats, demonstrate as well that Wyeth’s willingness to align himself with the modernists and against other “realists” extended only so far, for he refused to dwell exclusively within abstractionism’s constraints. Instead he seems to have elected to bring abstractionism and “seriousness” to bear on his profound commitment to figuration, much as de Kooning attempted to revisit figuration as a novel challenge to abstractionism.

At least he did so knowingly: N.C. had sounded an art-critical alarm to his son as early as 1944. Despite the fact that, according to Andrew, “[N.C.] painted many abstractions toward the end of his life,” one of his final letters to his son included a word of caution about recent developments within the avant-garde.<sup>119</sup> “There’s a real task on

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Describing a picture he painted of a plow “from the early 1700s,” which deserves, if any work of art ever has, the derogatory label “illustrative,” Sloane wrote, “Nowadays you see sculpture made from boilers and pipes and all the parts of modern-day scrap iron. New York’s Museum of Modern Art exhibited an old bicycle wheel and a men’s urinal from a garbage pile: I suppose it is modern art because art is supposed to exemplify its era and our time happens to be one of waste and bad taste. But on my living room table I have a real piece of art, a sculpture made by an anonymous American who pioneered the American way and thereby hand-crafted a work of art worthy of being in any museum. It is a plow.” Sloane, *Eighty: an American Souvenir* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1985), “The Ancient Plow” (no numbering is available, neither of pages nor figures). For more on Sloane’s life and works, see his autobiographical essay at the beginning of *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> See for examples, *Winter Fields* (1942), *Karl* (1948), *Cider and Pork* (1955), *Groundhog Day* (1959), and *Tenant Farmer* (1961).

<sup>116</sup> Meryman “Andrew Wyeth,” 114.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Richardson, “Andrew Wyeth,” 68.

our hands, Andy. Modern art critics and their supine followers *like* the flat and the shallow. They like it as they like soft drinks and factory-made bread.”<sup>120</sup> Moreover, N.C. concluded, “They fear disturbance!”<sup>121</sup>

But what sort of “disturbance” did he have in mind? Greenberg’s notion of modern art, as spelled out in “Avant-garde and Kitsch” in 1939, was one that thrived on disturbance in terms of artists who brake with convention in light of their keen awareness and embrace of cultural change.<sup>122</sup> His 1940 essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon” made the related historical claim that the modernist turn toward what N.C. termed “the flat and the shallow” had developed incrementally as a result of those disturbances, which prompted artists of all sorts—e.g., writers, musicians, painters—to gradually restrict themselves to practices that they felt could maintain the integrities of their respective media.<sup>123</sup> Perhaps then, N.C. was referring to a compromise of the picture surface by illusionism, or to a compromise of the plastic arts as a whole by the practice of illustration, which by definition makes some reference to content beyond itself—be it natural, literary, musical, or what have you. Or maybe he had in mind a disturbance of disturbance, as in the sense of the continual evolution of modernism itself being disrupted by regressive anti-modernisms. Either way, N.C.’s son could hardly have been unaware that his own inherently compromising, integrative approaches to painting had the potential to become a broad critical target.

It at least seems likely that critical rejection was a risk that he willingly undertook. Indeed Wyeth prepared himself to some degree for these risks—though evidently not enough to have avoided needing to make *a posteriori* statements against contemporary realism such as the one quoted above. Firstly, he turned away from the steady paychecks available through the labor of bespoke illustration, gambling instead on the long shot of becoming highly valued by society as a fine artist working with “complete freedom.”<sup>124</sup> Wyeth’s sell-out shows in New York City in the late 1930s no doubt encouraged him in this direction. So too did a letter that Wyeth received in 1941 from Dorothy Miller and Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art offering to purchase one of Wyeth’s early tempera paintings, which they had seen at a show at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. “That was the turning point,” Wyeth said to Louchheim in 1953, “I must have walked five miles that day, on that encouragement.”<sup>125</sup> Moreover, Wyeth proceeded with the blessing and financial support of his father, as explained above, as well as with the encouragement and business acumen of his wife, Betsy, who gradually took over from N.C. as Wyeth’s professional strategist after she and Andrew were married. Indeed Andrew’s remark to Louchheim about the offer from MOMA was

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<sup>120</sup> N.C. Wyeth, in a letter to Andrew Wyeth on February 16, 1944, in Betsy Wyeth, *The Wyeths*, 834.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 7.

<sup>123</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” first published in *Partisan Review* in the summer of 1940 and reproduced in John O’Brian, ed., *Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944*, vol. 1 of *Clement Greenberg: the Collected Essays and Criticism*, 23-38.

<sup>124</sup> Wyeth as cited above, note 106.

<sup>125</sup> Louchheim, “Wyeth,” 56.

followed up with a reference to Wyeth's new partner: "I believed in the temperas—and so did Betsy. This [recognition from MOMA] confirmed it."<sup>126</sup>

Secondly, Wyeth thickened his critical skin, bracing himself emotionally for the attacks that any celebrity artist was bound to receive. A remark by Wyeth in his interview with Richardson in 1964 implicitly expresses this second aspect of his stance toward the critical conditions of his historical moment: "My father told me that one Russian painter said to him, 'Mr. Wyeth, there is too much painting in your work to be good illustration, and too much illustration to be good painting.' This kind of thing shook him."<sup>127</sup> We have heard already how Wyeth worked hard to diminish his own susceptibility to "this kind of thing"—as, for example, in his deliberate omission of the "niceties of artistic thought" and his disciplined avoidance of "regular painting[s]"<sup>128</sup>—but he also suggests here, in the personal distance he maintains from his third-person remark about his father, that he intended for himself not to be so easily shaken.

Jacobs sought to pressure Wyeth's defenses in 1967, accusing him of "indulg[ing] in a near-orgy of undisciplined eclecticism that leaves a lot of unassimilated abstract expressionism, modified *tachisme*, a patch of Renaissance hatching, some timid Pollock spatter, and Lord-knows-what all floating aimlessly on the picture plane."<sup>129</sup> This is to say that Wyeth's paintings never become more than the sums of their parts, that his stylistic eclecticism never coalesces into a unified whole. So much may be true of some of Wyeth's works, especially those that include human figures, as explained above. Jacobs may have been justified, for example, in his criticism of *Christina's World*, the open hillside within which he described as

a tapestry of more or less uniform threads, each of which is simply the numerical equivalent of a blade of grass, and none of which is subject to the same conditions of perspective, chiaroscuro or even paint-handling that appear in the rest of the picture.... [Such an area] becomes, if you isolate it from its context, simply a textured two-dimensional panel virtually devoid of recognizable content.<sup>130</sup>

As explained in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, *Christina's World* presents a series of discrete objects—a ground plane, a sheltering farmhouse, and a disabled, stranded human figure, all of which conveniently explain and measure one another for the benefit of an independent, inspecting viewer. The stylistic inconsistency that Jacobs points out can thus help to support the previous chapter's claim that this picture, despite its measurability, never quite comes together, that it fails to represent the totality of Christina's experience in such a way that the viewer can not only inspect it but

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid. For more on Betsy's involvement in her husband's career, see Wanda Corn, "The Art of Andrew Wyeth," in Wanda Corn, ed., *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat. (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1973), 136.

<sup>127</sup> Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," 68.

<sup>128</sup> Wyeth as cited above, notes 74, 77, and 127.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Jacobs, "Andrew Wyeth," 30.

sympathize with it. Moreover, Jacobs pointed to matters of paint handling that would be less apparent to those viewing Wyeth's works in reproduction, and thus his critique provides further support for one of Chapter 1's other claims: that Wyeth's works must be judged first-hand if the successful ones are to be separated out from the failures, and likewise the earlier pictures (e.g., *Christina's World*) from the later and more mature ones.

But was Jacobs really distinguishing only between one portion of *Christina's World* and another? A close read of his critique as a whole suggests rather that he had in mind a more general distinction between works of art the totality of which are "textured two-dimensional panel[s] virtually devoid of recognizable content" and those, such as Wyeth's, of which texture and two-dimensionality are components of a larger whole. Describing Wyeth's *Young America* (1950), Jacobs wrote that "Wyeth became so engrossed with uniformity of 'tone' and 'light' ... and so caught up in the use of texture-for-its-own-sake that there is no appreciable difference between the stuff of the bicyclist's trousers (corduroy, alfalfa, or whatever it may be) and the grasses (or corduroy) growing on the road."<sup>131</sup> (Fig. 2.22) Taken together with his critique of the stylistic inconsistency of *Christina's World*, this latter passage indicates that no attempt by Wyeth to bring modernist flatness and traditional illusionism together had any chance of success. It makes sense then that Jacobs chose such disappointing (though admittedly popular) pictures as *Christina's World* and *Young America* to illustrate his critique: he was attacking weaknesses rather than strengths, pointing out problems that even Wyeth himself would likely not have defended—recall, if you will, Wyeth's remark to George Plimpton and Donald Stewart in 1961, which I quoted in the previous chapter: "I think perhaps it would have been possible to have painted just that field and have you *sense* Christina without her being there."<sup>132</sup> Such a correction, which *Hay Ledge* had already begun to make in 1957 would likely not have satisfied Jacobs, who seems to have preferred that a painted field and the way in which it is painted not be of equal importance in the context of a single work, and perhaps that they not be simultaneously sensible at all.

Why? Were the gains of modernism really so fragile, so submissive, that any combination of flatness with illusionism amounted to a subversion or dissipation of the former? Wyeth's pictures suggest that he thought not, believing instead that they all exist quite natively within the contingent human experience of abstract perception—that is, within an exchange between an informed, modern beholder and that which he sees. But as Jacobs's critique reveals, and as its editorial preface explicitly forewarned, such exchanges were problematic insofar as they interfered with the progress of American culture. Those editors claimed, in fact, that Wyeth was "the first artist to appear on the cover of *Time*," a dubious claim that is now frequently repeated.<sup>133</sup> Despite prior covers featuring painters and sculptors such as Edward Hopper (on December 24, 1956) and Bill Mauldin (on June 21, 1961), however, the editors of *Art in America* were in their own,

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Wyeth, interview by George Plimpton and Donald Stewart in 1961, as quoted in Adam Weinberg, "Terra Incognita: Redefining Wyeth's World," in Venn and Weinberg, *Unknown Terrain*, 20.

<sup>133</sup> Editorial preface to Jacobs, "Andrew Wyeth," 24.

contrived way correct: Wyeth was not just a traditionalist picture maker with a large popular following but also a serious American painter (i.e., an “artist”) who was helping to set the course for post-War, modern culture. It was this Wyeth, specifically, that the likes of Jacobs, Alloway, and Kuh, saw fit to critique.

1967 was the year, after all, in which Michael Fried famously claimed that “art” only existed as the pure manifestation of given media or techniques, and that any practice that situated itself between media or combined distinguishable techniques amounted instead to “theater,” with which art was “at war” for its very survival as a viable cultural phenomenon.<sup>134</sup> Minimalist sculpture, for example, was held by Fried to be theatrical because of the audience engagement that it courted, and thus upon which it depended more so than it did upon the strictly sculptural matters of materiality and form. Thus Fried would almost certainly have disagreed with the editors of *Art in America* that Wyeth deserved the exclusive label of “artist” in a way that Hopper and Grandma Moses did not. Wyeth’s pictures demand a certain dynamism with regard to the viewer’s recognition of style and technique, and that dynamism brings with it a sense of incrementally elapsing time—a sense of that fundamental, Heideggerian sequence of need and fulfillment that we encountered in Chapter 1. Such an awareness of the passing of time was for Fried antithetical to the experience of modern artistic beholding, which had rather to do with an overcoming or transcendence of temporal awareness. Thus the unassimilated eclecticism of Wyeth’s pictures afforded a “theatrical” bond between Wyeth’s pictures and their viewers, a bond which for Fried would have marked those pictures as anti-modern and indeed anti-“art.”

Wyeth was, in his own way, sensitive to distinctions between his favored media.<sup>135</sup> His pencil drawings explored the fine details and textures of a given object, and alternatively the rough geometries of complete pictorial compositions. In the former case, illusionism predominates, while in the latter case, graphite and line themselves come to the fore in their relationships with the sections of paper that they activate. (Fig. 2.23)

Wyeth’s watercolors, on the other hand, were fast and free, though not to the point of ignoring the representational capacity of swaths of blank paper, and they typically aimed to capture the visual generalities of a scene or object in terms of color and tonal relationships. Tempera and dry-brush, a variation of watercolor in which the water-soluble paint is minimally hydrated, were deliberately slow and methodical, though not without an occasional flourish of wet paint if a developing image grew stale or began to exhibit an encroachment of “the niceties of artistic thought.”<sup>136</sup>

But Wyeth’s specificity of practice with each medium stopped short of the sort of medium-purity that had come to define mid-twentieth-century “modernism” in the eyes of Greenberg and Fried. To recognize the strengths and limitations of a given medium, even to play deliberately to those strengths and to activate them as components of a given

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<sup>134</sup> Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” first published in *Artforum* in June of 1967, as reproduced in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-172, and see especially, for the terms quoted in the present paragraph, 163-67.

<sup>135</sup> Wyeth is quoted discussing these distinctions in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 31-36, and 110. See also de Kooning, “Andrew Wyeth,” 54.

<sup>136</sup> “Niceties of artistic thought” as quoted above, note 74.

work of art, is not necessarily to make those strengths and limitations the exclusive content of a work. Thus Jacobs would have been correct to label Wyeth a “non-modernist.” Instead, however, he settled on a more loaded phrase, “thoroughly eclectic primitive,” which would in fact have applied much better to, say, Grandma Moses, yet another one of those non-artists who had previously graced the cover of *Time*.<sup>137</sup>

At least Jacobs credited Wyeth with being “thorough” about his childish experiments. Accomplished or not, Wyeth believed himself to have been anything but undisciplined and aimless circa 1957, having declared to Meryman in 1965 that

I have driven myself harder than most artists towards the thing that I wanted. I've tried never to be easily satisfied, and I've been painting like fury now for 40 years. I think now I'll probably do very little painting for the next 25 years. I sort of feel I want to dam it up again. I don't know. I have a feeling. You paint about as far as your emotions go, and that's about it.<sup>138</sup>

He kept on painting, of course. The big gamble that he made years before had paid off: tempera manifestations of his unfettered “artistic” ability were earning handsome sums, he had a reputation to cultivate and to uphold, and he had a pair of children to support. But Wyeth's inventiveness and rigor declined from what it had been during the previous twenty-five years, during which he had worked with an intensity of motivation that occasionally spilled over into the darkness of desperation, and thus it was unsustainable. “Nothing means anything to me except painting,” Wyeth had exclaimed in 1951, “I'm warped in that direction. I have a terrible urge. ... I think I'd probably commit suicide if I couldn't paint.”<sup>139</sup> Here he is again with Louchheim in 1953: “Painting is living to me. If I had to stop painting, I'd just as leave die [sic].”<sup>140</sup> Let us be careful not to conflate energetic conviction with suicidal desperation, for the two are undoubtedly at odds. The point is rather that, short of these very darkest of thoughts, Wyeth was simply highly motivated and intensely committed where the practice of painting was concerned. Indeed we ought to take these remarks together with Wyeth's claims of delightful non-existence during his playful childhood and during the rigorous studies of still life objects and human figures that constituted his formal training as a draftsman. In doing so, we find that Wyeth managed to “lose” himself so happily and entirely within his painting practice that he shuddered at the thought of ever having to reconstitute himself beyond it.

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*Time's* attempt in 1963 to establish a continuity of American artistic accomplishment that united divergent pre- and post-war cultures and tastes marked the

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<sup>137</sup> Jacobs, “Andrew Wyeth,” 30. *Time* ran a cover story on Grandma Moses on December 28, 1953.

<sup>138</sup> Wyeth as quoted in Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 121.

<sup>139</sup> Wyeth as quoted in “American Realist,” an uncredited article appearing in *Time*, July 16, 1951, 75.

<sup>140</sup> Louchheim, “Wyeth,” 58.



continuation of a decades-long concern with nativism that pervaded much of the critical and historical writing about the fine arts in the United States from the 1930s through the cultural revolutions of the later 1960s and '70s.

Wyeth benefitted from this search for a native champion of the arts when he first arrived on the New York art scene with his one-man show at the MacBeth gallery in 1937. The watercolor paintings of coastal Maine that made up the sell-out show were praised for their eccentric and eclectic blends of techniques and contents, composition and expression. The prominent, mostly conservative art critic Royal Cortissoz noted the “bold manner in which Mr. Wyeth goes about his business. He uses the medium with a true feeling for watercolor, but he uses it with something like audacious force.... He is vivid and...remarkably proficient.”<sup>141</sup> In 1942, Cortissoz critiqued Wyeth again in equally positive terms: “Wyeth’s color sense is excellent...he gets light and atmosphere into his picture, and...almost all the work has a real emotional impact.”<sup>142</sup> And Henry McBride wrote in the *New York Sun* in 1937 that,

Mr. Wyeth has the breadth of view that is associated with the name of Homer, and he has a brave way of applying wash to the paper and he is unafraid of color, and with these accomplishments he finds it easy to present you with clean, crisp watercolors that immediately catch the eye.<sup>143</sup>

Comparisons between Wyeth and Winslow Homer (1836-1910) were common during this moment of Wyeth’s entrance into the public art market. In terms of rhetoric, they quantified the amount of praise being given—i.e., Wyeth’s works are good to the impressive degree at which they can be said to be on par with “Homer, the great.” However, these references to Homer also indicate a pre-War desire for home-grown American talent in an era in which Europe, and Paris in particular, was generally understood to be the fountainhead of Western art culture.<sup>144</sup>

This concern with the domestic production of culture manifested especially strongly in those instances in which Wyeth’s father, the illustrator, was expressly excluded from his son’s bona fides as a serious artist. “For a youth of twenty to appear upon the horizon of American art today with a series of watercolors that take one back to the work of Winslow Homer and do not suffer an eclipse from the comparison”—this is the art critic James Brown, writing for *Art in America* in 1938—

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<sup>141</sup> Royal Cortissoz, as quoted in “Andrew Wyeth, in Debut, Wins Critics’ Acclaim,” *Art Digest* 12 (November 1, 1937), 15.

<sup>142</sup> Royal Cortissoz as quoted in Howard Devree, “Four Good First Shows,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1937, 173.

<sup>143</sup> Henry McBride, as quoted in “Andrew Wyeth, in Debut,” *Art Digest*, 15.

<sup>144</sup> This pre-War push for nativism was of concern to traditionalists and modernists alike. For an explicit, period expression of the artistic desire to move American art out from under the shadow of Paris, see Grant Wood’s 1935 book, *Revolt Against the City* (Iowa City: Clio Press, 1935). For a later, historical account that interweaves various individual artistic motivations with those of cultural and political institutions and collectives, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1-100.

is something those who care for our native art must find highly encouraging... [Wyeth] is the son of N.C. Wyeth whose fame as an illustrator needs no emphasis. It is unlikely that the father's encouragement and advice as well as the actual observance of his methods had much to do with the son's immediate development and early arrival at a height of mastery generally reserved for an artist's middle age or later. Wyeth uses his brush with a really almost spectacular freedom, laying his color on unhesitatingly, and thereby achieving an effect of convincing verisimilitude that invariably arrests the attention, and in the aggregate, his work inevitably challenges comparison with that of our greatest in his field – men like Winslow Homer and John S. Sargent.<sup>145</sup>

Wyeth himself would have staunchly disagreed, for Brown credits him specifically with having been free *from* his father's techniques and traditions. We have seen already that Wyeth desired instead to be free *to* make productive use of the same, incorporating his hard-earned draftsmanship and his long developed familiarity with the behavioral characteristics of his media (in this case, watercolor, which he had been using since his early childhood<sup>146</sup>) within his most intense moments of intrepid, instinctual creativity.

Doris Brian's 1941 remarks, which were quoted near the beginning of this chapter, took a similar tack into the shifting winds of taste.<sup>147</sup> Both writers—Brian and Brown—were unknowingly celebrating much of what Wyeth had learned from his father in summertime Maine—e.g., freedom and spontaneity of vision and composition, and a direct engagement with the local environment—at the same time that they played down much of the complementary training that N.C. provided indoors in wintertime Pennsylvania.<sup>148</sup>

After World War II critical fashion began to shift from the invention of Wyeth as a laudable paradigm of Americanness to a lamentation of his work as cultural dead weight. At first, in the immediate post-War 1940s, Wyeth was still celebrated as a symbol of American cultural continuity but not as a champion of innovation, a role at that moment being credited instead to the burgeoning New York School. *Life* magazine proclaimed in 1948 that “if there is such a thing as a purely American tradition in art, it is represented at its best in the straightforward canvases of Andrew Wyeth.”<sup>149</sup> “Straightforward,” that is, as opposed to the confounding abstractionism that was associated with pre-War Europe, against which “American,” as a distinct sub-category of

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<sup>145</sup> James Brown, “The Watercolors of Andrew Wyeth,” *Art in America* 26 (January 1938), 41.

<sup>146</sup> Wyeth worked indoors with watercolor as a young child, and began to paint watercolor landscapes at the age of 10. See Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 40. Additionally, the long development of Wyeth's landscape practice is addressed in depth in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>147</sup> Brian as quoted above, note 15.

<sup>148</sup> In a letter to Robert MacBeth, for example, whose New York City gallery hosted Andrew's shows in the late 1930s and early '40s, N.C. expressed the balance that he had tried to maintain while teaching his son both discipline and passion, both draftsmanship and gestural/compositional expression. N.C. Wyeth, in a letter to Robert MacBeth, February 19, 1939, in Betsy Wyeth, *The Wyeths*, 785-87.

<sup>149</sup> “Andrew Wyeth: an American Realist Paints What He Sees,” *Life*, May 17, 1948, 102.

