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Industrial Modernism and the Hegelian Dialectic in Winslow Homer

Abstract

This paper looks at the themes of nature, humanity, and military and industrial development in the nineteenth century American painter Winslow Homer through the lens of the Hegelian theory of art. Robert Pippin's After the Beautiful (2015) *has recently put the Hegelian framework to very fruitful use in understanding pictorial modernism. This study of Homer follows a similar approach but argues that Homer's canvases represent a development in the modern spirt which, in many ways, goes beyond the canvases of Manet – a very tight modernist contemporary of Homer's. Homer communicates a presentment of the immense and, in certain profound respects, horrifying power of humanity's growing industrialization. I trace the development of this idea over the course of his career, from this early Civil War canvases to his final seascapes and argue that an understanding of Homer's work is important for understanding the modern spirit of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.*

Keywords: Hegel, Winslow Homer, Robert Pippin, Painting, Modernism

Introduction

This article explores a number of iconic paintings by the nineteenth century American Painter Winslow Homer using a broadly Hegelian approach to the meaning, nature, and purpose of art. My approach will be geared toward answering the question: what do Homer's paintings represent? I think we see a growing unease in Homer's work as he moves through his career and that this unease is importantly related to the troubled consciousness of the modern spirit. The American Civil War, I argue, gave Homer a glimpse of the kind of destruction that mechanized warfare produces. At the same time, the pioneering spirit was giving way (or had all but given way) to the industrial spirit; global economic markets were solidifying, industrial methods of production and agriculture were replacing traditional methods, and the relationship between humanity and the natural world was becoming ever more technological. All these things meant an increase in humanity's power over na-

ture, which itself meant an increase in humanity's power to destroy nature. My argument is that Homer's paintings represent a philosophical understanding (and presentment) of the meaning of this new destructive power.

One work I will take into consideration is Robert Pippin's *After the Beautiful* (Pippin 2015). Here Pippin gives an analysis of how the Hegelian framework for understanding art can be fruitfully applied to pictorial modernism – particularly Manet, a tight contemporary of Homer's. Pippin's work, as we will see, focuses primarily on the problem of artistic intelligibility. This problem, however, does not capture the contemporary but non-modernist artistic situation and is, I think, therefore limited in its application. My treatment of Homer will be more focused on the problem of humanity's alienation from nature. After an introductory look at Pippin and an outline of Hegel's artistic framework, I will turn to a dedicated analysis of Homer's work.

Hegelian Themes in Post-Hegelian Times

After the Beautiful is, as I've said, an application of the Hegelian framework to the art of Manet and Cézanne and looks forward to how this framework can be fruitfully used to understand the art of the modernist movement in general. Now, in some ways, Winslow Homer is a singular figure in art history. I do not mean that he totally resists categorization or that he stands outside his time. But he was a self-taught and largely solitary artist who explicitly rejected the use or importance of painting in communication with other contemporary artists. One of Homer's dealers, for instance, once wrote of him: "Homer was less influenced by others and by what others had done than any artist – any man, I may as well say – I have ever known. He was a rare visitor to public galleries and exhibition… Names meant little or nothing to him. He looked at any picture for precisely what it might have to say to him" (Goodrich 1973, 21). Homer was a tight contemporary of Manet's and, following the Civil War, spent a year between 1866 and 1867 in Paris. It's entirely possible that he saw Manet's, by then notorious, paintings *Olympia* and *The Luncheon on the Grass*, but we can only speculate about whether he took the time to view these pieces or if they exerted any influence over him at all. In short, Homer was not a modernist if modernist means following in the tradition started by Manet with these two works. Still, it will be useful to look at Pippin's work as a way of situating the Hegelian problems of post-Hegelian artists, even if we must move away somewhat from Pippin's own interests and conclusions.

For Hegel, in the broadest sense, the practice of art is one way that *Geist* has of understanding itself. Specifically, art is one of the four primary ways that *Geist* under-

stands itself in relation to the Absolute. As Pippin says, "art embodies a distinct mode of the intelligibility of the'Absolute'" (Pippin 2015, 5). At the same time, rendering the Absolute intelligible is also what philosophy attempts to do. Thus, art and philosophy have the same content and the same goal. "Fine art is not real art till it is in this sense free [has become philosophical], and only achieves its highest task when it has taken its place in the same sphere with religion and philosophy, and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the Divine Nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind" (Hegel 2004, 9).

"To make the Absolute intelligible" is, however, only an abstract articulation of the goal of philosophy. What is fundamentally at stake here is the possibility of human freedom. For, as long as we labor under contradictions and false or incomplete understandings of things, we are bound to err, to suffer frustration and disappointment, and feel inexplicably alienated from our own actions and from the world. But freedom for Hegel does not mean liberty or physical capacity. This is because I may be capable of doing anything I like, but if I cannot recognize my actions as my own, or if I cannot comprehend my actions within the contexts which make them meaningful, then I am not really capable of *acting* at all. And if I cannot act, I am not free.