“Western,” was generally defined. Later, in the 1950s, as high modernism, and particularly, Abstract Expressionism, gained wider appeal within American culture, Wyeth’s star began to fade in the eyes of critics even as it grew brighter in the minds of collectors and museum goers. Some critics questioned Wyeth’s Americanness, while others, who continued to certify it, also disparaged him for it.

In the case of Lloyd Goodrich we can find all of the above: history and criticism, praise and derision, and a marked concern with American-ness. In 1958 Goodrich wrote an essay for *Art in America* titled “What is American in American Art: Common Denominators from the Pilgrims to Pollock,” which theorized American art’s place within the larger history of Western art. On the way to celebrating Abstract Expressionism as America’s first innovative, globally significant “artistic concept,” Goodrich claimed that all prior American art had lagged behind that of Europe and apishly followed the advances being made there.<sup>150</sup> The problem, as Goodrich saw it, was not that America had previously lacked artistic talent, but rather that it was too culturally immature either to foment or to benefit from the talents of aspiring geniuses such as John Trumbull, John Vanderlyn, and Samuel Morse. Goodrich took it to be symptomatic of this dearth of culture that Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley sailed away to England, and he spun a particularly dreary yarn of dejection around Washington Allston, who suffered the “artistic barrenness of his native land” after returning from an inspiring grand tour of Europe.<sup>151</sup> While dismissing the eponymous straw-man of a “common denominator” of exceptionally American culture early on in his essay, Goodrich did identify a series of “common characteristics” exhibited by his paradigmatic pre-World War II Americans: “naturalism...adherence to facts, avoidance of subjective emotion, directness and simplicity of vision, clarity, solidity, [and] traditionalism.”<sup>152</sup> Such an inconsistent espousal of a coherent pre-war American-ness was required insofar as Goodrich held that it was the New York School’s post-war casting aside of the totality of those “characteristics” that marked the florescence of a fully-independent American art culture.

Three years prior, in 1955, Goodrich had published another essay in *Art in America*, this one on the subject of the increasingly popular Wyeth. While generally sympathetic and at times even laudatory, this essay turned out in hindsight to have contained a latent negative judgment. “It is the timeless, the unchanging, in country life,” Goodrich wrote, “that forms the core of Wyeth’s art...rural life as it was lived a hundred years ago, as it is still lived everywhere in our country, and as it will probably survive for years to come.”<sup>153</sup> Interpreted through the lens of the later essay, the conservative rural “core” that Goodrich ascribed to Wyeth in 1955 identified this Brandywine Valley son of a professional illustrator as yet another wasted artistic talent, the final, tragic casualty of America’s cultural immaturity.

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<sup>150</sup> Lloyd Goodrich, “What is American in American Art: Common Denominators from the Pilgrims to Pollock,” in Jean Lipman, ed., *What is American in American Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 18.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 and 23.

<sup>153</sup> Goodrich, Lloyd, “Andrew Wyeth,” 10.

This change of tune is unfortunate given that Goodrich's 1955 essay credited Wyeth's art with a seriousness that other critics of the time tended overwhelmingly to overlook:

Wyeth's style is completely realistic, even photographic, remarkable for extreme precision, minute detail and finished craftsmanship. But beyond these qualities, which it shares with much quite dead academic painting, are the selectivity and design of highly conscious art. His pictorial concepts are often extremely original, using everyday material in unexpected aspects and from startling viewpoints...<sup>154</sup>

A confounding parade of fraught art historical terms—"realistic... photographic... craftsmanship... academic... original"—is exacerbated here by the hyperbole that binds them together: "even...but beyond...quite dead...highly conscious...extremely... unexpected...startling." Nonetheless it might well be the most valid of all the major critical assessments of Wyeth's work from the 1950s or '60s, for it reveals Goodrich to have looked closely and openly enough at Wyeth's works to acknowledge their complexity. Specifically, it records a culturally conflicted writer's attempt at a kind of art-critical circumspection, one that could find gains in the eclecticism that struck Jacobs only as a loss.

Five years after the publication of Goodrich's second essay, John McCoubrey offered an alternative to Goodrich's history of a retarded pre-war American art industry. According to McCoubrey's *American Tradition in Painting*, "the conditions of modernism [were] present from the beginning" in America, where artists' engagements with an expansive continent theretofore unimpressed with the stamp of European culture, society, and industry had always been of primary importance.<sup>155</sup> American painting, McCoubrey explained, has always had to reckon with an uniquely American "nature" that is "unmeasured...haphazard... [and] hostile;" thus McCoubrey credited the Abstract Expressionists, Wyeth's 1950s opposition in the courts of both popular and high-brow appeal, with conceiving outsized and iconographically confounding pictures that accorded with "nature's process."<sup>156</sup> The simple logic and grand ambition of McCoubrey's historical analysis combine to make it almost as compelling as it is far-fetched. Indeed Wyeth's attempts to enclose outdoor spaces and to derive sociality from isolation, which are central topics in Chapter 3, would fit right in as attempts to subdue the sublimity of the North American continent. Such an alluring but ultimately frail argument about Wyeth's works need not be refuted, however, for McCoubrey's text never mentions them. Instead it silently asserted their irrelevance to contemporary art history and criticism. Asserted, I write, because McCoubrey was omitting a painter who was as famous and successful as his modernist peers in 1960s America—in some contexts even more so: it was Wyeth, after all, and not Rothko, Pollock, or Kline—all

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> John McCoubrey, *American Tradition in Painting* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 123-5.

central figures in the final act of McCoubrey's history—who appeared on the cover of *Time* and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in the same year that McCoubrey's book was released.

Wyeth's absence from McCoubrey's narrative was made even more blaring in February of 1967 when the *New York Times* ran an article about Wyeth on the occasion of an upcoming retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum. "The Wyeth Menace," as John Canaday's article was titled, quantified Wyeth's prominent, if also besieged, position in the art world by way of a tongue-in-cheek summary of statistical data concerning Wyeth and the upcoming show. "The new word for Andrew Wyeth in the critical circles," Canaday quipped, "where he was formerly adopted to serve so conveniently in a benign capacity, is 'dangerous.' 'He's a very dangerous artist,' you will hear. 'This Wyeth show at the Whitney is a very dangerous show.' 'Let's face it, it's a very dangerous situation altogether.'"<sup>157</sup> The exhibition catalog, Canaday recounted, sold over 100,000 copies by the time of the Whitney opening, and a stop in Chicago was still forthcoming. 130,000 people attended the exhibition at its first hanging in the Baltimore Museum, where the highest total attendance had previously been 95,000 (for a Vincent van Gogh exhibition in 1961). In Philadelphia, where the exhibition had stopped on its way to New York, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts received three times as many visitors as it ever had before for a single show; the total attendance was 183,000, which made for an average daily attendance of 4,000 per day. "The record attendance for a one-man show by a living artist in New York..." Canaday wrote,

must be the Museum of Modern Art's 328,000 for Picasso's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibition. But on a day-to-day average over its duration of 19 weeks...Picasso drew a smaller audience than Wyeth did in Philadelphia. No wonder that the Whitney has been battening down its hatches, installing protective barriers for the fragile tempera paintings and increasing its regular security measures.<sup>158</sup>

Canaday then moved on to a summary of Wyeth's recent sales records, which he described as "unpleasant shocks" to the "avant-garde."<sup>159</sup> Wyeth's sale of *Groundhog Day* (1959) to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the year it was completed set a record of \$35,000 for an amount paid by a museum to living American artist.<sup>160</sup> Wyeth proceeded to shatter that record himself in 1962, selling another tempera to the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts for \$58,000, and in 1963 he sold yet another to the Farnsworth Museum in Maine for \$65,000.<sup>161</sup> "By this time," Canaday wrote, "it just wasn't funny."<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> John Canaday, "The Wyeth Menace," *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1967.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

Whereas McCoubrey attempted to exclude Wyeth from his account of American art, E. P. Richardson made no such omissions while writing his own, competing history, which appeared two years later in 1965. Richardson's *Painting in America from 1502 to the Present* followed the structural model of McCoubrey's book—i.e., work backwards from an assumption of the Americanness of Abstract Expressionism—but it traded McCoubrey's interest in a vast and fearsome North American “nature” for a focus on ideology. “Idealism...[and] the appeal of the universal” had, according to Richardson, been present in the “American imagination...since the beginning of our republic,” but it was not until after World War II that idealism displaced “objective realism” as the predominant world view informing American painting.<sup>163</sup> Even after the Abstract Expressionists went all-in on idealism with regard to the flatness and materiality of the picture surface, however, a residual concern with familiarity, objectivity, and domesticity remained among the low brow majority of the American public, which directed its attention to Wyeth, who

has remained in harmony with his world and with the common vision of his time.... [His] gift is to clarify and intensify common experience.... His close and loving study of nature, like his life apart in Chadds Ford, Pa., and on the Maine coast, place him at the opposite pole from Abstract Expressionism.<sup>164</sup>

Wyeth, in other words, was the artist that the average American most admired as the representative of an older, more familiar American culture. Pollock and company, on the other hand, became associated with a novel, progressive American culture that was celebrated by a more select, high brow audience at home and was exported as the new face of American art abroad.<sup>165</sup> *Hay Ledge*, I think, was designed in 1957 with this rapidly bifurcating American culture in mind, for it appears to put the multi-faceted complexity of American art on display for its beholders to discern for themselves, that is, American art's past and present, its realist traditions and its idealist modernisms, all of which Wyeth was not only informed about but also eager to reconcile.

Betting in 1951 that a narrative of art-cultural conflict could make for exciting reading, *Time* played up this Wyeth/New York School opposition by qualifying *Life*'s 1948 identification of Wyeth as quintessentially American. We have seen already that by 1963 *Time* was looking to close the cultural gap—by then Wyeth was important enough to its readership that it had to approach his work more delicately—but in 1951 it was prodding and instigating with abandon, provocatively associating Wyeth exclusively with an American *past*, as well as with a regressive, popular nostalgia for the same. “Wyeth is a puzzle to critics, but not to laymen...” reads the text of *Time*'s 1951 article, which bore the title of “American Realist,”

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<sup>163</sup> Edgar P. Richardson, *Painting in America from 1502 to the Present* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1965), 419.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 419-23.

[His] storytelling pictures have more in common with 19<sup>th</sup>- than with 20<sup>th</sup>-Century art. To laymen, who generally prefer the old-fashioned kind anyway, that does not matter a bit. What does matter is the plain fact that Wyeth's pictures make sense, call for no translation.<sup>166</sup>

Anticipating Jacobs's 1967 accusations of "primitivism," *Time* suggested that Wyeth's works were puerile, the sort of amusements that marked American culture in its prior immaturity.

This sentiment was hardly contradicted by the enthusiastic reception of *Christina's World* in London in 1956, where it appeared as part of the Museum of Modern Art's traveling exhibition, "Modern Art of the United States." According to MOMA's internal press analysis, *Christina's World* was "undoubtedly the most popular painting in the exhibition among critics and public alike."<sup>167</sup> Unfortunately for Wyeth, this European (read: old-World) taste for such a sentimental and illusionistic picture was symbolic of that which the increasingly fashionable modernists were thought by their enthusiastic critics to be intent on rising above.

Why then, did *Time* make such a strong change of tune from instigation in 1948 to reconciliation in 1963, at which point it sought to weave Wyeth and the Abstract Expressionists together into a single tapestry of Americanness? Wyeth's increasing popular appeal and recent Presidential commendation might have been reason enough. Another answer, however, or at least a confirmation and expansion of the question, might be found in the fact that the 1960s saw some of the foundations of modernism shaken by the emergence of and debates over Pop Art, Minimalism, and avant-garde conceptual artists such as Robert Smithson, who desired that art should move on from what he called "insipid notions of flatness."<sup>168</sup>

Minimalism was an art that purported to emphasize non-objective abstraction and materiality as means to increase the accessibility and human relevance of modern art, and it thereby questioned the assumption of the inherent legibility of illusionistic, figurative realism.<sup>169</sup> The modernism of sculptors such as Robert Morris and Tony Smith was challenged, however, as we have seen already, by Michael Fried, who claimed that their "minimalism"—which he rephrased as "literalism" in order to emphasize the spectator's role in interpreting the works, or in the degree to which the works required audiences to activate them through recognition—was in fact dissolving art into "theater," and therefore that it was not "modern" at all.<sup>170</sup> Such internal debates over the nature of modernism

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<sup>166</sup> "American Realist," *Time*, 72.

<sup>167</sup> Museum of Modern Art "Press Analysis," as quoted in Michael Kimmelman, "Revisiting the Revisionists: The Modern, Its Critics, and the Cold War," in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: the Critical Debate, Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 298.

<sup>168</sup> Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape," in Jack Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: the Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 162.

<sup>169</sup> Robert Slifkin, for example, elaborates the political stakes of Judd's sculptural engagement with matters of illusionism and reality in the early 1960s, showing how even attempts at pure self-referentiality are dependent upon viewer engagement and interpretation, and thus slip invariably into illusionism of one form or another. Slifkin, "Donald Judd's Credibility Gap," *American Art* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2011), 56-75.

<sup>170</sup> Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 148-172.

may well have made the alternate directions in which Wyeth had been working seem less critical, farther from the front, and perhaps even more fertile.

The Pop Art works of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, meanwhile, questioned art and cultural distinctions between high and low, art and design, and painting and illustration. Moreover, Pop and Minimalism both firmly challenged the sanctity and singularity of handmade-ness by introducing industrial production processes and materials to the practice of serious fine art. Thus the emergence of Pop and Minimalism, taken together with *Time*'s shift, even if not as causes for it, indicates the increasing instability of a series of recurrent cultural binaries—high/low, popular/elite, American/European, urban/rural, regressive/progressive, and traditional/modern—that had long complicated the reception of Wyeth's works, tying them together with the artist himself and thus embroiling his practice and his works in a mess of misguided admiration and prejudiced contempt.<sup>171</sup>

Unlike the popular press, however, which by the 1960s was apologizing for Wyeth as best it could, hardened modernist critics were intent on keeping his works in the pigeon hole of traditionalism to which they had gradually been relegated since the late 1940s. Kuh, one of Wyeth's most uncompromising critics, accused the artist of feeding into a regressive

nostalgia for 'life on the farm.' The more international our world, the more tormented it is by unrest, the more unstable our social fabric, the more, alas, we turn to oversimple solutions. It is easier to shout about 'law and order' than to remedy the causes that turn these words into a national slogan.

Somehow I think of Wyeth's paintings as persistent, if gentle, evocations of that same mindless slogan. His 'law and order' never envisions a universal structure.<sup>172</sup>

For Kuh, cultural change was cultural betterment, and thus she found tragedy in that which she perceived to be Wyeth's concretion of present culture, or worse, his Eric Sloane-like revival of the social values of early America's agrarian past. "Wyeth shows us life as it is," Kuh wrote, "or at least as he sees it, not as it might be."<sup>173</sup> Jacobs seems to have shared this sentiment, writing that Wyeth "has neither advanced nor impeded the course of art in his time. He is an anarchistic loner who gets in nobody's way."<sup>174</sup> On the

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<sup>171</sup> For more on Pop art, see Cecile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). It is worth recalling here that Alloway's 1967 critique of Wyeth's work, cited numerous times above, bore the title "The Other Andy: 'America's Most Popular Painter.'" Alloway's comparison between Warhol and Wyeth is only a superficial one—two stylistically divergent but equally famous contemporary artists named "Andy"—but it nonetheless stands as evidence of a period interest in reading them together and against one another. Additionally, it is perhaps of diachronic relevance that in 1976 Warhol got together with Wyeth's son, James Wyeth, and the two painted each other's portraits, which were shown together at the Coe Kerr Gallery in New York that same year.

<sup>172</sup> Kuh, "Why Wyeth?" 11.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>174</sup> Jacobs, "Andrew Wyeth," 31.



face of it, Jacobs endeavored to deny that which Kuh claimed was Wyeth's traditionalist disruption of cultural progress. Yet the very publication of Jacobs's critique—which notes Wyeth's impressive sales and exhibition attendances—ironically affirmed that Wyeth, insofar as he was sopping up art market money, was in *everybody's* way.

It should come as no surprise then, that terms such as “bold,” “unhesitating,” “brave,” and “free,” which had been applied to Wyeth's works during World War II, afterward came to be applied instead to Wyeth himself, that is, the person, the celebrity. Wyeth, it was popularly believed, was thumbing his nose at the modernist avant-garde. “[Wyeth] works against the fashion of the day,” Henry McBride wrote in a 1953 critique titled “Wyeth: Serious Best Seller.”<sup>175</sup> McBride then went on to credit Wyeth's financial success—“Wyeth quietly sells whatever he does, not only to his neighbors but to every museum in the land”—to a deliberate effort to set his works apart from the abstractionism flooding the art market.<sup>176</sup> “An alliance with the mob of fashionables, all doing the same thing...” McBride maintained, “is...fatal to any final chance of distinction. ... Going it alone is a far better bet.”<sup>177</sup> In other words, McBride's Wyeth, who formerly, in 1937, was “brave” with his wash drawings, who was “unafraid” of color, and who merited comparisons with Homer, had become a sell-out—though possibly an admirable one: McBride left this final judgment unmade.<sup>178</sup> But the damage was done, or at least pointed out: Wyeth, a one-time heir-apparent to Winslow Homer as the flag bearer for American art, was selling for top dollar in a zero-sum game against Greenberg's “American-type” painters, and therefore Canaday's comedic claim was right on the money: Wyeth was a loose cannon, and as such he was “dangerous” and increasingly (and increasingly paradoxically) un-American.<sup>179</sup>

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Our point of focus in this second chapter has been Wyeth's art theory and practice, about which we have heard him speak openly despite the myths of his reclusion, isolation, and primitivism. In some cases Wyeth espoused modernist motivations toward artistic idealism. We have seen that he sympathized especially with the desire to protect his creative process from convention and from the financial imperative of popular appeal—the latter being an interest inherited in part from a father who never fully embraced it for himself. However, Wyeth's words have also confirmed that which is obvious in view of his pictures, namely that he stopped well short of purging his practice of illusionism. On the contrary, he appears to have worked instead to reconcile the humanism of naturalistic depiction with the idealism of purified painting, both of which seem to have been essential to the meaning of his 1975 statement that “art, to me, is

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<sup>175</sup> Henry McBride, “Wyeth: Serious Best-Seller,” *ARTnews* 52 (November 1953), 39.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>178</sup> McBride as cited above, note 143.

<sup>179</sup> Canaday as cited above, note 157.

seeing.”<sup>180</sup> *Hay Ledge*, I think, was an admirable attempt not only to apply but also self-critically to illustrate this long-cultivated practice. The timing was right for such a deliberate demonstration of Wyeth’s artistic principles: 1957 saw him working in the glow of Goodrich’s short-lived endorsement, beneath the burden of McBride’s insinuation that he traded artistic integrity for money, and amid the misguided support of “laymen” who mistook him for a brave, new Homer.

Reading *Hay Ledge* as a response to these conditions, we can see the illustrated dory as bait for both admiration and attack, for within and around it are numerous real and figural hooks into open minded beholding, a “startling” array of artistic possibilities (to borrow the term from Goodrich) that seem at first glance to blend seamlessly together but under scrutiny reveal the plurality of a practice that embraced possibility, opportunity, and complexity. Wyeth portrayed the elegance of the dory’s engineering through the old-fashioned technical proficiency of his draftsmanship, thereby putting both on display and relating the one to the other. In doing so he was calling out the public’s and his critics’ not quite dead fascinations with conventional depiction—that is, with a lingering curiosity and admiration that disturbed the progressive culture of the contemporary art market in the same way that Alvaro Olson’s lingering love of fishing would have perpetually interfered with his sacrifice of his dory’s original purpose. Ironically, however, Olson’s permanent storage of the dory—that is, his humanitarian refusal of its original purpose in combination with his preservation of its form—opened the possibility of the dory being viewed principally as a work of art, a thing of impractical but nonetheless admirable “beauty.” And indeed Wyeth embraced this possibility, using color, tone, shape, and surface texture to express an “emotion” by decorating the surface of a wooden panel in such a way as to present his painting as such, that is, as an autonomous thing to be confronted more so than as a medium through which to look. One of many accomplishments of *Hay Ledge*—the one in which this chapter has taken a particular interest—is that these two dories—the useful instrument and its delightful form—are simultaneously present, meaning that to “look at [one] directly” is always to call forth the other “out of the corner of your eye.”<sup>181</sup>

To put it another way, we can read these alternations and overlaps as enactments of a particular 1950s history of art: a history of *this* art, the history of *Hay Ledge*. This painting, in other words, was designed to perpetually reenact its own making, though not in the same way that an action painting indexes an artist’s bodily gestures, which signify in turn a resilient progression through a potentially exhausting dialectic of thought-action-response. Rather, *Hay Ledge* recorded and now exhibits a more incremental, discontinuous, and furtive process: first to circumspect the surrounding world with the aid of an active, abstracting mind, and second to represent that which is observed without betraying the complexity of the “seeing” that saw it. *Hay Ledge* cues the first phase by setting us up to “catch” the dory within a context of artistic looking and associative thought, and thereby to experience the pre-material component of Wyeth’s practice. Being drawn primarily to the strong illusionism of the central hanging rope, one’s first

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<sup>180</sup> Wyeth as cited above, note 1.

<sup>181</sup> Wyeth as cited above, note 68.

experience of the dory is indeed of “something...caught out of the corner of your eye.” *Hay Ledge* exhibits the second phase of Wyeth’s practice as an integration of naturalistic depiction with abstract expressionism, or of “illustration” with “painting:” a synthesis that forces each of these ostensibly discrete practices to call out and make significant the other.

The dismissive version of this claim would be that illusionism and modernism were contradictory but inescapable artistic premises for Wyeth on account of his particular experience of his mid-century historical moment, and thus that he floundered back and forth between them, producing paintings that reveal little more than stylistic indecision: because Wyeth to some degree loyal to N.C. and ingrained with the techniques of depiction that he learned in his studio, a full embrace of modernism was impossible; similarly, because he was exposed to the ideas of “Pollock, and Kline, and de Kooning,” any innocence or naiveté with which Wyeth might have executed those techniques was equally impossible to sustain.<sup>182</sup> By expanding our understanding of Wyeth’s formation and maturation as an artist, I hope to have shown instead that modernism and illusionism were artistic premises that, perhaps precisely because Wyeth saw them colliding around him so strongly and so often, he learned quite marvelously to look and to work around.

Finally, in mind of around-ness, let us conclude by returning to a particular term from one of Katherine Kuh’s comments quoted above—“evocations”—for it exemplifies a common claim about Wyeth’s works, one that I have made here myself in terms of “cueing,” “calling forth,” and “calling out.”<sup>183</sup> Detractors and supporters alike have credited Wyeth’s works with “evoking” various things, meanings, and ideas, and in doing so they have rightly acknowledged one of the gains of his style of representation in the 1950s and ‘60s, namely that it illustrated but never feigned to define the world of which it was a part. Not surprisingly, however, those critics have tended to fill in the blanks more often than they have inquired as to how those blanks came to be.

Perry Rathbone, for example, portrayed Wyeth’s pictures as standards to be waved proudly by his audience during its reluctant retreat from a steadily “encroaching” modernity:

We yearn for...values that refute our materialism, oppose the encroachment of technological expansion and reject the madness of modern urban life. The art of Andrew Wyeth abounds in emblems which support these values, values that stir the heart of a tortured age.

Solitude, simple pleasures, rural folk, the unexpected beauty of the commonplace, nature serene and inviolate, the quietude of the country – this is the repertory of Andrew Wyeth which evokes an anti-materialist image of America and offers a panacea to our spiritual blight.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Wyeth as cited above, note 106.

<sup>183</sup> Kuh as quoted above, note 172.

<sup>184</sup> Perry Rathbone, preface to Rathbone, ed., *Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat. (London: Lefevre Gallery, 1974), 1.

Rathbone is correct about Wyeth's interest in "solitude" and transcendentalism, and we shall explore that interest vis-à-vis *Hay Ledge* in Chapter 3. But the conflation of Wyeth's imagery with the cultural traumas of his viewers is largely ungrounded. Kuh invented an equally dubious connection between Wyeth's paintings and what she took to be the "mindless" whining of the miserable people who admire them.<sup>185</sup> To Rathbone, Wyeth's "simple," "rural" imagery was comforting. For Kuh that comfort was regrettable, being the equivalent of a perpetual morphine drip for a weak but not yet terminal culture.

The editors of *Art in America* are as correct today as they were in 1967: claims such as Kuh's and Rathbone's, which continue to be made, have only marginally to do with Wyeth and his art. They at once exploit and ignore the hard-won opacity of his pictures, their deftly non-committal evocations—in short their abstraction. Evocation is, after all, the common ingredient in Wyeth's many uses of the word "abstract," which seem to have more to do with the general meaning of the verb "to abstract" than with the specialized art-world nouns "abstraction" and "abstractionism." The former involves an expansion of possibilities and yet a loss certainty. The latter two often take expansion and loss to an extreme from which there is no getting back to the thing that was abstracted, and indeed "abstractionism" often even pretends that there was no such thing to begin with.

Artistic loss, for Wyeth, was more subtle and creative than all of that. And for this very reason Wyeth's paintings can in fact tell us a great deal if we forego declarations of that which they evoke and attend instead to the *ways in which* they do so. Specifically, works such as *Hay Ledge* can open windows onto the historical conditions of their creation and reception, becoming illustrations, as Hillis Miller would have it, that bring their own light to light. The manners, modes, and mechanics of *Hay Ledge's* evocations, for example, indicate the artistic concepts that a particular "abstract flash" evoked for Wyeth himself, and with them the cultures of which he understood himself and his paintings to be parts. *Hay Ledge* can therefore also give us new ways to think about those surrounding cultures and the other actors within them. If it is true that Wyeth was a thorn in the side of mid-century modernism and a beacon of false hope for modernity's discontents, then perhaps it is time to start using his works to illuminate the histories both.

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<sup>185</sup> Kuh as cited above, note 172.

### 3. WYETH'S MAINE

*What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another.*<sup>1</sup>

– Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854.

*The intensity builds until it's not a flat surface to me, until the painting becomes more real to me than the place itself, and I live within the picture.*<sup>2</sup>

– Andrew Wyeth in conversation with Richard Meryman sometime after 1964.

The first chapter of this dissertation interpreted *Hay Ledge*'s puzzling pictorial spaces in terms of the human experience of space in general, and, more specifically, as representations of the personal “worlds” of the Olson siblings. (Fig. 3.1) Chapter 2 recast *Hay Ledge* (its imagery and its materiality) as a deliberate exhibition of its own art history, reading it as an illustration of the kinds of hybrid studio-galleries in which Wyeth worked, of the technical and conceptual variety of his art practice, and of the wide range of perceptions, memories, and emotions that he brought willfully to bear on the scenes that he chose to depict. This final chapter aims to bring these two prior interpretations together by theorizing *Hay Ledge* in sum as the material and visual expression of a “place” that Wyeth at once created, documented, and inhabited. Specifically, it argues that *Hay Ledge* was for Wyeth a site of experience involving a collection of related actions and conditions that were especially meaningful for him during a particularly intense phase of his career: locality and regionalism, the observation, interpretation, and representation of a variously natural and social environment, and the exercise of individual artistic agency and aesthetic discernment.

The purpose of such a unifying interpretation is twofold. On one hand, it raises new possibilities for understanding *Hay Ledge* and the art practice that produced it. Thus it might provide new points of reference from which to triangulate Wyeth's place, as it were, in the history of twentieth-century American art, a history to the side of which Wyeth's popularity and financial success still stand awkwardly alone. On the other hand,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 2nd edition, ed. William Rossi (New York: Norton, 1992), 90.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Wyeth in conversation with Richard Meryman sometime after 1964, as quoted in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Spoken Self-Portrait* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2013), 65.

evidence of Wyeth's painterly engagement with matters of place, locality, landscape, and the like might bring his works to light for a broader collection of scholarly interests, including those of geographers, philosophers, and various students of culture and society.

The humanist geographer Edward Relph, for example, was already working in this direction in the 1970s when he referred explicitly to Wyeth's work—categorically rather than individually, alas—in his now widely cited book *Place and Placelessness*. Relph's mention of Wyeth comes in the context of his explanation of the notion of "vicarious insideness," a phrase which he coined in reference to the "human experience [of] places in a secondhand or vicarious way, that is, without actually visiting them."<sup>3</sup> Vicarious insideness depends, according to Relph, upon a combination of the "artist's skills of description" in conjunction with the beholder's natural inclination toward a feeling of emplacement or situatedness. When skillfully depicted scenes such as those painted by Wyeth activate this innate predisposition, one experiences a curious combination of empathy and sympathy: "we know what it is like to be *there*," Relph wrote, "because we know what it is like to be *here*."<sup>4</sup> In other words, despite the discreteness of the artist's *there* and our *here*, a (Wyeth) painting can bring us together around the common experience of the feeling of being *somewhere*.

The continuing value of Relph's book nearly forty years after its first publication lies partly in its ironic effort to understand the notion of "place" while ultimately moving away from the term itself (and toward such alternatives as "insideness.") Place can mean a great many things—over time it certainly has.<sup>5</sup> This instability of meaning lends the term a certain appeal: "place" often seems to fit where nothing else will, at least not anything so concise and provocative. Unfortunately, the meanings of place in scholarly writing are often explained only cursorily and with little recourse to prior scholarship and alternate terms. Moreover, loose or implied definitions of place are also typically implicitly universal, as if to assume that the word "place" has an established, consensus definition that can reasonably be left unsaid. It can therefore be difficult to relate various matters of place to each other even within given fields and disciplines, let alone across them, be it through concrete similarities or clear distinctions, both of which could in fact be useful. In an effort to encourage rather than hinder an exchange of ideas within the history of art and elsewhere, this chapter avoids the temptation to claim for place a meaning beyond the context of Wyeth's painting. Instead it defines "place"—and the related and equally mercurial term "sense of place"—only concretely and locally through descriptions of Wyeth's works, through analyses of remarks made by Wyeth and those around him in letters and interviews, and through references to the ideas of Relph and other theorists where they seem to overlap closely with Wyeth's own. This chapter is thus in some sense not *about* place at all: place, in the following pages, is not an analytical

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<sup>3</sup> Edward C. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> For the broad range of meanings of place and its cognate terms throughout the long history of Western thought, see Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For a survey of modern considerations of place as a concept of analysis and study across the humanities, see Tim Cresswell, *Place: a Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

apparatus brought to bear on Wyeth's work but rather a kernel of knowledge derived from that work and then clarified through recourse to related ideas expressed elsewhere.

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Slowed by a hip condition and burdened with what he referred to as "sinus trouble," Wyeth was deemed sickly by his parents and thus schooled at home, leaving him with ample time and privacy to cultivate the overlapping powers of keen observation and creative imagination that he would put to use later on as an artist.<sup>6</sup> "I played alone and wandered a great deal over the hills," he said to Thomas Hoving in 1975, "painting watercolors...and draw[ing] in pencil or pen and ink."<sup>7</sup> Thus when Wyeth began to study formally in his father's studio at the age of 14 he had already been drawing and painting for several years. "My earliest things were landscapes," he recalled to Hoving, "hills near our house [in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania], romantic images of medieval castles, knights in armor..."<sup>8</sup> There was nothing unusual about an early-twentieth-century American boy sketching castles and armor, but life drawings of the local landscape suggest a rarer degree of focus and interest in regional environments. "As early as ten," he added later on the in the same interview, "I began to paint Maine. I painted around the islands, and did my first pen drawings, and then I went to watercolor."<sup>9</sup> Rather than suffering his solitude, Wyeth delighted in it.

Moreover, he continued to do so as an adult, finding quiet contemplation and deep thought more energizing than taxing. His paintings have nonetheless been interpreted as sad and lonely because of how "bleak, still, and deathly" their scenes and palettes tend to be, but Wyeth has largely denied any intentions toward abjection or melancholia.<sup>10</sup> In 1964 E. P. Richardson asked Wyeth why "so many people think [that his] work is sad."<sup>11</sup> Wyeth replied:

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Wyeth as quoted in Richard Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth: an Interview," *Life*, May 14, 1965, 110. In terms of the hip condition and Wyeth's childhood sociality more broadly, see Anne Classen Knutson, "Andrew Wyeth's Language of Things," in *Andrew Wyeth: Memory & Magic* exh. cat., ed., Knutson (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2006), 47. See also Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 36-100.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Wyeth in an interview with Thomas Hoving from 1975, as quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. Until 1927, when the Wyeth family began to spend their summers in coastal Maine, they moved back and forth between Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and Needham, Massachusetts—N.C.'s hometown. Andrew retained some his early memories of the Needham landscape into adulthood, and claimed to have incorporated them into his images of Maine. See *ibid.*, 40-42.

<sup>10</sup> This exemplary quotation, which referred to "much of Wyeth's work," appeared in "American Realist," *Time*, July 16, 1951, 75. The notable exceptions are documented cases in which Wyeth painted pictures immediately following the deaths of family members and friends, for example, *Winter, 1946*, which Wyeth has said was a rumination on his recently deceased father, whose barrel chest Andrew found himself depicting in the guise of a rolling hill. Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life*, 228.

<sup>11</sup> Edgar P. Richardson, "Andrew Wyeth," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1964, 68.

Sad? I don't know why, I'm not sad. Perhaps they think so because it is low key. People confuse dark color with sadness. Unless your work is calendar color, it disturbs them. ... I believe people think my work is sad because they are afraid of solitude and silence. I love to be by myself.<sup>12</sup>

Wyeth was content, even happy, to be working undisturbed in unpopulated landscapes, and thus he quite naturally pictured those landscapes as empty and quiet:

People talk to me about the mood of melancholy in my pictures. ... I think the right word is not 'melancholy' but 'thoughtful.' ... I think anything [that is] contemplative, silent, shows a person alone ... people always feel is sad. It is because we've lost the art of being alone?<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, he was simply painting what he saw, authentically representing his visual experience: "I've been blamed, from time to time, for the fact that my pictures are colorless, but the color I use is so much like the country I live in. Winter is that color here [in southeastern Pennsylvania]."<sup>14</sup>

Betsy Wyeth has said of her now-deceased husband that he "has deep attachments, wants somebody he can count on, but doesn't want to be attached to anybody. ... He likes people he can discover for himself," that is, people who would appreciate his thoughtfulness and rich imagination but also regularly afford him the time alone that he desired.<sup>15</sup> As a teenager in summertime Maine, Wyeth befriended a local youth named Walt Anderson whose personality harmonized with Wyeth's own. "The Saint Georges River is perfectly flat, calm, and underneath are terrific currents. Well that's Walt. Not a simple man. Thinks a lot," Wyeth explained. He and Anderson seem to have gotten along in part because they were able to be alone together, to be in each other's company and yet to become absorbed in divergent thoughts and activities: "Almost every day we'd row out to hidden-away places, river coves. Sometimes we'd stay for days. ... Walt would dig clams for lunch while I did watercolors. ... Or we'd just silently drift."<sup>16</sup> These quotations, taken in combination with Wyeth's paintings, suggest not that he was a melancholic romantic, a dejected modern, or a victim of depression but more simply that he was sensitive and introverted, to use the non-judgmental terms of modern psychology: thoughtful, imaginative, deeply responsive to environmental stimuli, and appreciative of solitude.<sup>17</sup>

Wyeth's close relationships with Christina and Alvaro Olson seem to have been much the same as his friendship with Anderson. These neighbors—Wyeth and the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>13</sup> Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," 111.

<sup>14</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Betsy Wyeth as quoted in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Spoken Self-Portrait*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Wyeth as quoted in *ibid.*, 68.

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of current use and meaning of the terms "sensitivity" and "introversion" in modern psychology, see Susan Cain, *Quiet: the Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Crown, 2012).



Olsons—engaged each other sincerely and even intimately from time to time. Wyeth has spoken about combing Christina’s hair, for example, and he ultimately chose to be buried at the Olson farm beside the bodies of Alvaro and Christina in the family graveyard.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, during the peak of their time together in 1950s, the Olsons allowed Wyeth to enter and exit their home unannounced and to be left undisturbed when he was observing and painting.<sup>19</sup> “[Christina and I] were a little alike,” Wyeth said in an interview with Richard Meryman, “I was an unhealthy child that was kept at home. When she couldn’t walk anymore, she was kept at home. So there was an unsaid feeling between us that was wonderful, an utter naturalness. When we were alone we’d sit for a long time and not say a word...”<sup>20</sup> Alvaro, meanwhile, seems to have been no more eager than his sister to confront Wyeth’s introversion—nor, it would seem, his own: fondly recalling his former occupation of lobstering, Alvaro described it as “a pretty good job in the summer. Yup, [I] like the water. No one talks.”<sup>21</sup>

Fittingly, Wyeth was exposed during these early years to the ideas of the American Transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau. *Walden* (1854) was read aloud by N.C. to his family often enough that Meryman, in his 1996 biography of Andrew, saw fit to label it the “family bible.”<sup>22</sup> Here was a philosopher who aimed to live as an adult the kind of life that Andrew was enjoying as a child: left alone at home to read books, observe nature, and record his thoughts and findings—the philosopher in text, the child in pictures. “A lot of the time [I] just wandered over these hills, in this little territory right here, looking at things.”<sup>23</sup> This 1965 remark to Meryman reads like any number of

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<sup>18</sup> In Wyeth’s own words: “Sometimes I would even wash her face. She would cook over a wood stove and sometimes she would get dirt all over her face and I’d say I’d better wash your face and she’d say all right. Sometimes I would comb her hair. ... I became really fond of her as a friend.” As quoted in Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 117.

<sup>19</sup> “[Christina] and Alvaro...gave me complete liberty to wander over the house as I wanted. I finally [beginning the in the late 1940s] used the upstairs room almost as a permanent studio.” *Ibid.*, 117. See also Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Spoken Self-Portrait*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> N.C. also lectured publically about Thoreau’s ideas and considered Thoreau himself to be something of a hometown hero. In a posthumously published essay written in 1919, N.C. explained that “I grew up under the shade of Concord and consequently heard a great deal of the celebrities who had lived there, but I was made to feel a strong distaste for Thoreau,” whose ideas in fact turned out to be “tonics to brace a man when he is weary, to cleanse his vision until he sees the heights again—and there are blisters and plasters in great variety and of warranted strength to make a man repent the lowness of his aims and the vulgarity of his satisfactions.” N.C. Wyeth, “Thoreau, His Critics, and the Public,” written in 1919, first published in *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* 37 (October 1951), and reproduced in Wendell Glick, ed., *The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau: Selected Criticism Since 1848* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 231-32. Thoreau figures prominently in today’s canon of American literature, but appreciation of his work was rare until the second half of the twentieth century. N.C. is thus known to literary historians as one among a small number of amateur scholars to value Thoreau so highly in the early part of the century—above, for example, the much more widely appreciated Ralph Waldo Emerson. On Thoreau’s reception in the United States in the twentieth century, see Walter Harding and Michael Meyer, *The New Thoreau Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 202-219; see also Glick, ed., *The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau*.

<sup>23</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 110.

passages from *Walden*, which documented Thoreau's attempt to live self-sufficiently and locally, for the most part in isolation, on the shore of a woodland pond on the outskirts of Concord, Massachusetts.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of what the ten-year-old Wyeth understood about Thoreau's political and social-critical motivations (matters to which we shall return), *Walden* would have shined a positive light on his solitary study of the local landscape. It also would have condoned what would become a lifelong effort to find richness and depth in landscapes that conventional taste identified as bland and boring.

Not all of N.C.'s children were receptive to his Thoreauvian teachings. Andrew's sister Henriette, for example, rejected them entirely. An artist herself, one who succeeded financially as a portrait and still life painter, she had frequently been criticized by N.C. for being insufficiently "somber and real as great art required."<sup>25</sup> "Then," Henriette went on to recall, "he would quote Thoreau. I loathe Thoreau. The man was a dope. Totally selfish. If I meet him in heaven or hell, I'm going to pull his great big nose."<sup>26</sup> This filial distaste for Thoreau makes sense given N.C.'s fervent espousal of his favorite philosopher's teachings, which he pressed those around him embrace as well for themselves. "Thoreau's words *live*," he wrote to his brother, Stimson, in 1914,

they vibrate, with a singular virility. And there is no accounting for it except that he *lived by his spoken words*. This ability measures a man's strength and it is a prayer constantly on my lips. It is the life of my art and of tremendous importance to my family, and would create a noble respect for me if I could best live up to it in my relations with the world!!<sup>27</sup>

Andrew, who happened to be born precisely on the centenary of Thoreau's birth, was subjected by N.C. to the same sorts of admonitions that had frustrated Henriette, as evidenced, for example, by an exchange between N.C. and his youngest child from May of 1938. Andrew had recently arrived in Maine for the summer and was feeling "homesick" for Pennsylvania.<sup>28</sup> Sensing himself to be "lost up here [in Maine]," he longed for the familiarity and easy artistic inspiration that he enjoyed in Pennsylvania.<sup>29</sup> Writing to his parents, who were still in Chadds Ford, Andrew suggested that all of his problems might be solved by an immediate return home: "For two cents I would pack up now and return to Chadds Ford," he exclaimed.<sup>30</sup> In response to this plea, N.C. applauded

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<sup>24</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*.

<sup>25</sup> Henriette Wyeth as quoted in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> N.C. Wyeth, in a letter to his brother, Stimson, November 19, 1914, in Betsy James Wyeth, ed., *The Wyeths: the Letters of N.C. Wyeth, 1901-1945* (Boston: Gambit, 1971), 478. There are many further instances in which N.C. expressed excited admiration for Thoreau in his personal correspondence. See for example, *Ibid.*, 389, 478, 480.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Wyeth in a letter to his mother and father from May of 1938, in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life*, 117.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

his son's expression of "intense nostalgia" but also recommended that he stay put and give Maine another chance, much as Thoreau himself might have done:

Your feelings toward Chadds Ford...are just as they should be. This experience [of nostalgia] may be just the one that will crash through the passing phase of [your] dulled interest [in Maine].... This happens occasionally to every artist who ever lived. Thoreau was one of the rare exceptions who consistently hit through the commonplaces of familiar scenes and lifted them into extraordinary experiences—emotional and intellectual.<sup>31</sup>

Such was N.C.'s tendency to pressure his children to embrace Thoreau's philosophy in emotionally difficult situations.

Andrew, however, who had illustrated a published collection of Thoreau's letters and journal entries three years prior, took his father's advice in stride and maintained an interest in Thoreau as the years went on.<sup>32</sup> Indeed after N.C.'s death in 1945, an event that prompted Andrew to become more serious about his own work and about his father's legacy, the younger Wyeth seems only to have intensified his decidedly Thoreauvian practice of searching for depth and wonder in things that appear at first to be plain and simple.<sup>33</sup> "I don't agree with the theory that simplicity means lack of complexity," Wyeth would say later on in 1975, "I feel that the simpler the thing, the more complex it is bound to be."<sup>34</sup>

Landscapes especially drew N.C.'s and Andrew's attentions in this regard. "The day is somber and gray," wrote father to son in February, 1944, "and I am reminded of Thoreau who found the drab days of winter so inspiring. These dreary winter colors which depressed other people suggested to him the high spiritual traits that constituted his concept of beauty."<sup>35</sup> Winter—cold, bare, and dark—challenged a transcendentalist to value its plainness as clarity, elegance, and beauty. "I have been taking long walks over the winter hills," Andrew wrote to one of his collectors in January of 1957, "This is my time of year now and I spend all my time out in it. How I wish I could really get this down in paint."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> N.C. Wyeth in a letter to Andrew Wyeth from May 18, 1938, in Wyeth, ed., *The Wyeths*, 773.