This means, however, that freedom must meet an important condition; in order for an action to be free, it must be intelligible. But intelligibility is a social phenomenon which requires a structure of norms and institutions, each of which must itself be collectively recognized as legitimate, in order for things to be recognizable as the things they are. Outside the institutions and social practices of visual representation, a painting is merely a piece of cloth with smears of pigment on one side. Because the arrangement of pigments in certain ways has *come to mean* certain things, the practice of painting as a form of communication has become possible. Nevertheless, these norms and institutions are not static. As social and historical conditions change, so too do the norms of representation which govern the practice of painting. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, for instance, profoundly impacted the possibilities of interpreting visual representations, and the norms which governed such representations underwent certain changes as a result. Part of the story Pippin wants to tell about Manet concerns the effects of spreading capitalist social organization on the practice of easel painting in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. In short, there is something new and alienating about the baldly commodified nature of social relations under capitalism. Love, work, leisure, and, of course, art no longer feels quite authentic; everything has an exchange value, and so it's hard to see how anything could have intrinsic value, let alone absolute value; the modern world is not

quite capable of taking anything as sacrosanct. How does one paint under such conditions?

In order to answer this, we must look at the two major problems facing artistic practice. The first arises from the fact that self-consciousness understands itself in opposition to something other than itself. In the abstract formulation, the antithesis here is between *Geist* and Nature, where Nature is understood as the realm of spatiotemporally determined entities existing in relations of causal necessity with one another. Human beings *do* understand themselves as belonging to this realm, and yet this very self-understanding suggests that humans do *not* belong to this realm. This is because *Geist* recognizes this self-understanding, and *understanding* (as opposed to simply *reacting*) is an instantiation of freedom. Freedom does not seem possible in a world governed by laws of strict necessity. The contradiction here is painful because it renders free action unintelligible. Self-understanding, then, becomes the task of seeing ourselves "both as natural bodies in space and time and as reason-responsive thinking and acting agents who resolve what to believe and what to do in a way for which [we] are responsible" (Pippin 2015, 6). Kant's thinking represents the greatest achievement in this endeavor prior to Hegel, but even the Kantian doctrine leaves one in despair of ever concretely understanding the possibility of freedom. Hegel goes further. I will give the full quotation because we will need to revisit it later on:

> For, on the one side, we see man a prisoner in common reality and earthly temporality, oppressed by want and poverty, hard driven by nature, entangled in matter, in sensuous aims and their enjoyments; on the other side, he exalts himself to eternal ideas, to a realm of thought and freedom, imposes on himself as a *will* universal laws and attributions, strips the world of its living and flourishing reality and dissolves it into abstractions, inasmuch as the mind is put upon vindicating its rights and its dignity simply by denying the rights of nature and maltreating it, thereby retaliating the oppression and violence which itself has experienced from nature. (Hegel 2004, 60)

I will follow Pippin in referring to this as the "amphibian problem"; we must deal with the fact that we live in two opposing worlds at once, which "makes [man] an amphibian animal" (Hegel 2004, 59). This problem is particularly relevant for painting because every painting is simultaneously a physical object and a manifestation of conceptual truth. Part of the struggle for painting is how to give sensuous or physical form to something which is essentially non-physical.

Now, the term'nature' has a lot of different uses; in the Hegelian framework,'Nature' has a different sense than the term'nature' as applied to an artistic theme,

especially as applied to one of the dominant themes of American painting from the nineteenth century. For Hegel, Nature is the realm of beings determined by laws of causal necessity. This means that Natural beings are indifferent to existence, their own or that of others'. On the other hand,'nature,' as an artistic theme, connotes something like the realm of organic and living things, as opposed to the realms of culture, politics, industry, etc. The organic realm is often a dangerous problem for humanity, and Nature thus becomes a hostile and alien force. Yet from a Hegelian perspective, it is difficult to see how something which is essentially indifferent could also be hostile; being *hostile* is not the same thing as being dangerous. One aspect of Homer's work that I will be looking at is the personification of the indifference of Nature. Properly understood, "personification of indifference" seems like an oxymoron, or at least poetical in the extreme. It is actually, however, a distinctly dialectical mode of self-understanding; *Geist* sees itself, its own nature, in the "hostility" of the forces of Nature, thereby making Nature into a kind of spiritual being. It is at this level of the dialectical relationship between *Geist* and Nature that, I think, much of Homer's work takes place. To avoid confusion then, let us use'Nature' to refer to the spiritualized but nevertheless law governed and indifferent realm of beings, and'nature' to refer to the general subject of artistic naturalism.