<sup>32</sup> The illustrated volume was published in N.C.'s name in 1936, with Andrew having produced the illustrations under sub-contract in 1935: Henry David Thoreau, *Men of Concord and some others as Portrayed in the Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Francis H. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936). N.C. farmed out multiple illustration jobs to his student-son during Andrew's transition into professional maturity and independence. Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life*, 107-8. Andrew Wyeth's continuing interest in Thoreau as an adult was confirmed by Fred E. H. Schroeder in 1964. Schroeder, "Andrew Wyeth and the Transcendental Tradition," *American Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Autumn, 1965), 561.

<sup>33</sup> The impact of N.C.'s death on Wyeth practice is elaborated in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>34</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 101.

<sup>35</sup> N.C. Wyeth in a letter to Andrew Wyeth, February 16, 1944, in Wyeth, ed., *The Wyeths*, 833.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Wyeth, in a letter to W. E. Phelps from January 27, 1957, in Agnes Mongen, ed., *Andrew Wyeth: Dry Brush and Pencil Drawings* exh. cat. (Boston: Fogg Art Museum, 1963), cat. 38.

Wyeth's "time of year" was really any time that others might overlook. Where Pennsylvania was concerned, that time generally began when the colorful autumn leaves were browned and fallen, and it ended with the florescence of spring. The winter landscape, according to Andrew in an interview in 1953, "gets a bleak quality—the color of a young fawn. Then to me it's just epic. The earth stripped down to its simplest parts, so you can really get the structure and the essence."<sup>37</sup> In terms of Maine, Wyeth's time was the height of summer, during which he took a particular delight in "those days that you call a smoky sou'wester, [when] the sun [is] hidden but the sun [is] burning through the haze."<sup>38</sup> The son was eager to meet his father's Thoreauvian test. Here he is transcending simplicity once again:

There's a fantastic subtlety in a day when you get snow flurries...subtlety and great power. ... That gray which is not an obviously overdramatic gray, but just enough toned down so that a snowflake will [be visible against it]. ... You never get snow in an exaggeratedly dark sky, a black sky. You can put a piece of white paper up against the sky on a day when it's going to snow and you'll find that the piece of white paper almost merges into the sky. I have watched this very closely.<sup>39</sup>

Bluebirds and blue skies were outmatched, in Wyeth's mind, by the bright, pale yellows and the soft grays of pregnant winter clouds and heavy summer haze. Emptiness was ominous; bleak was fascinating.

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Over the course of his many years of attending closely to familiar environments in Pennsylvania and Maine, Wyeth seems to have developed a lucid sense of his personal attachments to those two environments—to their terrains and atmospheric conditions, to their material cultures and architectures, and to their present inhabitants and human histories. Indeed as we shall now begin to see, Wyeth understood that to some degree he perceived and interpreted those two familiar environments not as locales or regions to which other people could ever visit but rather as private exchanges between those environments and himself (i.e., his memories, his desires, and his artistic interests).

In the language of the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, Wyeth was experiencing an uncommonly conscious "sense of place." Tuan was one among a seminal group of humanistic geographers in the 1970s—Relph was another—who aimed to shift their discipline away from purely quantitative analyses of "space" and toward more qualitative studies, inspired largely by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, of individual and communal perceptions of the distinguishing characteristics of given environments and

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Wyeth as quoted in Aline Louchheim, "Wyeth—Conservative Avant-Gardist," *New York Times Magazine*, October 25, 1953, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 150.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

regions.<sup>40</sup> In his 1974 essay, “Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective,” Tuan theorized that “places” are known according to their “spirits” and “personalities,” qualities that arise from human beings’ “moral and aesthetic discernment[s] [of] sites and locations.”<sup>41</sup> Any instance of such discernment both qualifies as a “sense of place” and begets the “place” itself, the latter being not a site or location but a “field of care” projected from the mind of the beholder.<sup>42</sup>

Especially consistent with Tuan’s definition of place are Wyeth’s many remarks about the Olson siblings and their house and barn, which appear to have been essential to his general understanding of Maine.

The Olsons ... really were, to me, symbols of New England and Maine and ancient Maine, witchcraft, all sorts of things like that. When I’d be offshore, I’d think of that house even though I couldn’t see it. I’d think of that house sitting there and Christina down in that kitchen, hearing in my mind the sound of the lids of the stove rattling. I’d hear the scraping of her chair being pushed along. She’d rock it in such a way as to wear the legs right down. She had a terrific muscular development through her arms and shoulders. Her lips were very powerful. It was *Maine*.<sup>43</sup>

Acknowledging that the subjectivity of fields of care makes them difficult to recognize and study, Tuan notes that they have “low imageability” and are “inconspicuous visually.”<sup>44</sup> A person must therefore distance himself from a given field of care (or from a given “place”) in order to become aware of his sense of that place as such, that is, to sense his sense. The preceding quotation from Wyeth, for example, not only shows Wyeth acknowledging his assembly of a place from a broad collection of sensory experiences and ideas but also records him having temporarily departed from that place—“When I’d be offshore”—at which point he could, as Tuan puts it, “*see* [the place] as a whole from a distance.”<sup>45</sup>

N.C. might be said to have anticipated Tuan in this regard when he suggested, in the 1939 letter quoted above, that his son’s “intense nostalgia” for Chadds Ford could inspire Andrew to develop an equal feeling for Maine. According to Tuan, “the sense of place is perhaps never more acute than when one is homesick, and one can only be homesick when one is no longer at home.”<sup>46</sup> (By “home,” in this context, Tuan means “in place,” which in turn means something along the lines of communing with familiar and friendly personalities or spirits, albeit ones invented or projected rather than bilaterally acknowledged.) Encouraged by his father, Andrew dutifully sought a communion with

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<sup>40</sup> Cresswell, *Place*, 19-20.

<sup>41</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective,” in John Agnew, et al., eds., *Human Geography: an Essential Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 445-6.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 146.

<sup>44</sup> Tuan, “Space and Place,” 447-8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 447.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

Maine that was similar to that which he had with Pennsylvania. And he soon enough found it, as evidenced by a letter that we encountered in Chapter 2, in which Andrew gushed to N.C. about his new medium of egg tempera, which allowed him to “paint a pair of oarlocks with the cord that’s tied to the thwarts and really make you feel the truth, the absolute quality of a worn piece of metal, make it really as it is, to express all of Maine.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed in making this remark Andrew himself was uncannily anticipating Tuan, who would write that “While the eye takes in a lovely street scene and intelligence categorizes it, our hand feels the iron of the school fence and stores subliminally its coolness and resistance in our memory. Through such modest hoards we can acquire in time a profound sense of place.”<sup>48</sup> Like Tuan’s iron fence, the look and feel of an oarlock contributed to a sense of place that in turn gave reason and motivation to Wyeth’s art practice, in part by enabling him to express that sense concretely.

It may seem unremarkable that Wyeth ever left his homes in Maine and Pennsylvania—inter-regional mobility was an opportunity of course for a man of Wyeth’s means in mid-twentieth-century America. What is remarkable, however, is the regularity with which he left his two home regions again and again over the course of his life, departing Maine for Pennsylvania every autumn and Pennsylvania for Maine each spring. Wyeth thus had uncommonly stable points of comparison around which to construct two distinct senses of place. “Through the Olsons,” he said, “I really began to see New England as it really was. It is just the opposite to the Kuerners.”<sup>49</sup>

Each of these two places involved its own closely studied neighbors: like the Olsons in Maine, Karl and Anna Kuerner were tolerant friends who gave Wyeth free passage through their house and farm in Chadds Ford.<sup>50</sup> To uninformed viewers of Wyeth’s paintings these two families and their farms may seem very much the same: each is equal parts austere and quaint, a rustic symbol of an increasingly uncommon way of American life, a post-war incarnation, one might say, of the stalwart subsistence farmers of Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (1930). (Fig. 3.2) Wyeth, however, came to know them well enough to discern one from the other:

Of the essential environments in my life, Kuerners in Pennsylvania and Olsons in Maine are probably the most important. One has the colors of Pennsylvania and the surrounding area, the strength of the land, the enduring quality of it, the solidity of it; the other is spidery, light in color, windy perhaps, sometimes foggy.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed Wyeth seems to have seen in their sameness a Thoreauvian challenge to search deeply for the differences between them, and thereby aesthetically and morally to discern separate places of which each was a part. While discussing the differences between the

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<sup>47</sup> Andrew Wyeth in a letter to N.C. Wyeth sometime before 1945, in Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Secret Life*, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Tuan, “Space and Place,” 446-7

<sup>49</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 42.

<sup>50</sup> Betsy Wyeth, *Wyeth at Kuerners* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

<sup>51</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 39.

two places with Hoving, he remarked that “I don’t think if you’re truly emotional, you can concoct, truthfully anyway, the same set of values for one place as you can for another.”<sup>52</sup>

The Pennsylvanian qualities, as Wyeth identified them, of solidity, strength, and endurance found expression in the dark, weighty hillsides of *Winter, 1946*, *Hoffman’s Slough*, *Snow Flurries*, and *Brown Swiss*. (Figs. 3.3 - 3.6) Margaret Handy, one of Wyeth’s collectors in the 1950s, suggested to him that the fence posts in *Snow Flurries* clutter its composition. Wyeth responded by saying that the posts were needed to maintain the appearance of the hillside *as* a hillside, that is, as a massive, solid portion of earth: “The fence posts keep [the hill] tied down from going too far [toward superficiality and abstraction]. They are a thread that holds the painting from going off into the air.”<sup>53</sup>

Such ephemerality of the landscape was apparently poorly suited to Pennsylvania but quite appropriate to Maine, as explained by Wyeth in a remark that will by now be familiar from Chapters 1 and 2:

I feel things [in Maine] are just hanging on the surface and that it’s all going to blow away. In Maine, everything seems to be dwindling with terrific speed. In Pennsylvania, there’s a substantial foundation of depths of dirt and earth. Up in Maine I feel it’s all dry bones and desiccated sinews. That’s actually the difference between the two places to me. One is moist, another’s dry. If it is moist in Maine, it’s a surface moistness.<sup>54</sup>

Wyeth represented the Olson farm in accordance with such descriptions on several occasions, not least of which being his paintings from the late 1940s through the 1950s, such as *Seed Corn*, *Wind from the Sea*, *Miss Olson*, *Hay Ledge*, and *Weatherside*, works which played up “the dryness of the place, that special sort of dryness of dead flies that are left in a room that’s been closed for years.”<sup>55</sup> (Figs. 3.7 - 3.10) In terms of *Hay Ledge*, for example, we saw in Chapter 1 how weightless the skeletal structure of the barn as a whole appears to be on account of its absent floor, its hidden ceiling, its thick air, and its obscured joints and corners: despite the rich textures of its individual wooden posts and beams, this is indeed a structure that is “hanging on the surface and...all going to blow away.”<sup>56</sup> Individual wisps of hay, which appear throughout the picture, are already on their way.

Both places, Pennsylvania and Maine, were collections of natural, human, and built phenomena onto which Wyeth had projected spirits and personality. As we saw in Chapter 2, Wyeth often looked at one thing and saw another—or rather, saw many things all at once. Every element of the Maine landscape signified another in his mind as he spoke to Meryman in 1965: “A white mussel shell on a gravel bank in Maine is thrilling to me because it’s all the sea—the gull that brought it there, the rain, the sun that

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 171.

bleached it there by a stand of spruce woods. Most artists just look at an object and there it sits.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, when Wyeth interviewed a decade later with Hoving, the dory in Olson’s barn was the sun, and that sun was the sea: “There were some boards with openings in them to hold up the hay, and the sun would come through and hit the boat. It was almost like the phosphorescence that you get in the sea water.”<sup>58</sup>

In the case of *River Cove*, a tempera painting from 1958, we can imagine Wyeth adrift in a dory with Walt Anderson and happening upon avian footprints in a sandy cove, at which moment he might have delighted in capacious, environmentally inclusive compounds such as “seabird” and “waterfowl.” (Fig. 3.11) For him, the mark of a flying sea creature impressed into wet sand could well have been sky and ground, height and depth, and water and wind, as well as picture plane and ground plane, absence and presence, and gesture and notation. In Wyeth’s terms as presented and defined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, the subjects of his works are “emotions” that he developed over time from observations that he made “out of the corner of [his] eye,” that he blended with memories and imagination, and that he set down in paint so that “you can look at [them] directly.”<sup>59</sup> “Emotion” in the case of *River Cove*, can be read specifically to mean something along the lines of a Tuanian sense of place: an image of a familiar environment encountered in a downcast but highly active gaze, a narrow focus that aims, perhaps ironically, to enrich, relate, and abstract.

Further evidence for Wyeth’s projection of spirits and personalities onto various elements of his surrounding environments can be found in his tendency to refer to his scene paintings as “portraits” and to describe his figure studies as “total environments.”<sup>60</sup> “*Snow Flurries*,” Wyeth said, “is the portrait of a hill where I have walked many years.”<sup>61</sup> *Hay Ledge*, meanwhile, was one of a series of “portraits of Al,” that is, Alvaro Olson, who was, in Wyeth’s mind, inseparable from the place that he inhabited:

[Olson] was a strangely delicate man, a sensitive man. He looked like Emerson at times, even like Henry David Thoreau. Very New England. ... Sometimes, he’d come in from the barn wearing this old hat with cowlicks shooting out of the hole in the top of it, making him look as if he were wearing a knight’s helm with a feather coming out, and there he’d be covered with hay and straw and feed.... [He was] just [a] part of the barn that he lived in. When the wind would blow, it would all blow off of him.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 108.

<sup>58</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 165.

<sup>59</sup> In terms of “emotion,” see Louchheim, “Wyeth—Conservative Avant-Gardist,” 58. The other direct quotations in this sentence come from Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 93.

<sup>60</sup> “A human being within an environment is a reflection of all of the aspects of that environment. Some other painters are maybe still-life painters or landscape painters or seascape painters or portrait painters, but to be categorized would be intolerable or impossible for me.” Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 98.

<sup>62</sup> In terms of “portraits of Al,” see Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: a Spoken Self-Portrait*, 13. The offset quotation that follows comes from Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 178.



Wyeth's statement that Olson "lived" in the barn is valid within the context of "*Maine*," a place in which Olson *was* that barn no less than his sister, with her "power[ful]" lips, was the nearby house.

In another explanation of *Hay Ledge*, Wyeth recalled to E. P. Richardson sometime before 1966 that he was struck by the way in which Olson's dory "seemed as if hung up on hay rather than on [coastal] rocks;"<sup>63</sup> he presumably had a similar impression in mind in 1958 when he painted *The Slip*, a dry brush picture in which a grounded schooner turns an area of tall grass into a brownish-yellow sea. (Fig. 3.12) Additionally, the title "Hay Ledge," as you may recall from Chapter 1, referred in Wyeth's mind to a feature of the local landscape—"I called it that because there's a ledge above the Georges River called 'Hay Ledge'"—as much as it did to the hay loft in Olson's barn. Indeed that barn, as a part of the Olson farm, *was* the Maine landscape in Wyeth's mind: "The world of New England was in that house overlooking the mouth of the Georges River."<sup>64</sup> A sense of place—at once perceived and projected—is the overarching subject that brings all of the terms of these various overlapping references to *Hay Ledge* together. The Olsons, New England, Thoreau, the dory, the sea, the sun, the hay, the river, the wind, the barn: all were aspects, hermeneutics, and representations of and for the same thing: an intricate and deeply personal field of care, as Tuan would have it, that Wyeth assembled through an extended series of moral and aesthetic discernments. "People are so often disappointed when they see a place I've painted a picture of," Wyeth said to Meryman in 1965, "Really, I've actually created my own little world—what I want."<sup>65</sup>

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*Walden* offered Wyeth a precedent for the representation of a place that is at once constructed and observed, a phenomenon that has partly to do with social- and natural-environmental regions of the terrestrial world but is in other ways discrete and absolute, existing only in itself, or manifesting only in the mind of the person who beholds and inhabits it. "Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers," Thoreau wrote about his experimental home on Walden Pond.<sup>66</sup>

We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system....far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Edgar P. Richardson, ed., *Andrew Wyeth: Temperas, Watercolors, Dry Brush, Drawings, 1938 into 1966* exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1966), 61, cat. 109.

<sup>64</sup> Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," 110.

<sup>66</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 59.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Far off, rare, remote, corner, far from, withdrawn: the point was belabored because the stakes were high. Thoreau's attempts to produce his own fuel and shelter and to occupy his curiosity with solitary studies of Concord's landscape and human community were directed toward a set of troubling beliefs about modernity, all boiling down to the idea that people were laboring toward no worthy end beyond the continuation of an abstract, dehumanizing, global economy, and that they were suffering the while. The locality and solitude of Thoreau's activities as represented in *Walden* were intended both to illustrate this tragedy of modern life (in his observations of the people and economy of Concord) and to demonstrate a viable alternative to it (in his documentation of his own daily life, which he claimed to have found quite satisfying). The point, in any case, is that Thoreau's perception of isolation was in fact a very deliberate interpretation; he wanted to believe in the possibility of an at least partially self-determined site of existence in which his morals were affirmed through his observations of nature. Hence his "discovery" that his chosen site was "withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned."

The intentionality of Thoreau's descriptions of his secluded home is evidenced by acknowledgments elsewhere in his text that his "remote...corner" of the cosmos was in fact "profaned" each day by the railroad, which ran along a portion of the edge of Walden pond, and which was one among several technologies that were rapidly unifying America's discrete regions and communities during the middle third of the nineteenth century.

Far through unfrequented woods on the confines of towns, where once only the hunter penetrated by day, in the darkest night dart these bright saloons without the knowledge of their inhabitants; this moment stopping at some brilliant station-house in town or city, where a social crowd is gathered, the next in the Dismal Swamp, scaring the owl and fox. ... The farmers set their clocks by them, and thus one well conducted institution regulates a whole country.<sup>68</sup>

The railroad thus signified the increasing prominence of a space that negated traditional distinctions between night and day, forest and city. Having been written prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, Thoreau's claim of a single "institution regulat[ing] a whole country" may to some degree be taken as hyperbolic. Nevertheless, Thoreau was living and writing at a time when connectivity across modern, national networks was being felt by the average American in other ways as well. The post and the telegraph, for example, offered rapid, reliable communications across a complex network of routes and media that were difficult for the average person to trace but quick and easy to use; social space was thus diverging from geodetic space, confounding peoples' senses of situatedness and distance from each other.<sup>69</sup> Senses of locality and place thus had to be willed rather than passively perceived.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>69</sup> David Henkin, *The Postal Age: the Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 38.

Wyeth's motivations toward isolation seem to have arisen more from the pleasures of solitude and deep thought that he learned as a child than from an intention toward social critique—though there is something timidly critical about his question, quoted above, concerning the lost “art of being alone.”<sup>70</sup> The result, in any case, was the same for Wyeth as it was for Thoreau: places set deliberately apart from the rest of the world by acts of selective observation and pointed representation. Indeed Wyeth was aware of but ignored what he referred to as the “cornball” aspects of Maine—its touristy quaintness, its commodified traditions—as well as the sublime and picturesque coastal imagery that prior generations of artists such as Frederic Church, Winslow Homer, and Rockwell Kent had impressed upon the collective mind of connoisseurs and collectors of American art.<sup>71</sup> Instead of sweeping views, crashing waves, and quaint village churches, Wyeth painted quiet, nondescript scenes that were rigidly, restrictively cropped.

*Wind from the Sea* (1947) is an early example of Wyeth's privatization of worldly space. Priscilla Patton has noted its lack of human figures, its limited view of the sea, and the line of trees that enclose its tawny meadow, remarking that the overall effect is to suggest that “what exists here stays and does not leave.”<sup>72</sup> Patton thus seems to be indicating a sense of enclosure like that “discovered” by Thoreau at his cabin near the shore of Walden Pond: “I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant horizon.”<sup>73</sup> This is what it feels like, Thoreau declared, to be in a landscape—to be freely out-of-doors and in direct connection with the spherical surface of the earth—and yet to sense a boundary drawn around you, one that establishes an absolute break between the rest of that surface and *here*.

In the late 1940s Wyeth still had a way to go, however, toward the rhetorical elimination of any sense of continuity with the larger world that had been demonstrated by Thoreau: the sky, which Thoreau aptly elided in his description of his view across Walden pond, looms large in *Wind from the Sea*, and thus the thin band of trees is easy to overlook; meanwhile, the tracks that traverse the field in this picture lead predictably down to the sea, which, although it occupies only a small portion of the picture surface, is nonetheless symbolic of the vast global space of which this otherwise small corner of the earth is a part. To be sure, some notion of the sea was present within Wyeth's sense of Maine, but it was a local sea, a windswept home of gulls and lobstermen rather than a vast, homogeneous waterway connecting each continent of the earth with every other. The sea in Wyeth's Maine was thus better represented by the sunlit underside of a permanently stored dory than it was by even a marginalized vignette of the sea itself.

Indeed *Hay Ledge*'s dory is illuminated by sunlight that is reflected off of the ground, diffused by the dust that hangs in the still air of the barn, and finally is

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<sup>70</sup> Andrew Wyeth, as cited above, note 13.

<sup>71</sup> “I like Maine in spite of its scenery. There's a lot of cornball in that state you have to go through—boats at docks, old fisherman, and shacks with swayback roofs. I hate all that.” Andrew Wyeth as quoted in Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 121.

<sup>72</sup> Priscilla Paton, *Abandoned New England: Landscape in the Works of Homer, Frost, Hopper, Wyeth, and Bishop* (Lebanon: University of New Hampshire Press, 2003), 160.

<sup>73</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 58.

fragmented by the planks that form the base of the mow. And yet the dory's white paint is bright and prominent. Our pupils have adjusted to make it so, as evidenced by the bright or over-exposed quality of the grass that receives the sun's rays directly, an optical condition that Wyeth made little attempt to hide. And why should he have hidden it? He was not simply picturing a barn and its surrounding landscape, which would have warranted an unnaturally even light and the implication of a disembodied gaze, one capable of seeing everything clearly and neutrally all at once, but rather a place of which Wyeth, with all of his memories, emotions, and discernments, was an essential part.

With hindsight we can read *Wind from the Sea* as part of series of compositions in which Wyeth was experimenting with the deliberate isolation and remoteness described in *Walden*. As early as 1945, Wyeth began to rotate the viewing angles of his landscape paintings downward, manipulating his compositions so that the earth's surface became more prominent and the sky was diminished. For example, in pictures such as *Winter, 1946* (1946), *Hoffman's Slough* (1948), *Trodden Weed* (1951), and *Faraway* (1952), the sky is represented by increasingly shorter and narrower areas of plain, whitish paint, and thus we can see as well that Wyeth was working to distance himself further from the nineteenth-century conventions of landscape painting, in which the sky, with its colorful sunsets and variable cloud formations was a common vehicle for the artistic expression of emotional and aesthetic interpretations of the natural world. (Figs. 3.13 & 3.14)

In the late 1950s, Wyeth pushed these manipulations to an extreme: he cropped the sky from view altogether, he distorted his ground planes to make them appear in some instances more vertical than horizontal, and he limited the illusionistic, orthogonal distances into which beholders of his pictures could see. *Brown Swiss* (1957), for example, pictures a rural Pennsylvania farmhouse and the hillside on which it sits: a bare, sweeping ground plane, which Wyeth rotated and extended upward to the top edge of his painted panel, setting it to hang behind the farmhouse like a curtain before an unseen sky.<sup>74</sup> The reflective surface of a pond in the foreground might be expected to extend our view above this towering hill. Instead, however, the pond only extends the hill itself further upward.

The upper right portion of *Brown Swiss* is especially difficult to read as a plane that is more horizontal than vertical, more landscape than decorated vertical panel, for this area of the painting is unburdened by the recognizable forms that appear elsewhere in the picture—e.g., the farmhouse and the pond on the left and the small pile of green limestone rocks at the lower right, all of which put us in mind of the earth's surface in its typical, horizontal state. Our sense of orthogonal distance between the hillside and the picture plane thus becomes difficult to maintain when our gaze falls directly upon this particular portion of the picture.

The title of this work refers to the picturesque brown-and-tan-coated dairy animals that occupied this field at the time that Wyeth was studying and painting it. As in the case of *Hay Ledge*, however, these eponymous pictorial objects are present only

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<sup>74</sup> Wanda Corn uses a photograph of this farmhouse and its hillside, taken from a standpoint similar to that of *Brown Swiss*, to expose this particular manipulation of pictorial space. Corn, "The Art of Andrew Wyeth," in Corn, ed., *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* exh. cat. (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1973), 104.

indirectly. Their tracks are drawn in meandering lines across a landscape that bears the brown hues of their handsome coats. According to Wyeth, he decided that direct depiction of his bovine muses would have distracted us too powerfully from the surface-decorative flatness of the otherwise bare hillside on the right half of the picture, and thus he withdrew them from view.<sup>75</sup>

In 1958 Wyeth painted *River Cove*, a picture of the Maine landscape that directs its beholder's attention once again toward a watery ground. Sky, in this work, is directly visible to some degree on the surface of the water at the left—specifically, in the high tones that border the tips of downward-pointing evergreen trees. However, the iconicity of these high tones is complicated by the larger tonal gradation of which they are a part: where does the illusion of visible sky end and that of water begin? In passages such as this one, the material paint surface becomes a more stable and alluring point of focus than the imagery that that surface presents equivocally to view—here, especially, in an instance in which that imagery itself concerns the superimposition of one worldly phenomenon (sky) onto another (the surface of the water).

On the right side of *River Cove*, meanwhile, the aforementioned avian footprints enact a situational irony that further destabilizes our discernments of ground, water, and sky, and likewise of impression and notation. Indeed these curious forms pull us forward and downward to join a bird in wet sand and the artist in paint. They also provide a narrative that leads us even further away from any sense of a stably horizontal landscape: the grounded flier exited stage-left, where the water turns fully dark and opaque and the ground plane as a whole turns decidedly upward. Like the upper right portion of *Brown Swiss*, this particular area of *River Cove* makes height and painterly surface decoration especially difficult to discern from illusionistic depth.

*Groundhog Day* (1959) similarly elides the sky while also collapsing its picture plane and ground plane. (Fig. 3.15) In this case the beholder is situated in an austere, interior dining space and presented with a window onto a bare and sky-less landscape. A crack in the upper left pane of the window sets the glass apart from the brown turf that recedes into the distance behind it, while a line of trees and fence posts, which diminish in size according to the conventions of linear perspective, helps to manifest this illusory depth. In the upper right corner of the window, however, there is no such distinction to be made between the bare ground and the window pane. Horizontal becomes vertical; grass and glass collapse into paint.<sup>76</sup>

*Hay Ledge*, too, withholds the sky and the horizon from view. The parallel curving tracks that traverse its field of grass seem at first glance to be headed into a far distance, to merge in the symbolic infinity of a far-distant horizon. In fact, however, these tracks turn upward, still in parallel, at their point of deepest recession. The result is an odd collision between the far edge of the grassy field and the lower edge of the wall of

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<sup>75</sup> For Wyeth's discussion of the development of this painting, including his internal debates about composition and the inclusion of such features as the limestone rocks and the brown swiss cattle, see Hoving, *Two Worlds*, 47-59.

<sup>76</sup> For documentation in depth of Wyeth's process of composition in the case of *Groundhog Day*, see Kathleen A. Foster, "Meaning and Medium in Wyeth's Art: Revisiting *Groundhog Day*," in Knutson, ed., *Andrew Wyeth*, 84-105.

the barn. The latter seems almost to absorb the former, giving the appearance, at the very least, of there being no further orthogonal distance to be imagined beyond the wall, and perhaps even of the horizontal plane of the earth's surface somehow coming to share an edge with that wall. The field itself thus appears at times to be more a hanging collage of grass, dirt, and paint than an orthogonally receding ground plane.

This effect was strengthened, moreover, by a pair of crucial choices about how to present Olson's barn to view. The first choice concerned the angle at which we are made to view the northwest and northeast walls. Specifically, Wyeth appears to have studied and drawn these walls from two distinct viewing angles: one that looks from the center of the barn toward the corner behind the hanging rope and another that looks from the same standpoint but thirty or so degrees to the right, that is, more directly toward the doorway and the (northeastern) wall above it. Contrary to a reasonable assumption, based on our view into the corner of the barn, that this wall intersects the picture plane at an angle of approximately forty-five degrees, it appears instead to run almost parallel to that plane, and thus the wall, the paint surface, and the upward-turning landscape are all rather easily conflated with one another.

The second choice concerned the thickness of the paint surface that represents that same northeastern wall, which turns out to be remarkably thin. The neutral tone of Wyeth's russet under painting predominates here, being widely visible beneath a drizzle of dark browns and light ochres. Illusionism is not confronted as aggressively here as it is by the thick, pocketed paint that represents the darkness behind the hanging rope, as described in Chapter 1. It is rather brought delicately into question, for the paint surface and the wooden wall are similar enough to be kept simultaneously in mind: all at once we sense a wall which drew an artist's aesthetic interest and the decorated masonite panel that imitates it. If the thickest portion of the paint surface established the outer limits of *Hay Ledge's* traditional illusionism and modernist materiality, then this thinnest portion of the picture might be said to stake out a common ground between them.

This overlap between art, illustration, and environmental perception is emphasized as well by Wyeth's aestheticized representation of the vertical post that frames the doorway to the beholder's left. Here a balanced arrangement of puddles of white paint form a delightful pattern on a flat, vertical surface. This arrangement was, presumably, an unintended result of the pragmatic painting and subsequent weathering of a barn. But it became for Wyeth a compositional prompt, a kernel of aesthetic possibility, which he refined and represented to view in a new context of art making and beholding.

These late-1950s variations on long-standing themes and conventions of Western landscape and scene painting accord with the well-informed but emphatically non-committal art theory of the Wyeth that we came to know in Chapter 2. Despite his academic training with his illustrator father, his predilection for solitude, and his interest in the archaic medium of egg tempera, Wyeth engaged the diverse contemporary art world that surrounded him, choosing media, techniques, and artistic principles from traditional and avant-garde cultures alike. However, Wyeth's compositional devices were more than clever riffs on conventional styles and contemporary modernisms. They helped him to sense places and to represent them, that is, to concretize his feelings of situatedness, locality, and aesthetic discernment as he experienced them in his most

familiar and inspiring environments. Chapter 2 made the case that Wyeth practiced his art in a liberal middle ground opened up by a twentieth-century confrontation between “illustration” and “painting,” and between tradition and modernism. Here I mean to add that these experiments were not only inspired by but central to his sense of place.

The place theory of the geographer Timothy Oakes can help us to understand how this is so, for it deals directly with matters of creative agency and conscious discernment. Writing in 1997, two decades removed from Tuan’s initial humanistic turn away from the modernist analysis of quantities and spaces, Oakes revisited the relationships between modernity, tradition, and place, attempting to transcend the binary structures of thought within which we typically understand them—e.g., space/place, rationalism/humanism, and modernity/tradition.<sup>77</sup> On one hand, Oakes sought an object of study that is unitary and absolute, that is, something more independent than, say, an area of social, economic, or geological space that has been set deliberately and tenuously apart from a larger space for the purpose of study. On the other hand, Oakes wanted his object of study—his “place”—to be more self-aware and individually determined than a traditional community or region, that is, an area the inhabitants of which have no knowledge of its continuity with a larger, global space. The result of this quest, which Oakes pursued in part through a study of place-interested literary fiction—e.g., Raymond Williams’s *Border Country* (1960)—was a concept of “place” that amounts essentially to opportunity. Specifically, Oakes theorized a realm of possibility opened up by modernization, which at once brings to light and destabilizes cultures, societies, ideologies, or practices that were previously taken for granted or conceptually unopposed by the members of regional communities who had unwittingly been perpetuating them. Oakes’s “places” are thus manifested in individuals’ willful ambivalences toward, on one hand, the prescriptions of what comes, post-modernization, to be understood as “tradition” and, on the other hand, the proscriptions of modernization itself. By judiciously embracing new orders and selectively casting-off traditional ones, a person constructs for himself neither an exclusively traditional region nor a fully modern space but rather an individual, hybrid “place” in which to exist—at least until such time as all vestiges of the given “tradition” have been cast off and the person’s place becomes indistinguishable from modern space.

Wyeth, circa 1957, was a well informed mid-twentieth-century artist trained in early-twentieth-century practices of illustration; he was a wealthy professional exhibiting his works in major urban museums and yet maintaining close personal ties to a pair of rural, low-income landscapes and the farmers who inhabited them; and he was a native and life-long resident of inland Pennsylvania who had nonetheless come to feel perfectly at home in coastal Maine. As such Wyeth was well positioned to seize the sort of highly-individual place-making opportunities that Oakes described. Of course, as Wyeth’s critics have been quick to point out, he occasionally failed to remain in place, as it were, in instances in which he grasped conventional manners of representation too strongly, when he lunged too clumsily into fits of modernist decoration and expressionism, and when his

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<sup>77</sup> Timothy Oakes, “Place and the Paradox of Modernity,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, no. 3 (September 1997), 509-31.

pictures appeared to caricature traditional spaces and material cultures instead of deriving from them something personal, novel, and unique.<sup>78</sup> It is also unsurprising that Wyeth was expressly content to be without students or notable imitators.<sup>79</sup> Past experiences and present agency within deeply familiar environments seem to have been essential components of a practice that had, circa 1957, taken an on-going lifetime to develop and would therefore have been difficult to present to others as a portable method or style.

Wyeth's variously illustrative and personally expressive practice of art would indeed have met its greatest, and its most appropriate, challenge in the painting of places such as those described by Oakes—and by “painting,” in this case, I mean not only depicting something but also exercising that thing, achieving a *work* of art, or being able, as Wyeth put it in conversation with Meryman, to “live within the picture.”<sup>80</sup> Such works were matters of maintaining and even strengthening the subjectivity of a place through the act of painting it, as opposed to reducing it to a space, site, location, or region devoid of spirit and personality. Painting a place was thus a matter of accomplishing that Heideggerian “de-severance” (“*Entfernung*”) that we found wanting in *Christina's World* in Chapter 1—a challenge that *Hay Ledge's* presentation of intuitively whole but rationally fragmented “spaces” marks an admirable effort to overcome.<sup>81</sup> (Fig. 3.16)

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These matters of Wyeth's locality and place-making raise an old critical chestnut that ought not go unaddressed, especially given the connections that I have drawn thus far between Wyeth and Thoreau. Did Wyeth's interest in locality and place, together with his search for “subtlety and great power” in dull, empty scenery make him a Transcendentalist, broadly speaking—not only a neo-Thoreauvian but an Emersonian spiritualist with an eye toward a universal end? It has been suggested elsewhere that Wyeth aimed to be, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it in *Nature* (1936), “uplifted into infinite space.... [to] become a transparent eye-ball; [to be] nothing; [to] see all; [to have] the currents of the Universal Being circulate through [him].”<sup>82</sup> Patton, for example, has argued that

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<sup>78</sup> The criticism of Wyeth's work is a central subject in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Here I have in mind, for examples, Lawrence Alloway, “The Other Andy: ‘America's Most Popular Painter,’” *Arts Magazine* 41 (April 1967), 20-21; and Jay Jacobs, “Andrew Wyeth: an Unsentimental Reappraisal,” *Art in America* 55 (January/February 1967), 25-31.

<sup>79</sup> Wyeth expressed this contentment to Meryman in 1965. See Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 111.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Wyeth, as cited above, note 2.

<sup>81</sup> In terms of Martin Heidegger's discussion of space and “distance,” see Chapter 1 of this dissertation, specifically pages 12-20.

<sup>82</sup> The complete quotation is as follows: “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into finite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 10. Paton, *Abandoned New England*. In 1965 Schroeder (cited above, note 32) admitted of an only loose



In articulating the feeling behind a painting, Wyeth echoes transcendental credos about becoming a transparent eyeball: ‘I wish I could paint without me existing—that just my hands were there. ... When I’m alone in the woods, across these fields, I forget all about myself, I don’t exist.’ Wyeth emphasizes that familiarity with place is crucial to attain this state: ‘Now, I couldn’t get any of this feeling without a very strong connection for a place.’<sup>83</sup>

*Hay Ledge*, *Brown Swiss*, *Groundhog Day*, and *River Cove*, however, can hardly be said to offer views of “infinite space.” And judging from the rest of Wyeth’s remarks that I have quoted thus far in this chapter, and also in the previous chapter, it would seem that his desire for non-existence boiled down to a will to be one with his *local* environment, or indeed with his “own little world—what I want,” rather than with a communal universe as a whole.<sup>84</sup>

*Hay Ledge*, moreover, as we have already begun to see, offers no even, clarifying illumination by which to transcend the optical limitations of embodied viewing. Even the so-called “Luminist” paintings from the second half of the nineteenth century—with their “clear, lucid mode of expression”—work only slightly better in this regard as illustrations of Emerson’s famous remark in *Nature*.<sup>85</sup> The lighting in these pictures, which Barbara Novak describes as “cool...hard...[and] planar” as opposed to “atmospheric” and “optical,” is more even than that of *Hay Ledge*.<sup>86</sup> This “luminist” light thus more artificially exposes the sites, locales, and regions that we gaze upon from these pictures’ raised, privileged standpoints, looking horizontally across the grand continuity of “infinite space” of which we and they are Emersonian “parts.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed in pictures by the likes of Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904) we look directly into colorful suns and yet still discern in great detail the hills, meadows, built structures, waterways, flora, and people beneath them. In *Hay Ledge*, by contrast, we see a private world from within: our prospects of deep space are limited by the wall of the barn, and our ocular adjustment to the filtered and reflected light on the dory makes the field of grass too bright and the

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connection between Wyeth and Emerson’s essays but nonetheless pursued a specifically Emerson-centric interpretation of Wyeth’s practice.

<sup>83</sup> Paton, *Abandoned New England*, 165.

<sup>84</sup> Meryman, “Andrew Wyeth,” 110.

<sup>85</sup> Barbara Novak, “On Defining Luminism,” in *American Light: the Luminist Movement, 1850-1875* exh. cat., ed. John Wilmerding (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1980), 23

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>87</sup> Novak and others have drawn intertextual connections between the so-called “luminist” painters and Emerson’s mid-nineteenth-century Transcendentalist philosophy, recent scholarship has shown that the artists in question were a socially and geographically diverse group who were working for the most part independently of each other and merely contemporaneously with Emerson. See, for example, Margaretta M. Lovell, *Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz Henry Lane and Antebellum America* (forthcoming); and Andrew Wilton, “The Sublime in the Old World and the New,” in *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880*, ed. Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11-37.

immediate foreground too dark. Unlike Heade's dutiful suns, which ideally illuminate the world before us *for* us, *Hay Ledge's* sun shines also *upon* us. In other words, we see not the sun itself but its distinctively local manifestation: *sunshine* as experienced precisely in Wyeth's Maine.

Still, Wanda Corn was surely correct to situate the beginning of Wyeth's career at the tail-end of a pre-World-War-II embrace of the "American scene," a figurative movement with roots in nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism that aimed, as Corn puts it, to derive from regional American landscapes and visual cultures "significant artistic statements."<sup>88</sup> Indeed Wyeth "admired" Edward Hopper in part because, as Wyeth put it in 1965, "he's the only man I know who actually feels that America can stand on its own."<sup>89</sup> But like Grant Wood, whose 1935 publication, *Revolt Against the City*, served as a kind of regionalist apologia, Wyeth typically stopped short of the claim that American subject matter could stand for anything *beyond* itself, or that "artistic statements" drawn from American landscapes and cultures could or should be globally, or even nationally, salient.<sup>90</sup> On the contrary, when Wyeth talked about the artistic fertility of "America," he seems to have had in mind its diversity, that is, the reality of the broad range of its terrestrial environments and cultural and social contexts—"the vastness of America and American history," as he phrased it for *Time* in 1951, or "the complexities of America," as he explained it to Meryman in 1965.<sup>91</sup> Wood's "regionalism," as expounded in *Revolt Against the City*, was likewise not an effort to shift a monolithic Western culture's center of creativity from Europe to North America and from major urban centers to less populated rural communities; instead it was a matter of diversifying that monolithic culture, of discovering what any given community and landscape had to show. Like Wood before him, Wyeth's embrace of the American scene was thus a matter of deliberate locality, that is, of looking ever more closely at that which he knew well with the belief that there was still more to see. Thus the leap from Wyeth to Emerson, who was shedding locality, rising above it, as it were, to a state of omnipresence, is difficult to support. Wyeth was rather immersing himself deeply *within* the local, desiring to inhabit the environment of which he was a part by studying it so closely as to eliminate any observational distance that he felt from it.

The connection from Wyeth to Thoreau, meanwhile, grows only stronger. Thoreau claimed in *Walden* that an intention toward aesthetic discovery limits the observational powers of traveling poets during their encounters with novel locales, whereas locals "are often in a better mood for observing," particularly in routine moments of pause.<sup>92</sup> Thoreau also maintained, however, that a poet can harvest aesthetic fruits of which the farmer may never have been aware, as if to steal them from under the nose of a "crusty" yokel.<sup>93</sup> Wyeth seems to have wanted to have it both ways. Fancying

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<sup>88</sup> Wanda Corn, "Andrew Wyeth: the Man, his Art, and his Audience" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1974), 34.

Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," 121.

<sup>90</sup> Grant Wood, *Revolt Against the City* (Iowa City: Clio, 1935).

<sup>91</sup> "American Realist," *Time*, 75; and Meryman, "Andrew Wyeth," 113.

<sup>92</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 141.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

himself a distinctly local poet-thief, he strove to be both local and aesthetically sensible, aiming not only to afford himself moments of pause but to grasp the aesthetic value of that which he observed therein. In terms of *Hay Ledge*, Wyeth would eventually “steal” a dory from Alvaro Olson’s barn, but only long after that barn and the dory within it had become parts of a Maine that was exclusively Wyeth’s own, and even then he took with him only a mercurial, shadowy image of that dory.

Patience was essential in this regard, much as it was for Thoreau before Wyeth, and for the Roman poet Cato before Thoreau:

Old Cato, whose ‘De Re Rusticâ’ is my ‘Cultivator,’ says... ‘When you think of getting a farm turn it thus in your mind, not to buy greedily; nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it enough to go round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will please you, if it is good.’ I think I shall not buy greedily, but go round and round it as long as I live, and be buried in it first, that it may please me the more at last.<sup>94</sup>

Wyeth indeed went “round and round” the Olson farm from the time he first got to know it in the mid 1940s to the time Christina and Alvaro passed away at the end of the 1960s. He “turn[ed] it thus” it in his mind again and again, drawing from it places that he could inhabit—places of art, of community, of happy solitude—and finally he was buried in it.