Now Hegel denies that the reconciliation of *Geist* and Nature is possible in the sensuous form of art. The Absolute transcends the merely physical and, once this has been comprehended, the physical instantiations of the Absolute are therefore shown to be insufficient; an essential aspect of the Absolute somehow always escapes. This transcendence of the Absolute, however, must be *worked out*. Art is the process of this working out. Once the insufficiency of sensuous representation has been realized, art loses its historical significance for *Geist*. According to the Hegelian story, this has already happened. And as the importance of art wanes, other modes of self-understanding move in to carry on the struggle for the reconciliation of *Geist* and Nature. For many reasons, this is a story we cannot accept. And while it is true that virtually every mode of self-understanding demonstrated inadequacies in the historical period following Hegel's death, Pippin focuses our attention particularly on the political. Hegel seemed to place special hope in the *institutionalization* of the mutual recognition of subjecthood. Liberal democracies and constitutional monarchies were firmly establishing themselves in Europe and in the United States; the state and civil society (Creon and Antigone) had come to a place of mutual recognition, and so genuine subject-to-subject recognition had also (so it seemed to Hegel) been institutionalized. History demonstrated otherwise. Because Hegel believed that this social reconciliation had been successfully institutionalized, he saw that a major part of the tension between *Geist* and Nature had been resolved. Art

naturally reflected this: "Romantic art had already embodied the fact that we had'liberated' ourselves from our natural home and had successfully created another" (Pippin 2015, 37). One of Pippin's basic claims is that we have not liberated ourselves from our natural home, nor have we successfully created another, and so art still has an important role to play in the development of *Geist*. In other words, the'amphibian problem' is still a problem. We shall see, however, in our examination of Homer's work that Pippin's formulation here is inadequate.

The second problem facing artistic practice has to do with the nature of the *work* of art itself. No piece of art actually *is* Absolute Knowing or *Geist*; the canvas is a dead thing that certainly does not contemplate or understand itself. Art only *becomes* art in the mind of a beholder. Yet not just anything can be thought of as a work of art. Most importantly, natural things cannot be thought of as works of art. Hegel opens his *Lectures* with: "We may, however, begin at once by asserting that artistic beauty stands *higher* than nature. For the beauty of art is the beauty that is born – born again, that is – of the mind […]" (Hegel 2004, 4). Yet if the actual piece of art is a dead thing, exactly how does it attain a higher standing than Nature? Hegel's answer is important:

> The birds' variegated plumage shines unseen, and their song dies away unheard, the *Cereus* which blossoms only for a night withers without having been admired in the wilds of southern forests, and these forests, jungles of the most beautiful and luxuriant vegetation, with the most odorous and aromatic perfumes, perish and decay no less unenjoyed. The work of art has not such a naïve self-centered being, but is essentially a question, an address to the responsive heart, an appeal to affections and to minds. (Hegel 2004, 78)

The work of art is essentially an appeal. A number of things are therefore implied in the nature of art: art must be created by a mind *as* a certain type of appeal, art must be apprehended by a mind *capable* of comprehending such an appeal, and there must be a structure of norms and practices mediating these two minds which makes the appeal *intelligible as such*. Pippin's treatment of Manet focuses on the historical structure of the norms and practices that make artistic meaning possible. His claim is that, by the mid-nineteenth century, the dominant structures of artistic meaning had begun to fail, thus giving raise to the need for new approaches, i.e. modernism.

As I pointed out above, however, Homer is not a modernist painter. Homer is concerned with a problem other than artistic intelligibility. For it was not only the social practices of art interpretation that had begun to change and, in important ways, fail by the mid-nineteenth century. The convergence of industrialized agriculture, global market economies, and mechanized warfare now threatened to collapse the very distinction be-

tween Nature and *Geist*. And this collapse did not appear to offer a dialectical reconciliation or rationalized mediation of these poles, but rather the eventual, literal destruction of both.

The Veteran in a New Field

> "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4)

We turn now to *The Veteran in a New Field*.[1] We see immediately that it is a painting of a farmer. We cannot discern much about the man as he is now; his back is turned to us and he is absorbed in the act of cutting wheat. His close-cropped hair and smoot skin indicate that he is young, but he is not a boy. There is no indication of his family relations, no immediate suggestion of his religion, and no obvious indication of his geographical location apart from the fact that he is a farmer of wheat. In his simplicity he seems to represent the abstract idea of a farmer, and for the purposes of the painting all we need to know about him now is that he tends a field. Yet we also know one very important thing about his history: he was a solider in the American Civil War. His military coat and canteen rest on the ground behind him; the canteen bears the mark of the Army of the Potomac's First Division of the Second Corps.[2] Almost the entire canvas is dominated by the bountiful harvest of wheat. The tallest ears stand taller than the farmer himself and, because the mass of wheat obscures the horizon, we get the distinct impression that the field itself extends indefinitely. The sky above is pitilessly blue, the earth beneath the fallen stalks is dark and moist, and the sun behind the farmer radiates brilliantly from his white shirt.