Unfortunately for Wyeth, “burial” may be doubly to the point insofar as his locality had both gains and losses, sheltering Wyeth’s artistic inspiration but also obscuring his accomplishments from critics and historians. John Barrell has noted that the eighteenth-century English poet John Clare suffered a similar fate. Barrell explains that, on the one hand, a pointed “sense of place” propelled Clare’s rich enactment of local cultures and forms of speech—a locality embraced and expressed deliberately in response to the increasing regulation and assimilation of Clare’s home region of Helpston by a modernizing English state.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, Barrell adds that Clare’s work was for a long time overlooked by literary scholars and critics who found its locality difficult to situate within assessments and histories of the field of eighteenth-century poetry in general. The same could certainly be said for Wyeth in the larger field of twentieth-century American art. Or consider Wood and the other American Regionalists, who lost favor at mid-century in part because of conceptual similarities between their own pursuits of locality and those of fascist and national-socialist movements in Europe—e.g., the Nazi German claim upon northern Europe as a discrete racial *Heimat*.<sup>96</sup> The international triumph of Abstract Expressionism after World War II painted Wyeth’s American locality into its own Regionalist corner: an art of place came not only to be dismissed as

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>95</sup> John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840; an Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

<sup>96</sup> James Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: the Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998).

idiosyncratic but actively rejected as ignorant and regressive, especially when beheld from within the fantasy of a progressively liberal and egalitarian American social space.<sup>97</sup>

Wyeth's interest in place is certainly not reducible to environmental determinism. True, his places involved aspects of specific climatic, geological, and cultural regions. But those places were also ultimately discrete from any such region on account of the openly individual discernments and art practices by which they were assembled. The tapestry of largely unblended strokes and spatters of tempera in the lower left corner of *Hay Ledge* presents the actions and materials of painting itself in a reserved nod to modernism, reminding viewers of how essential Wyeth himself was to the scene that he depicted. On the other hand, those ochre and brown marks also construct an illusion of immeasurable depths of dry, rustling hay—except, of course, when looking directly at the permanently stored dory and bringing its marine context to mind, in which case that hay swells and rolls like a coastal wave. *Hay Ledge* thus not only symbolizes the paradoxical “dryness” of “*Maine*,” a place derived in part, as Wyeth explained in 1955, from the “subtle presence of the sea in [a] rural farming country,” but also allegorizes the general concept of a site of experience (in particular the ephemerality that is so essential to it) by way of its presentation of a site of painting wherein things are “hanging on the surface” and “dwindling with terrific speed.”<sup>98</sup> Thus we arrive at another one of Wyeth's accomplishments vis-à-vis *Hay Ledge*: to see this picture change in accordance with our own changing thoughts, assumptions, and judgments, is to begin to see the way that Wyeth saw, by which I mean both to see in a manner similar to Wyeth's own and to become aware of that manner itself, of its constitution of a practice of art, and thereby to understand the kinds of places that he believed himself to inhabit.

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Corn has surmised that “On a very basic level, [Wyeth's] imagery has a psychological potency which can provoke even the most uninstructed viewer into entertaining private thoughts and feelings.”<sup>99</sup> In doing so she joined the chorus of writers who claim, as noted in Chapter 2, that Wyeth's works have a particular power to “evoke” unspecified ideas and emotions in the minds of their viewers—the direct and indirect objects are shuffled and the verb prefixes are different, but the gist remains essentially the

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<sup>97</sup> Despite its focus on an earlier period in American history, Phillip Fisher's “Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency,” which appeared in *Representations* 24 (Autumn, 1988), Special Issue: “America Reconstructed, 1840-1940”, 60-101, has helped me to understand the stakes of Wyeth's regionalism and locality in his own historical moment. For more on the reception of Wyeth's work see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>98</sup> “Moving from [my father's house in] Port Clyde to [my own house in] Cushing brought many changes in my understanding of Maine. Before, I had only known the close relation of the sea to those who fish it. Now I realized that there was a more subtle presence of the sea in the rural farming country of Cushing.” Andrew Wyeth interviewed by Lloyd Goodrich in 1955, in Goodrich, “Andrew Wyeth,” *Art in America* 43, no. 3 (October 1955), 13. The other quoted terms here are Wyeth's as cited above in notes 55, 43, and 54, respectively.

<sup>99</sup> Corn, “Andrew Wyeth,” 139.

same. In terms of the ways in which Wyeth's works "provoke," Corn has suggested, on one hand, the universal saliency of Wyeth's imagery, which came "straight out of a basic Freudian repertory" and was of an "elementary dramatic order."<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, Corn points to the "uncanny" and "otherworldly" quality of Wyeth's pictures as wholes, that is, the obscurity of the larger spatial contexts in which his provocative imagery is typically presented.<sup>101</sup> The premise of trans-cultural significance makes the first explanation difficult to espouse—and with it, to some degree, the primary claim as a whole. The second explanation, however, resonates quite powerfully with the reading of *Hay Ledge* that has been offered here, which has prioritized, in various ways, the discretion with which *Hay Ledge*'s pictorial objects are depicted—that is, the ellipticality of the presumable totality of which the painterly and illusionistic elements that compose this painting are parts.

If, in the case of *Hay Ledge*, Wyeth was indeed working, as he explained it to Meryman, towards a "painting [that] becomes more real to me than the place itself," to the point at which he could "live within the picture," he may not have been doing so by representing "*Maine*" thoroughly, clearly, or altogether coherently but rather by depicting it minimally, even guardedly, concretizing a particular, familiar environment to the point at which a general *sense* of place (but not the place itself) could be experienced when beholding the painting. Wyeth's places, as specific sites of experience, could thus remain private and inaccessible for anyone but himself even while his sense of place was able to be shared.

This idea of illustrating only fragments of a place—i.e., limited and ambiguous vignettes of objects, textures, actions, and atmosphere—in order to invoke a sense of place in general was described in 1958 by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. His *Poetics of Space* was a self-described "philosophy of poetry" which theorized something similar to Relph's "vicarious insideness," that is, a possibility of describing one's sense of place in such a way as to make another person sense a place of his own—to repeat that relevant and poignant line from Relph: "we know what it is like to be *there* because we know what it is like to be *here*."<sup>102</sup> In other words, while *here* and *there* can be discrete, and moreover, while knowing one is no guarantee of knowing the other, the common feeling of "knowing," the *sense* of place, can bring the experiences of *here* and *there* quite close together.

For Bachelard—and, I mean to suggest, for Wyeth—the discretion between *here* and *there* was paramount and had to be carefully maintained in order for the abstract experience of "knowing" or "sensing" to be effectively shared between poet and reader (or painter and beholder). At the heart of Bachelard's theory was the concept of a "poetic image," a precise and striking but not laborious or exhaustive illustration of a poet's experience of something, say, a particular space or environment. If the poet's description of a given space is too thorough, then the reader will exhaust himself in an effort to track the description and visualize the space in question as a unified whole, thereby rendering

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 136-37.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>102</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1994). Relph as cited above, note 3.

himself incapable of any profound sympathy with the sensory experience being described. On the other hand, a description that is too vague or insubstantial will fail to draw sympathy in the first place. Bachelard believed that between these two dysfunctional poles lies a potential for inter-subjectivity: descriptions of fragments of a poet's experience that can launch fantasized inhabitations of readers' own remembered spaces.<sup>103</sup>

"All I ought to say about my childhood home is just barely enough to place me, myself, in an oneiric situation," Bachelard wrote, "to set me on the threshold of a daydream in which I shall *find* repose in the past. Then I may hope that my page will possess a sonority that will ring true [for my reader].... We orient oneirism but we do not accomplish it."<sup>104</sup> Daydreaming was central to Bachelard's theory of interpersonal exchange, for he believed that "the values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity at its depths."<sup>105</sup> So, too, was "shelter," that is, "protected" spaces in which day dreams can be had, and to which a reader can happily, imaginatively return when provoked to do so by a vivid "poetic image."<sup>106</sup> A room in a family house might provide such "shelter" for one person, whereas solitude in a wintry landscape might afford it for others.

Wyeth seems to have daydreamed "poetic images" of the personal and artistic shelter of the Olson farm when he was boating on the sea nearby—"hearing in my mind the sound of the lids of the stove rattling."<sup>107</sup> But of course Wyeth's lifetime of work suggests that he preferred pictorial rather than verbal media, and that he worked specifically to paint the places that his daydreams helped him to know: places *in* which he had daydreamed and *of* which those dreams had become parts—places such as the Olson barn perceived as a kingdom of simple living in which Alvaro wore the hayseed helm of a Thoreauvian knight.

The parallel tracks across *Hay Ledge*'s tightly bracketed landscape might be said to offer a "poetic" inroad to this particular "place" of the sort theorized by Oakes. As we saw in Chapter 1, these tracks offer a traceable road that leads nowhere beyond the act of tracing itself. We can follow these tracks to their end rather than drifting away in our mind's eye to other tracks and roads that we may have walked ourselves, but if we do so we find that they they lead only back into the barn, and indeed into the paint surface that represents it. *Hay Ledge* thus works against our rational comprehension of a spatially coherent depiction of an unfamiliar but accessible site within a global context; instead it encourages us to recall images of private places of our own by sympathizing with the artist's actions, with his experiences of sights and textures, and with the daydreaming that brought *Hay Ledge* into being. Additional evidence for this poetic, ironically provocative withholding is everywhere to be found. The floor of the barn remains unseen beneath the pitch darkness in the right foreground and behind the heavy air below the mow. The blade of the scythe is hidden in shadow. The ropes of the block-and-tackle are tied off out of sight. The rolling wave at the prow of the dory is also, primarily an amorphous pile of

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<sup>103</sup> This paragraph summarizes the ideas presented in Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xv-xxxix.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Wyeth as cited above, note 43.

hay laid loosely to rest. The central hanging rope, with which our encounter with *Hay Ledge* first began, is fraying at its innumerable ends.

Despite their divergent media and disciplines, Wyeth, Bachelard, Oakes, Tuan, Relph, and indeed Thoreau, all seem to have believed that there is something innately human about the act of assembling environmental-perceptual totalities in a protected, sheltered, day-dreamy, and, for all of that, willful sort of way. *Hay Ledge's* many instances of serious painting and expository illustration can thus be read as signs (variously and simultaneously as indices, icons, and symbols) of the sense of a personally determined place that Olson's barn and dory inspired Wyeth to depict, and in depicting, to create. Moreover, by ambiguating, abstracting, and diffracting the linear-perspectival space, the light, and the material culture of the Olson farm as Wyeth understood it, *Hay Ledge* encourages its beholder toward a general sense of place. That is, toward a feeling of being within a field of care, to return for the last time to that phrase from Tuan: *Hay Ledge* invites us not to measure and inspect an objective space but to care for a collection of things in various discrete (and discreet) spaces all at once—things as diverse and complex as modern art, traditional rural life, engineering, death and disability, the sea, and even “space” as such. It invites us to “field” these things altogether as a community of “spirits” and “personalities,” and by being with them, by choosing and rejecting them, by seeing some and overlooking others, to be in places of our own.

## CONCLUSION

2017 will bring the centennial of Wyeth's birth. It will also mark roughly eighty years of critical and historical debate about his life and art. Over the course of that time Wyeth's "Americanness" has been extolled, derided, and denied. His methods, styles, and imagery have been celebrated as both modern and traditional and also dismissed and scorned as regressive. He has been championed as a provocative artist and written off as a pandering illustrator. The titles of non-committal articles have described him, quite confusingly, as a "serious best-seller" and a "conservative avant-gardist."

There has, however, been an implicit consensus that Wyeth and his works are simple matters—that be they good or bad, artistic or illustrative, innovative or apish, they are obviously or self-evidently so. Such a belief is indicated, at least, by the common practice of withholding from publication the concrete observations about individual works upon which the broad claims and conclusions listed above (and elaborated here and there in the preceding chapters) have been reached. Without records of such observations those conclusions can be neither confirmed nor invalidated by deliberate reexaminations of Wyeth's works. Nor can those underlying but unwritten observations—and this is the more pressing matter going forward—be resituated in novel critical and historical contexts that might shed new light on Wyeth's works and on the discourses surrounding them. For example, it mattered to some scholars in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s whether or not Wyeth was a "traditionalist," and likewise whether or not his works were quintessentially "American," but even as those particular concerns began to fade and be replaced by others—say, the participation of Wyeth's works in the visual culture of disability<sup>1</sup>—the matter of that which those previous scholars had *seen* in Wyeth's works could still constitute useful information—that is, what traditionalism *looked like*, or precisely what specific visual cues led those earlier observers to find the quality of Americanness manifested in specific paintings. Without records of such concrete observations there can be no meaningful continuity of discussion where Wyeth's works are concerned, and thus no way to implicate those works in revised and refocused histories. Concerns about "Americanness" can be, and have been, parts of larger histories and historiographies, but those concerns ultimately, and regrettably, must be divorced from the paintings upon which they were originally focused for lack of documented observations. And thus to the history of twentieth-century American art Wyeth has remained a thorny enigma of unexamined consequence.

In response to this pattern of discontinuity, binary oppositions, and ideological projections, this dissertation has sought less a sudden and dramatic sea change in the scholarly reception of Wyeth's art and more the introduction of small kernels of new knowledge about that art which might, over time, gather more knowledge around them and make the next eighty years of writing more grounded, balanced, and nuanced, and thus more useful, than the last. At the very least the preceding chapters have laid bare the

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<sup>1</sup> Randall C. Griffin, "Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*: Normalizing the Abnormal Body," *American Art* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 30-49.



direct, concrete observations upon which their arguments are built, and thus even if those arguments are rejected the observations themselves can still be of some use.

I have taken my cue from *Hay Ledge* itself in this regard. For I have found this painting, on the whole, to be rich with individual details the cumulative acknowledgment of which, together with the facts and textual records of Wyeth's life, can lead in numerous different conceptual directions. Rather than interpreting this ambivalence as a failure of the painting to cohere around a clear, simple concept or idea, I have read it instead as an artful ellipticality deliberately achieved. Insofar as *Hay Ledge* can be found to have a unifying subject of which this ellipticality is symbolic, I have suggested the totality of an instance of perceptual experience, which Wyeth attempted to render in paint without a reduction of the complexity of all of that experience's attendant thoughts, memories, and emotions, including those stemming from the act of painting itself. So much, at least, is what I think that Wyeth had in mind for his most rigorous works from the later 1950s. That is to say that *Hay Ledge* is an allegory of embodied, environmentally situated experience, a recorded instance of environmental perception that can stand for the complexity and individuality of perception in general. Or to put it yet another way, *Hay Ledge* is a picture not of a boat in a barn but rather a demonstration of how seeing worked for a particular person in a specific circumstance, and thus, allegorically, of seeing itself. We should care, in this case, because those specifics refer to a highly trained and imaginative figurative painter with a working knowledge of the methods of mid-twentieth-century modernism and also a large popular following.

The observations recorded along the way to this final, totalizing conclusion indicated that *Hay Ledge* is less a picture of a knowable place or a bracketed region and more an enactment, on the one hand, of a general sense of inhabitation, and on the other hand, of an instance of personal, private emplacement; it is less a repudiation of mid-century modernism and stylistic purity and more a demonstration of the enduring value of past artistic discoveries to present human concerns, and indeed of inclusivity in general; it is less an embrace of the surreal and more a judicious deconstruction of the everyday, as of a delicate tug at a fraying thread of experience; it is less a reinvention of the aims and techniques of illustration and more a playful elision of illustration's transitive object (and hence, on the whole, a picture of seeing rather than of that which is seen); and, for all of these subtle provocations, it is less a social critique or an analytical philosophy and a more a romantic curiosity, a figment of alternative possibility.

While I have read this painting as provocative and disturbing—its play with pictorial spaces, the narrative instability of its sheltered dory, and of course its enigmatic and ominous title—I have shown it to be only subtly so, and moreover to be so only over time—a time marked by the cognitive accumulation of those many individual details—rather than in the instant of a first impression. *Hay Ledge* never shocks or awes but neither does it ever allow its beholder to rest—fitting, this, given that it took Wyeth decades passively to conceive it and months actively to paint it. A hard-won ellipticality—that is, a power to “evoke”—is what enables *Hay Ledge* to constitute a “place” for any given beholder: a site of experience defined by a practice of agency, and more specifically, a site of aesthetic discernment, of an assembly of discrete objects within a projected, subjective space, and of a recognition and then either acceptance or

rejection of the various premises of tradition and modernism that make *Hay Ledge* good or bad, art or not.

These claims and the observations that support them have raised several possibilities for continuing research. Having addressed the often unacknowledged and largely understudied change over time of Wyeth's practice from the 1930s and '40s to the 1950s, I find myself now curious about what an in-depth examination of Wyeth's much later paintings would reveal. Did he maintain a painterly interest in place long after the deaths of the Olsons in Maine and the Kuerners in Pennsylvania, and, if so, how divergent might that earlier place be from the one elaborated here in terms of *Hay Ledge*? What cultural conditions might be found to have contributed to such a change or stasis?

A study of Wyeth's later work could also help to clarify the matter of Wyeth's apparent phenomenology (as noted here with regard to *Hay Ledge*). As the Continental tradition and the influence of Heidegger in particular continued to spread across the American academic and cultural landscapes in the last third of the twentieth century, did Wyeth's work become any more markedly concerned with there-being, complexity, and subjectivity? Or might the case be made that Wyeth propelled American culture toward an embrace of continental thought by way of his enormously popular paintings from the 1950s? I would hope at least that the research presented here has made Wyeth's work accessible, and ideally more appealing, to scholars interested in pursuing such questions.

We might also revisit the matters of figurative, naturalistic, and realist painting in mid-twentieth-century America. Wyeth has long been viewed in opposition to the modernists and abstractionists, but I hope to have provided reasons also to compare him with and contrast him to the other figurative painters and illustrators of his day. The question of whether or not Wyeth (or, say, Eric Sloan, Jack Levine, or Rockwell Kent) was an "artist" might have to be put aside in order to proceed before a sympathetic audience, but close analyses of these contemporary painters that chart the precise similarities and differences among their styles, their materials, their imageries, their subjects, their theories, and the markets that supported them could bear historical fruit—to the point, perhaps, of bringing each of them in from the awkward margins of larger histories of art and culture, especially those that pursue continuities of art practice and cultural production from the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries.

I have, in any case, attempted here to promote a new understanding of Wyeth's art, one that accepts its challenge to look closely and patiently enough to reveal not only the richness of his best paintings but also the assumptions and expectations that any given beholder brings to them—the challenge, indeed, to behold them rather than simply to view them, that is, to be with them in place, space, and practice.



I.1. Andrew Wyeth, *Hay Ledge*, 1957.  
Tempera on panel, 21 ½ x 45 ¼ inches.  
Private Collection.



IN HIS STUDIO ANDREW WYETH PERCHES ON A HIGH STOOL BEFORE HIS LATEST PAINTING, A PORTRAIT HEAD OF A FARMER NEIGHBOR



WYETH'S FATHER, who died in 1945, paints Columbus' discovery. Three of his five children paint, including Henriette, who is wife of Painter Peter Hurd.

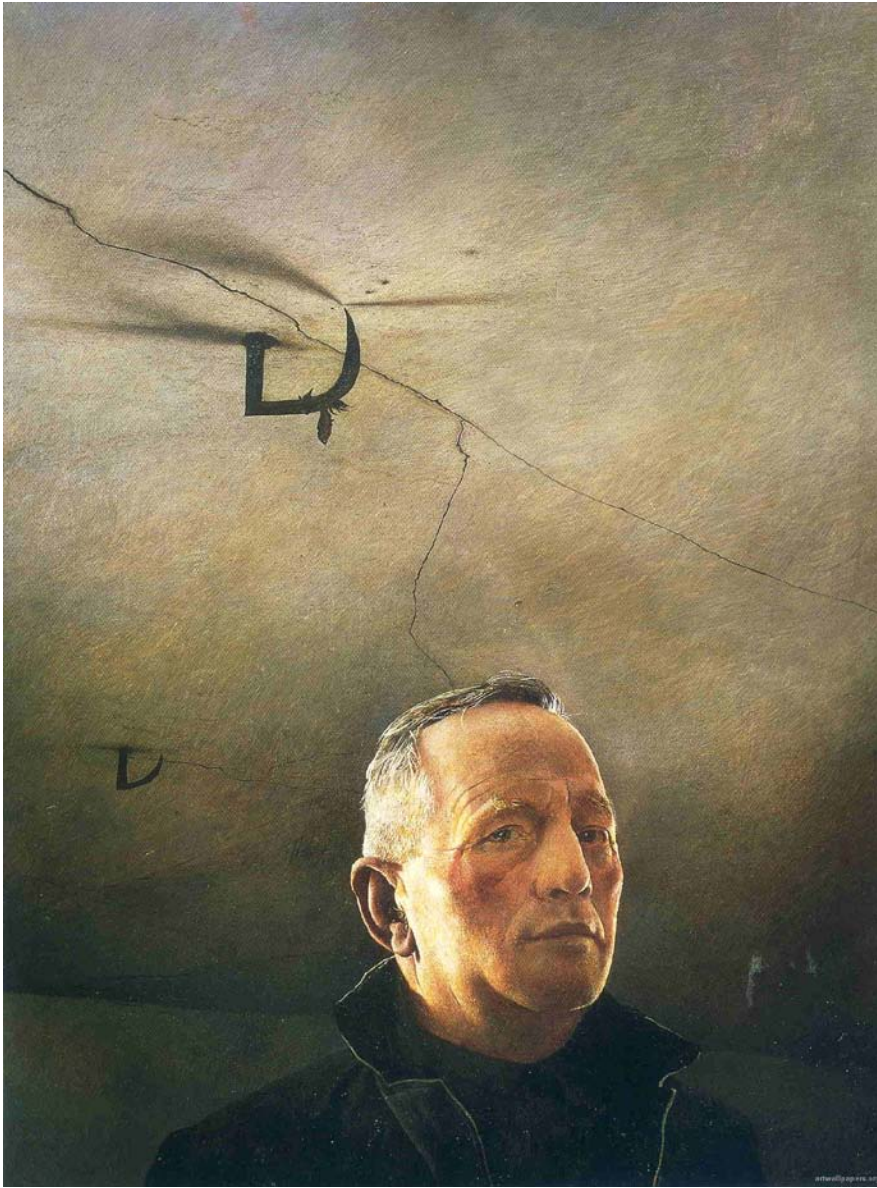
## Andrew Wyeth

An American realist paints what he sees

If there is such a thing as a purely American tradition in art, it is represented at its best in the straightforward canvases of Andrew Wyeth. His artistic ancestors are not the subjective psychological anatomists of Paris and Central Europe but the direct line of plain-thinking American painters of nature that includes Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer. His expert craftsmanship is, to a certain extent, the result of long hours of meticulous training under the eye of his father, the late N.E. Wyeth (died June 17, 1946), a famous book illustrator and a protégé of Howard Pyle, who did romantic drawings for *Treasure*

*Island*, *Scottish Chiefs* and scores of other children's books. Andrew Wyeth's directness and simplicity have made him, at 30, one of America's most popular artists. His first exhibition, 10 years ago, was a complete sellout, and he has kept close to that record ever since.

Wyeth's personality is as realistic as his painting. No urban garret painter, he works in a studio that is as white and antiseptic-looking as an operating room. He associates more with farmers than with other painters, likes to box, fence and pilot an airplane. "All I want to do is paint," he says. "And I paint the things I know best."



I.3. Andrew Wyeth, *Karl*, 1948.  
Tempera on panel, 30 ½ x 23 ½ inches.  
Private Collection.





I.4. N.C. Wyeth, *Columbus Discovers America*, 1942.  
Oil on panel, 27 x 25 ½ inches.  
United States Naval Academy Museum.



I.5. N. C. Wyeth, *Columbus Discovers America*, c. 1942.  
Charcoal on paper, 45 ½ x 39 ½ inches.  
Private Collection.



I.6. N.C. Wyeth, *The Wreck of "The Covenant"*, 1913.  
Oil on canvas, 40 ½ x 32 ¼ inches.  
Brandywine River Museum.





I.7. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948.  
Tempera on panel, 32 ½ x 47 ¾ inches.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.



I.8. Andrew Wyeth, *Night Hauling*, 1944.  
Oil on panel, 23 x 37 inches.  
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.



1.1. Andrew Wyeth, *Hay Ledge*, 1957.  
Tempera on panel, 21 ½ x 45 ¼ inches.  
Private Collection.



1.2. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948.  
Tempera on panel, 32 ½ x 47 ¾ inches.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.





1.3. Detail of Figure 1.1.



1.4. Detail of Figure 1.1.



1.5. Detail of Figure 1.1.



1.6. Exterior view of the barn at the Olson House, Cushing, Maine.  
Digital photograph taken by the author in 2009.





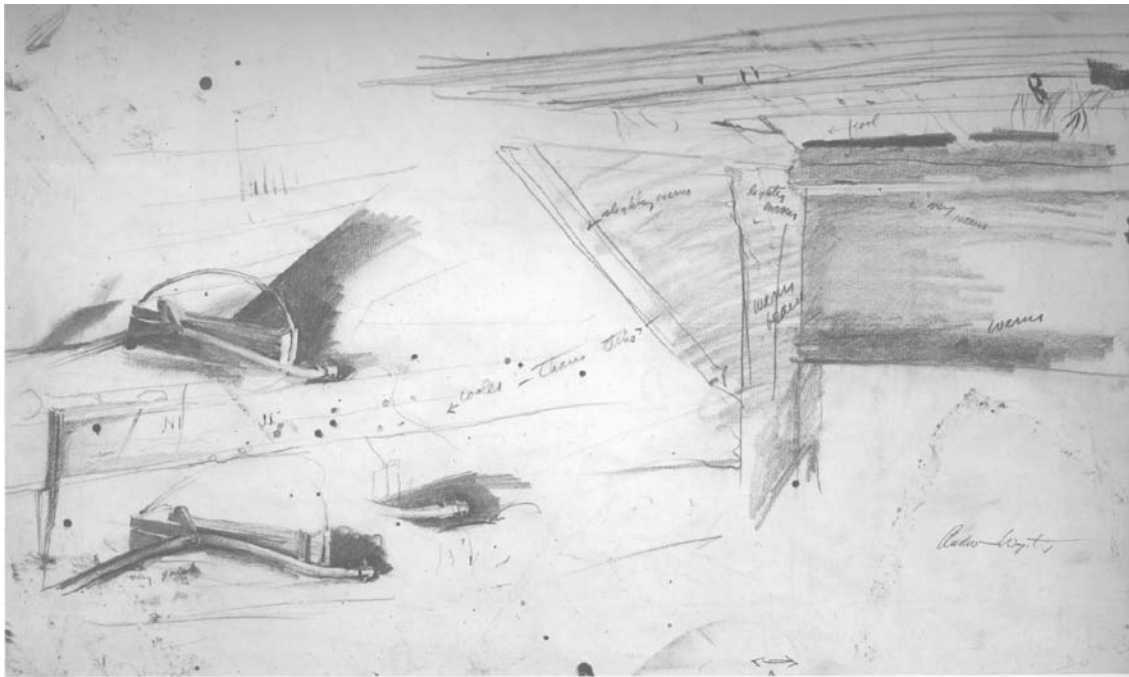
1.7. Interior view of the barn at the Olson House, Cusing, Maine.  
Digital photograph taken by the author in 2009.



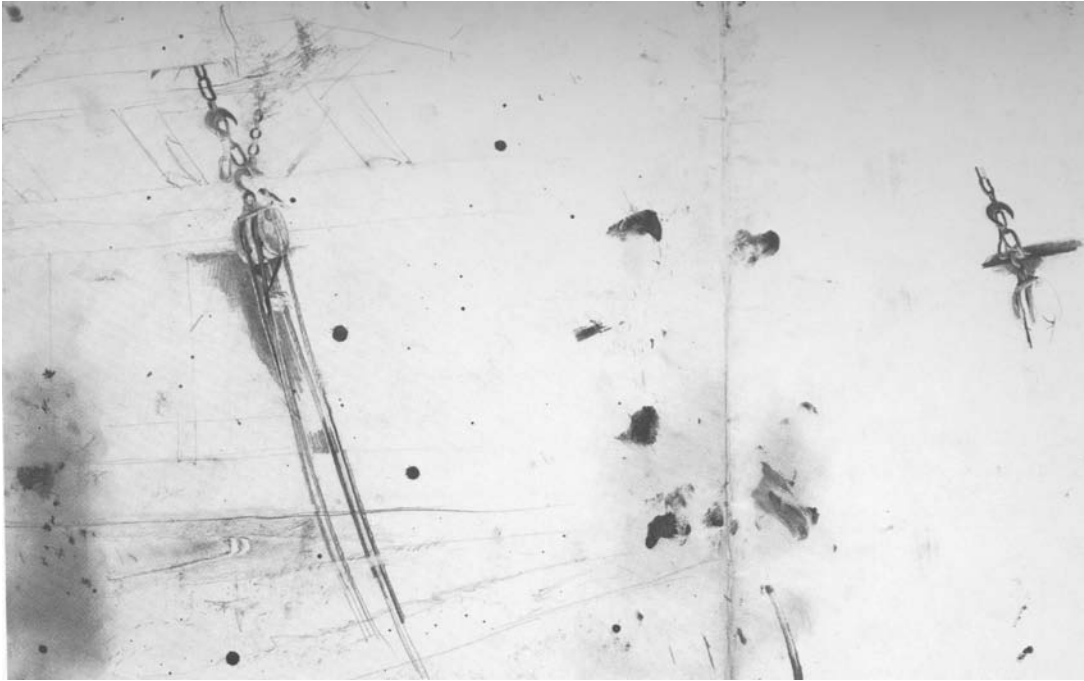
1.8. Andrew Wyeth, *The Rope*, 1957.  
Watercolor on paper, 20 x 12 inches.  
Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.



1.9. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957.  
Watercolor on paper, 21 ½ x 28 inches.  
Private collection.



1.10. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957.  
Pencil on paper, 21 x 27 inches.  
Private Collection.



1.11. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957 (Detail).  
Pencil on paper, 14 x 23 inches.  
Private Collection.





1.12. Detail of Figure 1.



1.13. Detail of Figure 1.



1.14. Detail of Figure 1.





1.15. Andrew Wyeth, *Hoffman's Slough*, 1948.  
Tempera on panel, 29  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 55 inches.  
Everson Museum of Art of Syracuse and Onandaga County.



1.16. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hoffman's Slough*, 1947.  
Watercolor on paper, 29 x 41 inches.  
Private Collection.



1.17. Detail of Figure 1.15.



1.18. Andrew Wyeth, *Coming Storm*, 1938.  
Watercolor on paper, 18 x 22 inches.  
Private Collection.





1.19. Andrew Wyeth, *Night Hauling*, 1944.  
Oil on panel, 23 x 37 inches.  
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.



1.20. Andrew Wyeth, *The Hunter*, 1943.  
Tempera on panel, 33 x 34 inches.  
Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio.



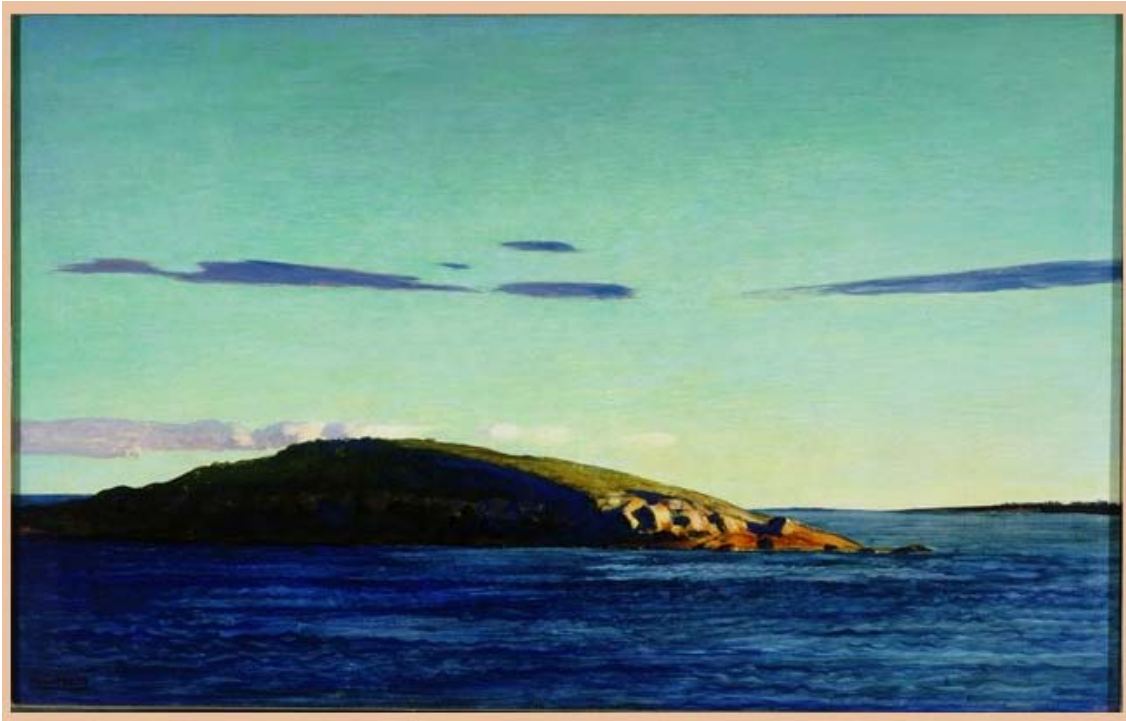
1.21. Andrew Wyeth, *Christmas Morning*, 1944.  
Tempera on panel, 23  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 38  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minnesota.



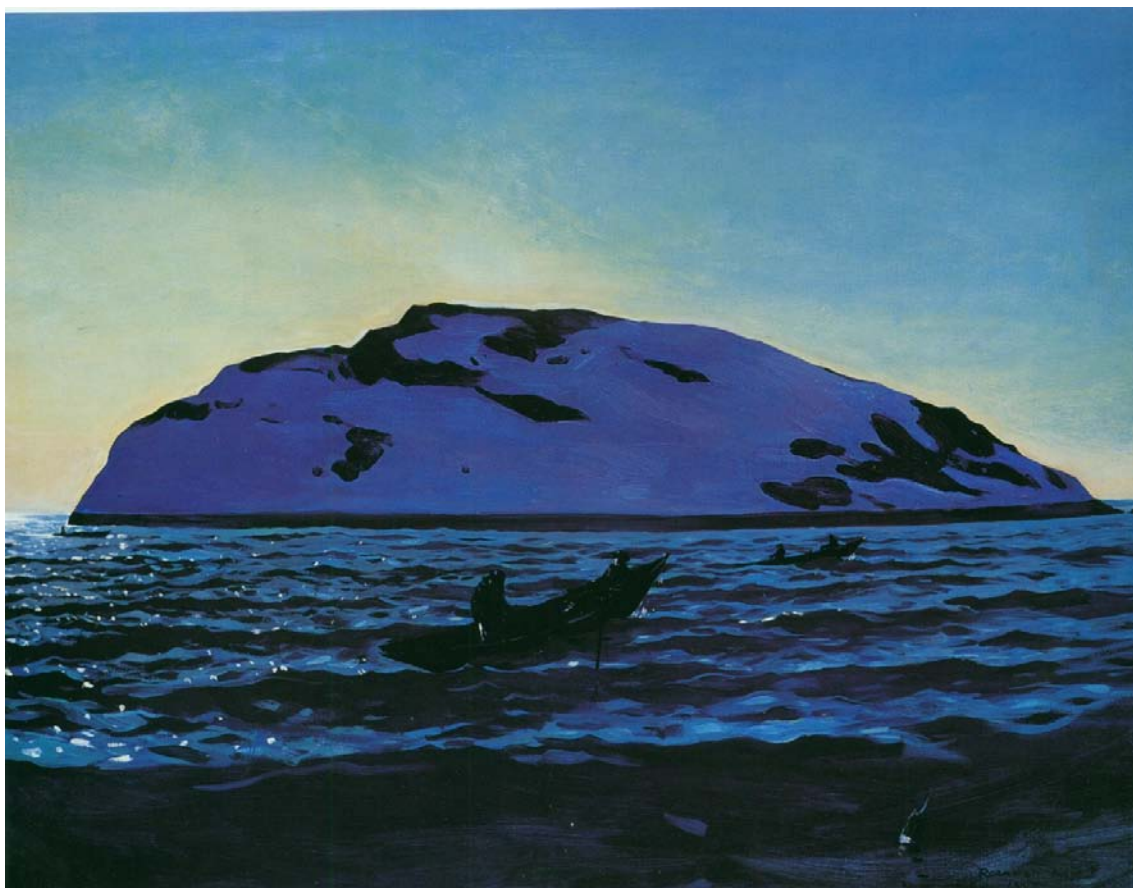


2.1. Andrew Wyeth, *Hay Ledge*, 1957.  
Tempera on panel, 21 ½ x 45 ¼ inches.  
Private Collection.





2.2. N.C. Wyeth, *Blubber Island*, 1938.  
Oil on panel, 25 x 40 inches.  
National Academy Museum, New York.



2.3. Rockwell Kent, *Afternoon on the Sea, Monhegan*, 1907.  
Oil on canvas, 34 x 44 inches.  
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



2.4. William Hogarth, *The Painter and his Pug*, 1745.  
Oil on canvas, 35 x 27 inches.  
Tate Britain.



2.5. Detail of Figure 4.





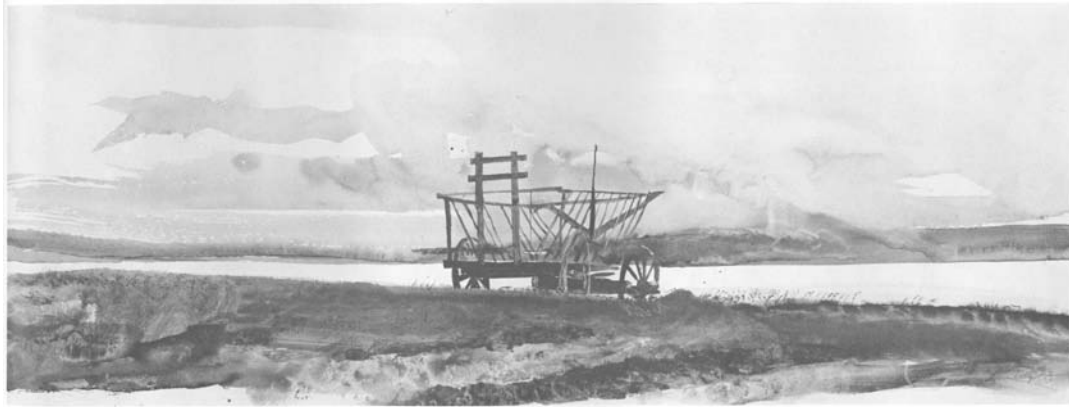
2.6. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957.  
Watercolor on paper, 21 ½ x 28 inches.  
Private collection.



2.7. John Constable, *The Hay Wain*, 1821.  
Oil on canvas, 51 x 73 inches.  
The National Gallery, London.

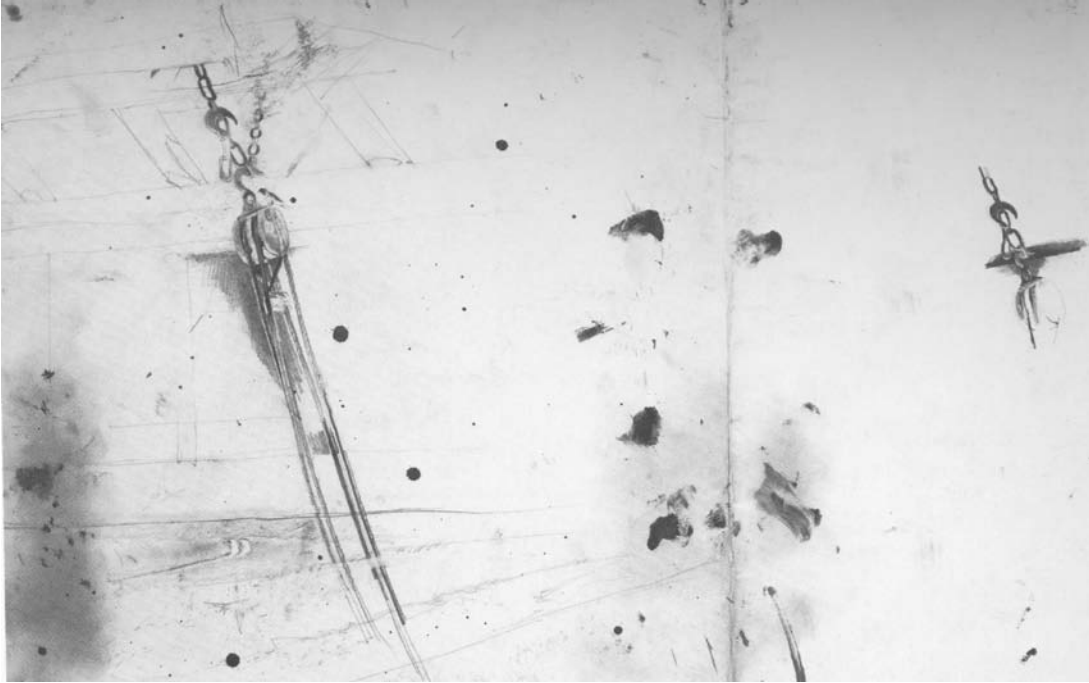


2.8. Detail of Figure 6.

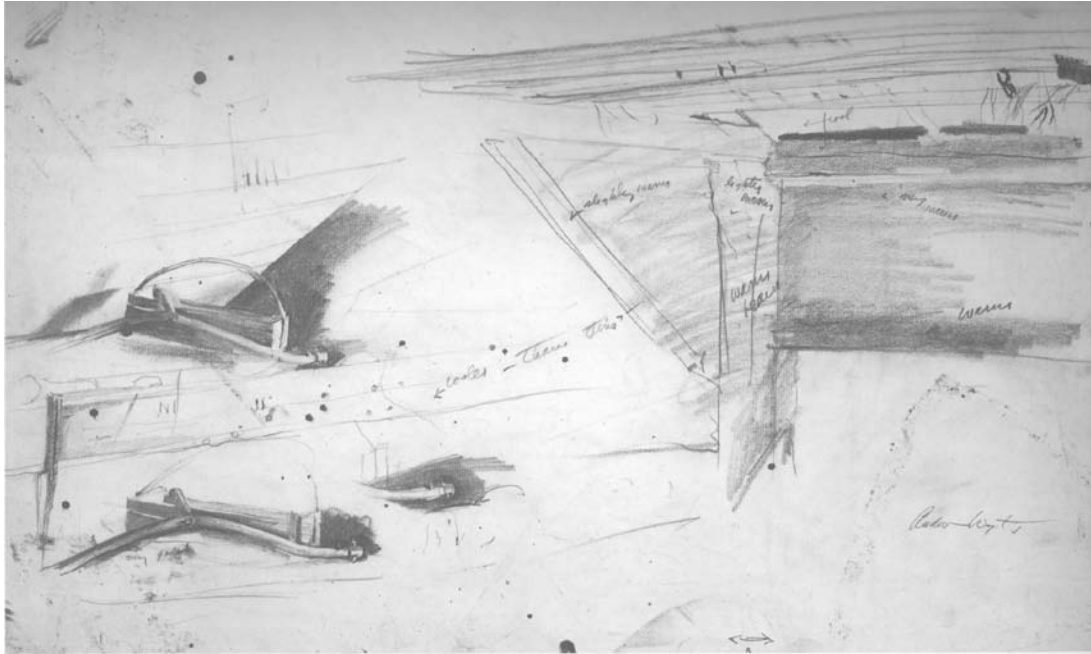


2.9. Andrew Wyeth, *Alvaro's Hayrack*, 1958.  
Watercolor on paper, 8 x 22 inches.  
Farnsworth Museum.





2.10. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957 (Detail).  
Pencil on paper, 14 x 23 inches.  
Private Collection.