At the most superficial level, the painting is of a farmer and therefore depicts mid-nineteenth century agricultural practices. As we will see shortly, this depiction is importantly and intentionally inaccurate. But in light of the importance of fishing practices in Homer's later work, we ought to note the particular focus on agriculture here. Agriculture, in which I include the practices of fishing, was, of course, one of the defining features of American life at the time. But the nature of agricultural practices was changing, and the way in which it contributed to the economy, and to society broadly, was changing. Many of these changes facilitated greater production. At the same time, the farmer (and the fisherman) was becoming alienated from the land (or the sea) that he or she worked. This was

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[1] For an excellent analysis of this painting, see "*A Harvest of Death:* The Veteran in a New Field" by Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., 1988.

[2] As noted by the painting's description of The Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1967 (Simpson 1988, 217).

because agricultural production was being comprehended more and more within the framework of national and international economic enterprise. These observations will be made more concrete when we turn to *The Gale* and *The Herring Nets*. Even here though, the anonymity of the farmer is striking. Homer is giving us the absolute minimum of what we need to know about him, but his lack of identity may already be read as a presentment of what will befall agricultural workers in the coming century.

Now, there are two distinct and competing symbolic allusions at work in this painting. The first is a reference to the legendary Roman dictator Cincinnatus. Cincinnatus was a statesman who had finished his career and retired to a life of farming outside of Rome when a military disaster befell one of the consuls. Cincinnatus was unanimously appointed dictator and given power to raise an army and right the situation. He did so. When he returned to Rome at the head of an enthusiastic and loyal army, he immediately disbanded this army and returned control of the city to the civil government. And, legendarily, he then crossed the Tiber to his farmstead and resumed a peaceful and productive life. The reason for the profound significance of this gesture for post-Civil War Americans is obvious when we consider, for instance, Lincoln's suspension of *habeas corpus*, his appeal in the Second Inaugural Address, or the massive Union Army which had been raised and trained and which now had no enemy. The possibility of the civil society for which the war had been fought, at that moment, hung on the dissolution of the very army which had secured it. Cikovsky, in his analysis of the painting, quotes the *New York Weekly Tribune* of 1865: "Rome took her great man from the plow, and made him a dictator – we must now take our soldiers from the camp and make them farmers […]" (Simpson 1988, 86). There are, of course, thousands of professions to which a veteran could return after a war, and it is no accident that Homer chose farming for the subject of his own veteran.

The second symbolic allusion, however, is to the Angle of Death. Homer's choice of the single-bladed scythe is intentionally anachronistic; by 1866, wheat was harvested using a cradled scythe. The cradled scythe was a tool similar to the single-bladed version, but which had multiple blades fixed along the handle. This innovation increased the ease with which the stalks could be cut, but the cradled scythe did not carry the same connotations as the more traditional tool. It is now possible to see, in fact, that Homer originally painted his famer wielding the cradled scythe but decided to paint over the auxiliary blades. The intention is unmistakable; our famer is a veteran, and as he now cuts down stalks of wheat, so also did he once cut down men. Cikovsky points out that this meaning is present in the title of the work itself: "To what does the'new field' refer? Not to the field of grain. It is not new but mature, ready for harvest. The reference is to the veteran's new field of activity, his new occupation, made by an almost punning play on words" (Simpson 1988, 91).

The man was once a reaper of souls, as it were, and neither he nor his activity are innocent of bloodshed. The Civil War was a particularly traumatic war because, among other reasons, we had not yet comprehended (and, arguably, would not really begin to comprehend until the detonation of the first atomic bomb less than a century later) the power of industrialized and mechanized killing. The painting is *simultaneously* an appeal to the post-Civil War Spirit and a troubling characterization of war itself. On the one hand, the war is over. It is time to return our focus to prosperity, and to reap the much more bountiful harvest of peace. On the other hand, war is not what we thought it was. War is not a heroic charge or a prevailing against all odds; the cavalry charges and last-stands of the Mexican-American war, and especially the rustic skirmishes of the Western Expansion, are obsolete. This is a new kind of war, the war of the Gatling gun, the Howitzer, and rifled artillery. And it has a different character. Things are becoming mechanical, methodical, impersonal. And importantly Homer's farmer is a farmer only because he was a soldier; the possibility of meaningful farming was provided for by the Union's victory, which he helped bring about.[3] But he was a soldier only because he is a farmer; the need to protect the possibility of this way of life provided the reason for his going to war. He is a reaper of souls only insofar as he is a reaper of wheat; he is a reaper of wheat, only because as he was a reaper of souls. But this is what it means to fight and kill for an ideal. *And* this is what it means to be a farmer. War is horrible, and the coat and canteen should be set aside when they can be. But war was necessary.[4] To a certain degree, modern society required that war define everything, even farming. Even its antithesis.

The painting, then, effectively represents three things: republican spirt, agricultural practice, and the nature of warfare. As a representation of republican spirt, the painting is an appeal to the importance of the dissolution of the Union Army, which was essential to the success of the Reconstruction and to the continued existence of the Union as a form of civil society. As a representation of agricultural practice, it is self-consciously anachronistic. This anachronism – the insistence of the single-bladed scythe over the cradled scythe – is the keystone to the painting's entire symbolic meaning. But it also draws our attention to the fact that agricultural practices are changing. Technological innovation is increasing the efficiency with which we draw sustenance from the earth. Much is gained by these techno-

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[3] Obviously, there would still be a need for farming in the event of a Confederate victory. I want to point out however that, on the one hand, the conflict was in large part a conflict over what agricultural practices were allowed within the Union and, on the other hand, that farming *under a Confederacy* would not be the same thing as farming *under a Union*.

[4] From Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address: "Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came." (Lincoln 1865)

logical advances, but Homer's insistence upon the single blade draws our attention to the fact that something is also thereby lost. Finally, as a representation of the nature of warfare, the painting challenges naïve or romantic conceptions of conflict. In its general essence, war is the practice of killing. Passions, ideals, and even the struggle for existence may give war meaning, but the result, as depicted in the painting, is an impersonal and dispassionate culling of life. Thus, considered at the highest level, the painting is a dialectal struggle; Cincinnatus, the symbol of civic spirt, cannot be the Angle of Death[5], and yet he is; war cannot be a necessary condition for civil society, and yet it is; the practices that make us the humans that we are cannot dehumanize us, and yet they do.

Importantly, I want to suggest that Homer himself seems to have failed to reconcile these antitheses. It is for this reason that the painting is *troubled*. What I mean by this is that, if the painting is a celebration of civic spirit *at the same time* that it is a reflection on the impersonal and mechanistic nature of death in warfare, then it is a painting of a troubled consciousness failing to reconcile two undeniable truths. Put glibly, from the perspective of human life, the Civil War was obviously a bad thing, but from the perspective of civil society it was also obviously a good thing. Homer was not alone in failing to come to terms with how this could be possible. That said, just because the painting fails to reconcile these concepts, the painting itself is a stunning success. The painting's beauty derives from its being troubled. Homer shows his excellence in presenting *Geist* as it actually is, failing to bring oppositional concepts to resolution. At the end of the Civil War, Cincinnatus and the Angle of Death abide each other in uneasy union; *The Veteran in a New Field* captures this tension. As we'll see, however, this same kind of tension plagues Homer through the rest of his career.

The Gale

The Homer of *The Gale* is not quite the same man as the Homer of *The Veteran in a New Field*. The tumultuous seascapes of this period are the canvases for which he is probably best known, and *The Gale* is one of the most important of these pieces[6]. The themes of

[5] It ought to be remember that Cincinnatus did not only return control of Rome to the civil government, twice. He was also merciful to his enemies: he "told them, that'he wanted not the blood of the Aequans; that they were at liberty to depart; but he would send them under the yolk, as an acknowledgement, at length extorted, that their nation was conquered and subdued'" (Livy's *History of Rome*, Book III, paragraph XXVIII).

[6] It's worth noting that *The Gale* was first exhibited in 1883 as *The Coming Away of the Gale*. The painting originally featured a rescue boat and guard house behind the woman, which must have given the painting a very different meaning. However, as a result of unfavorable criticism, Homer kept the painting in his studio for a decade. In 1893 he re-exhibited the painting as we know it now. For an

civil duty and war, leisure and courtship, peace and productivity, are no longer given central importance, though they are not abandoned. Into their place has stepped, above all, humanity's struggle with Nature. The task now is to see how the broader narrative of humanity's struggle with Nature comes to supplant, or even grows out of, Homer's failure to reconcile the conflicting conceptual exigencies (Cincinnatus and the Angle of Death) that became apparent at the end of the Civil War.

There are three features in *The Gale*: the woman, her child, and the storm. The storm rages in the sky. It is not a uniform grey. The clouds are various in their density, moving in unison but not uniform, and swelling past her. But the storm rages in the ocean, too. The whole sphere of life, from the atmosphere to the surface and perhaps even the depths of the sea, is caught up in the violence. The waves are thrown against the rocks with explosive force. The water flows from the rocks back into the surf and is thrown against the rocks again, and again. It is a storm, but we do not see its center, if it even has a center. The differing tones in the clouds suggest shape, but the clouds themselves are indefinite, indeterminate. The waves too suggest certain shapes to us, but these are blended at the edges. A crest rises behind the woman, and behind the crest, a swell. Yet between these is an indefinite, darker mass we can only characterize as churning.