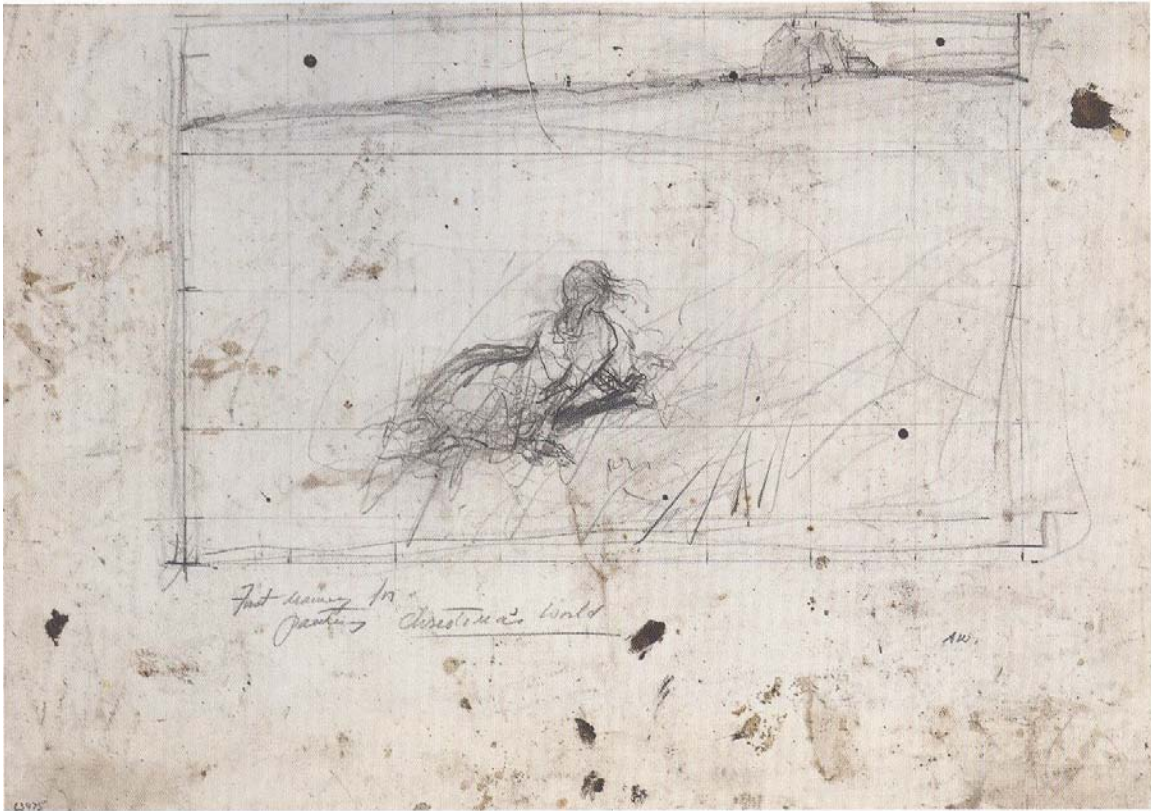
2.11. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Hay Ledge*, 1957.  
Pencil on paper, 21 x 27 inches.  
Private Collection.



2.12. Andrew Wyeth, *The Rope*, 1957.  
Watercolor on paper, 20 x 12 inches.  
Worcester Art Museum.



2.13. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948.  
Tempera on panel, 32 ½ x 47 ¾ inches.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.



2.14. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Christina's World*, 1948.  
Pencil on paper, 12 x 18 3/4 inches.  
Marunuma Art Park, Asaka, Japan.

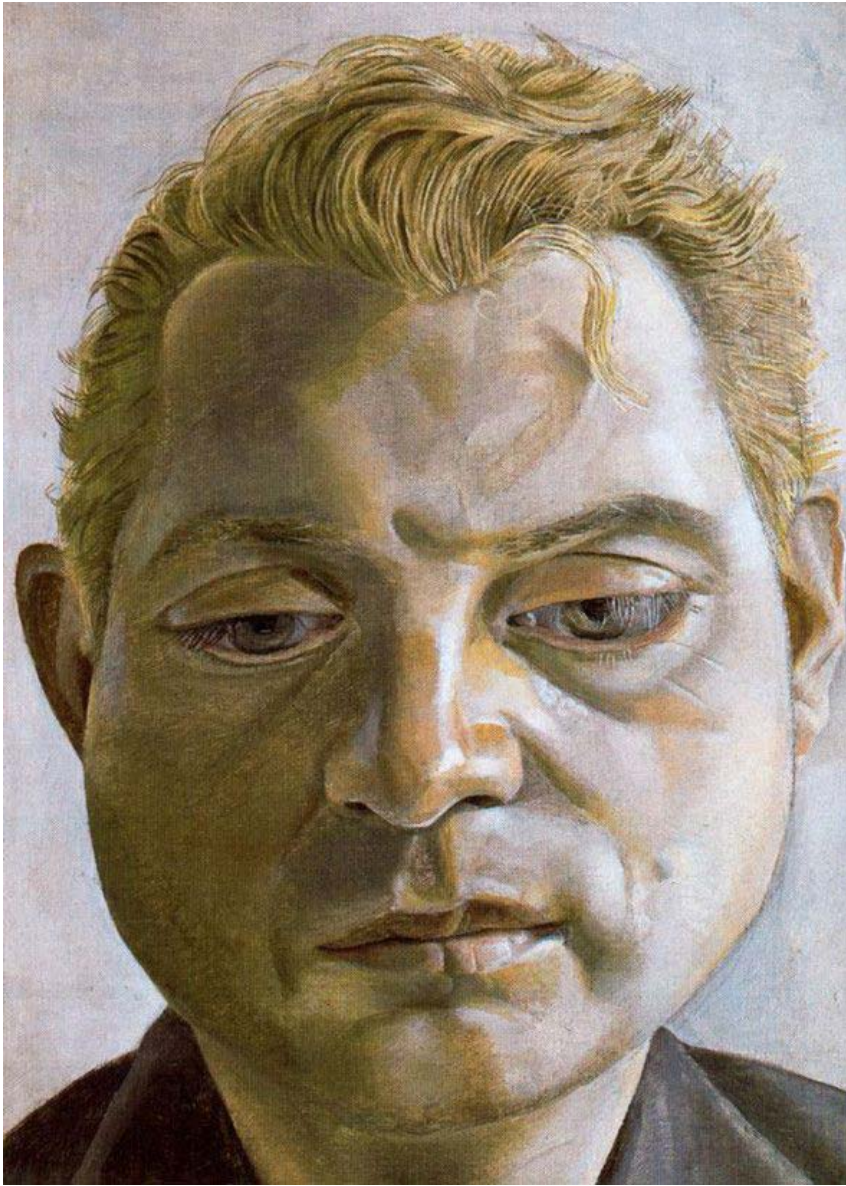




2.15. Andrew Wyeth, *Egg Scale*, 1959.  
Watercolor on paper, 14 x 17 inches.  
Private Collection.

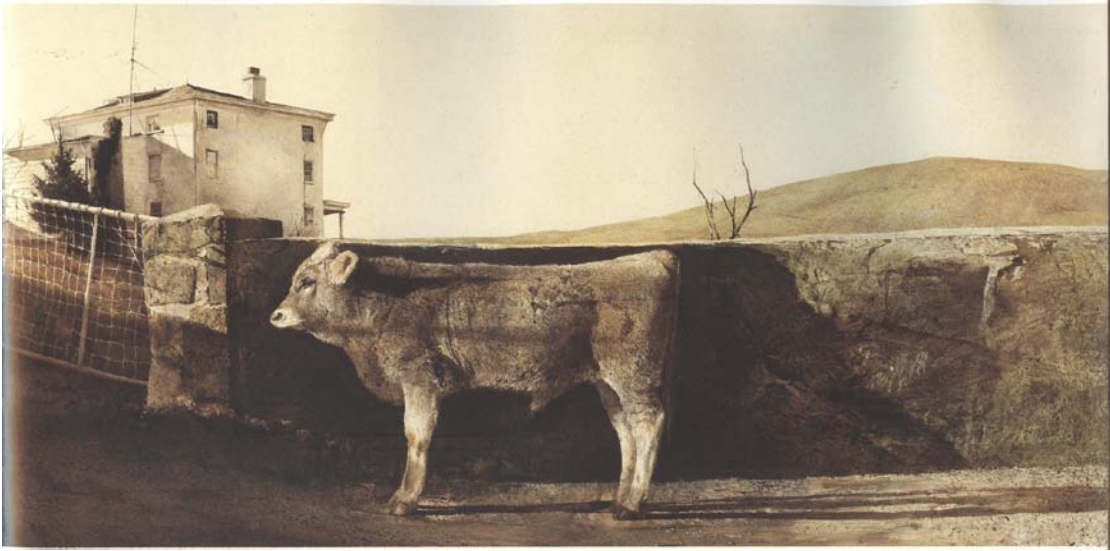


2.16. Lucian Freud, *Girl with a White Dog*, 1950-1.  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches.  
Tate Britain.



2.17. Lucian Freud, *Francis Bacon*, 1952.  
Oil on copper, 7 x 5 inches.  
Tate Britain.

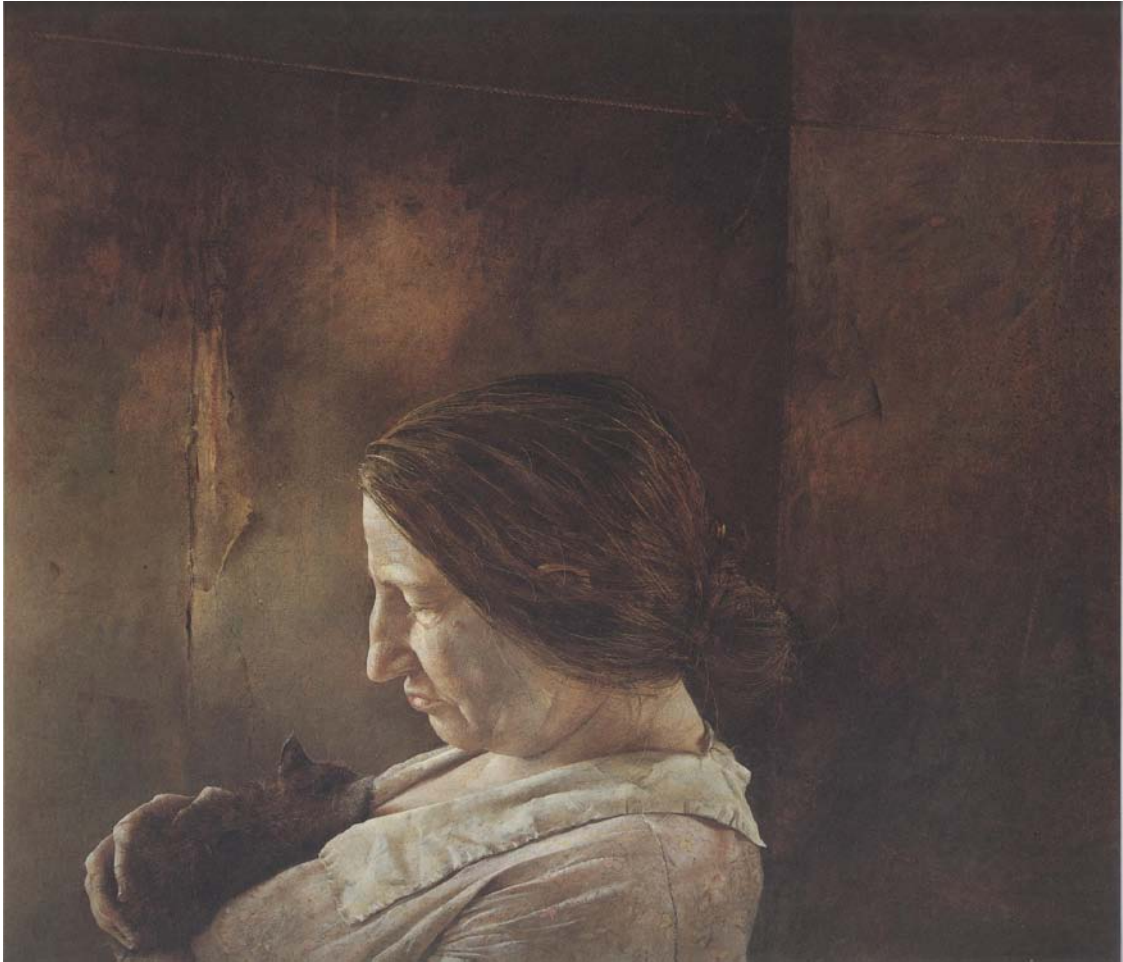




2.18. Andrew Wyeth, *Young Bull*, 1960.  
Watercolor on paper, 19 7/8 x 41 3/8 inches.  
Private Collection.



2.19. Andrew Wyeth, *Raccoon*, 1958.  
Tempera on panel, 48 x 48 inches.  
Brandywine River Museum.



2.20. Andrew Wyeth, *Miss Olson*, 1952.  
Tempera on panel, 25 x 28 inches.  
Private collection.





2.21. Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950.  
Enamel on canvas, 105 x 207 inches.  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



2.23. Andrew Wyeth, *Young America*, 1950.  
Tempera on panel, 32 1/2 x 45 1/4 inches.  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.



2.22. Andrew Wyeth, Study for *Brown Swiss*, 1957.  
Pencil on paper. As reproduced on page 55 of Thomas Hoving, *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).



3.1. Andrew Wyeth, *Hay Ledge*, 1957.  
Tempera on panel, 21 ½ x 45 ¼ inches.  
Private Collection.





3.2. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930.  
Oil on board, 29 x 25 inches.  
Art Institute of Chicago.

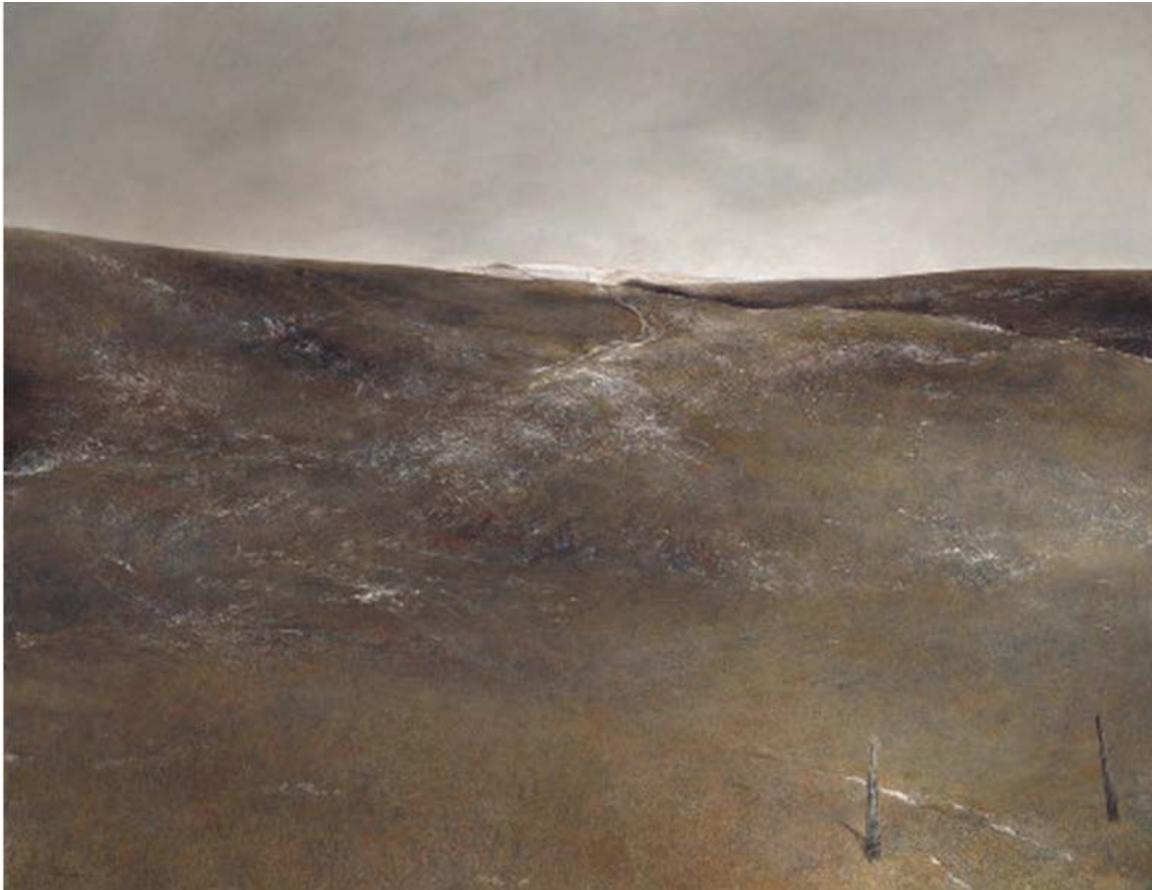




3.3. Andrew Wyeth, *Winter*, 1946, 1946.  
Tempera on Panel, 31 3/8 x 48 inches.  
North Carolina Museum of Art.



3.4. Andrew Wyeth, *Hoffman's Slough*, 1948.  
Tempera on panel, 29  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 55 inches.  
Everson Museum of Art of Syracuse and Onandaga County.



3.5. Andrew Wyeth, *Snow Flurries*, 1953.  
Tempera on panel, 37 ¼ x 48 inches.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



3.6. Andrew Wyeth, *Brown Swiss*, 1959.  
Tempera on Panel, 30 x 60 1/8 inches.  
Private Collection.

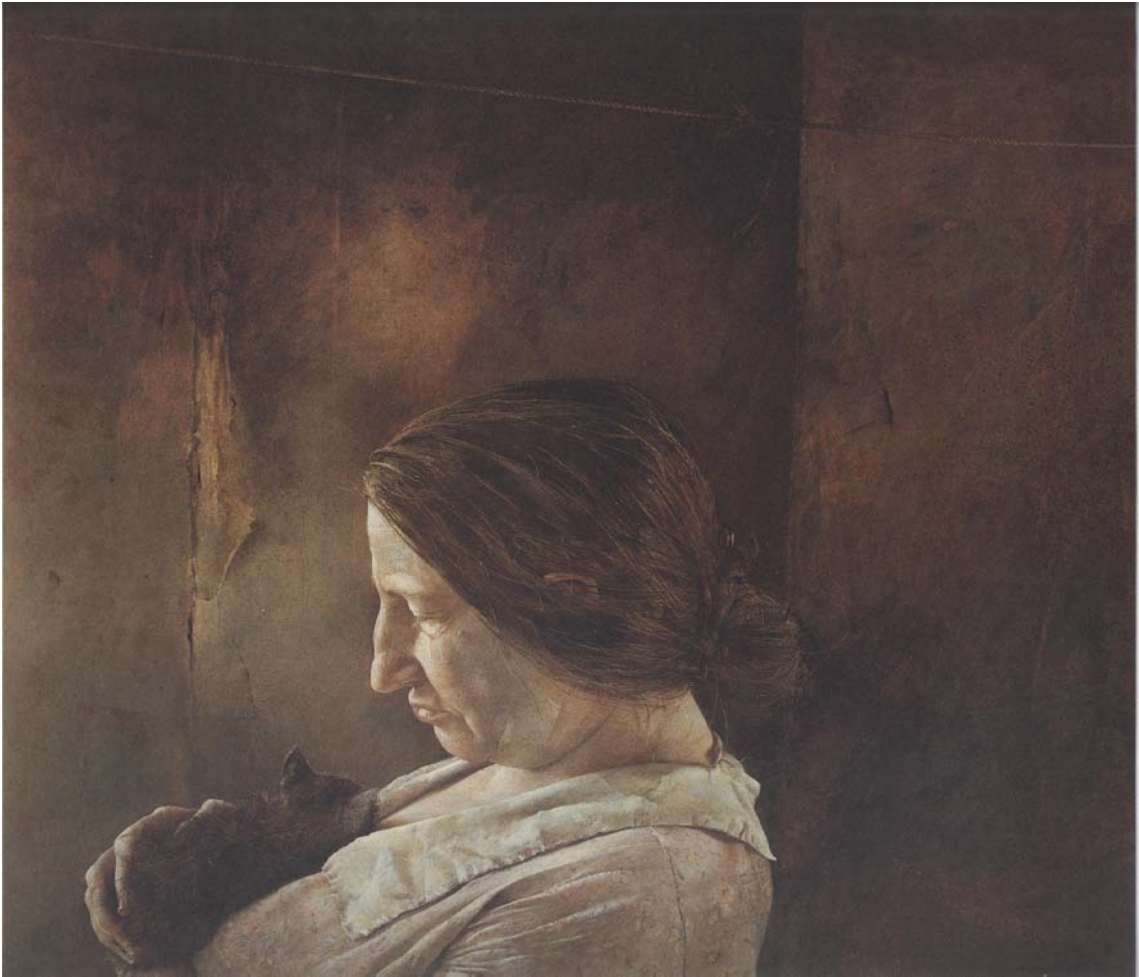




3.7. Andrew Wyeth, *Seed Corn*, 1948.  
Tempera on panel, 15 3/8 x 22 inches.  
Private Collection.



3.8. Andrew Wyeth, *Wind from the Sea*, 1947.  
Tempera on panel, 18 ½ x 27 ½ inches.  
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst Massachusetts.



3.9. Andrew Wyeth, *Miss Olson*, 1952.  
Tempera on panel, 25 x 28 inches.  
Private collection.



3.10. Andrew Wyeth, *Weatherside*, 1965.  
Tempera on panel, 48 1/8 x 27 7/8 inches.  
Private Collection.





3.11. Andrew Wyeth, *River Cove*, 1958.  
Tempera on panel, 48 x 30 ¼ inches.  
Private collection.



3.12. Andrew Wyeth, *The Slip*, 1958.  
Dry brush on paper, 20 x 29 inches.  
Private Collection.



3.13. Andrew Wyeth, *Trodden Weed*, 1951.  
Tempera on panel, 20 x 18 ¼ inches.  
Private Collection.





3.14. Andrew Wyeth, *Faraway*, 1952.  
Drybrush on paper, 13  $\frac{3}{4}$  . 21  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches.  
Private Collection.



3.15. Andrew Wyeth, *Groundhog Day*, 1959.  
Tempera on panel, 31 3/8 x 32 1/8 inches.  
Philadelphia Museum of Art.



3.16. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948.  
Tempera on panel, 32 ½ x 47 ¾ inches.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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