The woman herself is ambiguous. Her stride is confident, and her posture is upright, sturdy and intentional. She moves nearly in a contrapposto and the position of her arms is reminiscent of Botticelli's *Venus*. But she is *not* in contrapposto, and she is not covering herself; she carries a child on her back. And any similarity she bears to the idealized femininity of Botticelli or Bouguereau, for instance, only serves to distance her from that femininity. Nevertheless, she does have a certain idealized quality. But what? We want to say that she seems like the image of the resolute, of the stoical. But her face says otherwise. Her eyes are tired and almost mournful; she does indeed regard the storm with a certain resoluteness, but this feels like the resolution of defeat. We want to say that she seems like the image of human vitality striving against Nature. But the dingy green color of her skin, and again the sad eyes, suggest otherwise. If she is striving, she seems to strive as a matter of course. In spite of her robust figure, she's weary and sick looking. We do not get the sense that she is in danger, that she and her child might be swept into the ocean. Rather, we get the disappointing sense that this is only another day of drudgery in a long series of similarly difficult days.

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interesting study of Homer's maritime work, see Kathleen A. Foster's *Shipwreck! Winslow Homer and* The Life Line (2012).

But certainly, the painting's most striking feature is the pair of eyes peeking out from the woman's bundle. The child's face is full and healthy, its red hair whips in the wind like the flames of a small fire, and its little boots are upturned and almost joyful at its mother's waist. A dab of green on the child's forehead brings it into harmony with the rest of the painting by situating it environmentally within the tumultuous scene. But the surprising yellow around the eyes, and the orange in the hair, bring above all the little creature's *look* to the fore. Yet the meaning of this look is also uncertain. The child is wide-eyed, and its forehead is smooth and relaxed, giving the unmistakable impression of curiosity. The look seems to ask a question. And because the look is pointed directly at the beholder, it seems to ask something of *us*.

Interestingly, this look has nothing of the indifference or contempt that characterize similar techniques in Manet. Of Manet's'looks' Pippin writes:

> The challenge is strikingly clear in the startling looks of the two women […], looks that all at once destroy the convention of pictorial illusionism (the illusion that we are looking into a three-dimensional space and not at a flat, painted rectangle), seem to address the beholder (of the painting, not the scene) with a confrontational challenge (as if to ask, "Just what is it you are looking for?"), and thereby also thematize the *painting's* facing position opposite the beholder, suggesting questions about the psychology of meaningful beholding and the status of the very social conventions assumed in understanding the point of easel paintings. (Pippin 2015, 29)

The child's look certainly does not, and is not intended to, accomplish this. And yet child's look does have a remarkable effect. I would like to suggest that, where *Olympia*'s gaze challenges the viewer, and the waitress's gaze in *A bar at the Folies-Bergère* wearily tolerates the viewer, the child's gaze in *The Gale* ponders with the viewer. Homer is not interested in challenging the dominant "representational regime"[7] but we also know that he *was* profoundly dissatisfied with it. In fact, it seems that he had no interest in challenging such a regime because of the degree to which he was "dissatisfied" with it. In one of the only explicit quotations we have of Homer's concerning the nature and purpose of art, he flippantly disregards one of the figureheads of the'representational regime': "I wouldn't go across the street to see a Bouguereau. His pictures look false; he does not get the truth of that which he wishes to represent; his light is not out-door light; his works are waxy and

[7] Pippin identifies a rebellion against the dominant "representational regime" as a key feature of modernism: "A certain dissatisfaction with representation itself, or a dissatisfaction with the limitations of the ability of bourgeois modernity's'representational regime' to reach the actual life, or vital reality, still available for aesthetic embodiment, is an oft-cited element of pictorial modernism's general motivation" (Pippin 2015, 73).

artificial. They are extremely near being frauds." But I say that Homer was not interested in challenging this regime because he is interested in a problem which effects humanity at a higher level. The failure is not just a failure of bourgeois society, it is a failure at the heart of society at large, perhaps even a problem with humanity itself. It is a failure of *Geist*, in so far as *Geist* has become alienated from Nature.

Much of Homer's early career was dedicated to representing scenes of leisure. The two themes that dominated his work prior to traveling to Europe at the end of the Civil War were bourgeois frivolity and military life. *The Veteran in a New Field* is not his best-known work on the Civil War but, I have argued, demonstrates the troubled consciousness that arises (in an individual, or in an entire epoch) from such a traumatic event. The tension in such a consciousness cannot be successfully reconciled by reimagining or further understanding the conventions of a particular social practice. The drama surrounding the practices of representational meaning must, *even to an artist*, seem paltry as compared with the threatened possibility of meaningful life as such. If the meaning derived from participation in modern civil society is compromised by civil society's dependence on warfare (i.e. mechanized, ultimately impersonal warfare), then the social practices which make up civil society, including the institutions of visual representation, are all also compromised. But the child's gaze in *The Gale* is not plaintive, nor is it distressed. In spite of the storm, the look is focused on the painting's beholder; it seems to come from simple curiosity, as if to ask, "What are you doing there?" This is not as scandalizing as the confrontational gaze of *Olympia*, but it does challenge us to account for ourselves. And the contexts within which this takes place are important.

For there is an obvious generational overtone in the relation between the woman and the child. The child is *her* child, whom she carries on her back. The woman looks off to the horizon with a distinctly portentous sadness. She carries her child through the storm, and yet she also carries it *into* the storm. Her resolute walk carries her and her child into the future, and yet this future, the horizon, is violent, chaotic, and hostile. The child, however, is also in its own way a symbol of the future. But the child, and particularly the innocent curiosity in its gaze, is far from violent, chaotic, or hostile. If we allow the child and the storm to represent two distinct and antithetical aspects of the future, then the ambiguities in the presentation of the woman become clearer as well. She strides into an *uncertain* future, and this accounts for her various conflicting aspects. *The Veteran in a New Field* has given us a clue as to why the future is uncertain: human society is growing much more powerful, but its destructive impulses have not diminished. The storm is a natural image, and Homer

is known for representing the "contest between man and nature," but'nature' here represents something more than the biosphere.[8]

As we saw in the quotation from Hegel above, the separation of *Geist* from Nature results in antagonism between them. "Man is a prisoner in common reality and earthly temporality" and "strips the world of its living and flourishing reality… by denying the rights of nature and maltreating it, thereby retaliating the oppression and violence which itself has experienced from nature" (Hegel 2004, 60). What exactly is "Nature?" Initially, we were to understand Nature as the realm of necessity which stands in opposition to the realm of freedom. But the supposed realm of freedom, wherein *Geist* recognizes itself in its own actions, the realm of politics and understanding, has also resulted in want, poverty, and violence. Humanity, we must remember, *does* exist within the realm of Nature and, insofar as humanity extends its power over Nature, humanity also extends power over itself. The institutions of civil society, within which individuals are engaged in a relation of mutual recognition, are supposed to protect individuals from the usurpation of freedom which may result from the extension of humanity's power over itself (i.e. political authority). The American Civil War, however, gives us a shocking glimpse of how the institutions of civil society can fail to safeguard human freedom. As it happens, being "oppressed by want and poverty, hard driven by *nature*" is only one of *Geist*'s problems.

Hegel's framework allows us to see the fundamental social, cultural, institutional, conventional, and, in all these ways, historical ideas of a time, worked out as the sensuous expressions of living humans. Homer often, as in *The Gale*, shows Nature as a powerful and threatening force, but he senses something more profound: *Geist* has struggled against Nature since it has understood itself apart from Nature, but sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, *Geist* began to win this struggle. And it began to win in earnest. Homer's work, we might say, shows the darkness before the dawn of a new industrial humanity. The contest between humanity and the natural world, between *Geist* and Nature, seems to be coming to an end. But insofar as the child's gaze is an appeal, and an appeal to *us*, the possibility of a reconciliation between the conflicting dimensions of *Geist* and Nature remains real. If the generation of the 1860's (and even those up to the 1890's) could not succeed in reconciling *Geist* with Nature, perhaps coming generations still can. Or, at least, the possibility remains open for the future.

Thus, a streak of hope is represented in *The Gale*. It's comforting, in a way. By the end of his life, however, Homer seems to have lost this hope; *Driftwood*, Homer's final

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[8] Indeed, Homer is also known for representing the *tranquility* of nature. And interestingly, the themes of childhood and natural tranquility are often portrayed in the same works, as in *The Whittling Boy*, *Boy in A Small Boat*, and *Boys in a Pasture*.

meditation on the struggle between *Geist* and Nature, shows an overwhelming darkness and the futility of the struggle against this darkness. In the final section, we will see how the representation of this futility nevertheless constitutes an important moment in the development of *Geist*.

Driftwood

I want to look at *Driftwood* in conjunction with two of Homer's other paintings, *Shark Fishing* and *The Herring Net*, because these help to contextualize his final piece. Turning first to *The Herring Net*, we see that the two fishermen are drawing in their net from a tumultuous sea. The ocean is chaotic, and the sky above them is dark. Their little skiff is dwarfed by the swells over which it rolls. One man pulls in the net, while the other – perhaps a boy – collects the herring they have caught. Above all, it is the figures' anonymity which stands out; their faces are obscured and, just as with the *Veteran*, we are shown all that we need to know about them by their activity. But unlike the *Veteran*, they do not seem to possess the same type of symbolic meaning; the *Veteran* was charged with what we might call literary significance, while these two are more charged with social or cultural significance. That is, there is little or nothing to suggest, for instance, Peter or Andrew from the Book of Matthew, or Glaucus, or even proverbial folk figures ("Give a man a fish…"). Rather, they are representatives of a profession. Aside from the fishermen, the ocean, and the sky, we also see the herring in the nets and the schooners on the horizon. All these elements taken together constitute a mediation on the social practice of fishing in the early industrial era. The men are connected to the schooners, but distantly. Likewise, the men are connected to the nets, but the nets will remain with the ocean while the men will depart. The system is efficient, and every part of the system fulfills a specific role. And yet, the anonymity of the men suggests that functioning as an isolated part of a broader system has deprived them of an independent personality.[9] The schooners show us that these "fishermen" are more fundamentally wage-laborers, since we may presume that whoever owns this fleet of fishing vessels does not risk his own life laboring skiffs at the net. These men are fishermen by profession, but they will return to their houses at the end of the day with wages, not fish. In this way they have been reduced to mere instruments in the enterprise of another person.

Finally, the herring in the nets are painted with a remarkable vitality; the silver sheen of their scales is the brightest point of the canvas, the visceral red of their gills is the only

[9] We may consider the difference here between industrial fishing and sport fishing. Homer's representations of sport fishermen almost always show the face or indicate a certain personality. See, for instance, *Playing a Fish* or *The Adirondack Guide*.

departure from the otherwise green-brown pallet, and the highlights on their slender bodies suggest that a single ray of sunlight has broken through the cloud cover and fallen directly onto the fish themselves. Importantly, however, the fish are powerless to extricate themselves from the net. Their vitality is fearful and panicked, as seen in their open and searching eyes. And the futility of their attempt to free themselves seems mirrored in the impotent violence of the ocean around them. The swells do communicate a degree of danger but, as with the woman and the storm in *The Gale*, the fishermen here go about their business in a mechanically secure way. Nature is powerless to prevent *Geist* from culling its members and bending the earth to its purposes. For even if these two should drown, the schooners in the distance guarantee that others will come to replace them. The fish and the swells are equally powerless against the fishermen, and yet, the fishermen are not shown in a heroic or self-certain way; the fishermen are themselves caught in a kind of net, and the impersonal efficiency with which they take the herring from the sea dimly recalls the Angle of Death from *The Veteran in a New Field*.

This aspect of the relationship between *Geist* and Nature – what we might call the one-sidedness of the contest between them – is more nakedly represented in *Shark Fishing*. This watercolor is thematically simpler than the paintings we have looked at so far. Again, we have two fishermen in a small skiff, and again they are in the act of hauling in their catch. The sea is calmer than before, and the sky is clearer. Both the men are turned toward us, but only the face of one is detailed. And the details are troubling; his eyes are darkened by shadow and his mouth is curled into a grimace. The shark flounders powerlessly, half submerged in the sea beside the small boat. The industrial overtone of *The Herring Net* is gone, but the men are similarly anonymous. The tumult of the sea is subdued, and the vitality of the catch is entirely absent. The expression of the shark's face, to the degree that it can be personified, is one of anguish. And the expression of the fisherman is one of sadness verging on disgust. What we see here, I would like to suggest, is the tragedy inherent in *Geist*'s triumph over Nature. The shark is a keystone predator, and as such is a symbol of predation. It represents the terrifying power of Nature; in its own way, it is a symbol of death. And yet, this is a death that operates in an organic realm and which is part of a natural order: "…the *Cereus* which blossoms only for a night withers without having been admired in the wilds of southern forests…" (Hegel 2004, 78). *Geist* brings the world a different kind of death, a spiritualized death which only serves the order of *Geist*, and which is therefore well imagined in the *Angle* of Death. The fishermen of *Shark Fishing* and *The Herring Net* stand outside the Natural world but also bring death into the Natural world. And Nature, as we have seen, is all but powerless to stop them. These are images of a rationalized death, and the sadness and anonymity of the men

who carry it out show what becomes of *Geist* itself when it is technologically equipped to pursue this end with rational efficiency.

Driftwood, finally, gives us the last anonymous and weather-beaten figure in Homer's corpus. The themes of this painting are similar to the others, but there are important differences. The man is not its central figure; in each of the other works, the human subjects occupied the central focus and the images of nature were shown in a subordinate relation to the lives of these humans. In *Driftwood*, the focus is on the storm. The sea and sky are again tumultuous, the waves are crashing again over the rocks. But unlike *The Gale*, the human figure does not move with confidence. The piece of wood he is attempting to extricate from the surf is massive, and we doubt whether he would be able to remove it even under favorable conditions. And importantly, the note of hope represented by the child's gaze in *The Gale* is not only absent but has given way to an image of futility. Like the fishermen in *Shark Fishing* and *The Herring Net*, the man labors at his task with the industrial trappings of modern technology. And like *The Herring Net* and *The Gale*, the storm of *Driftwood* seems ultimately powerless to hinder him. Yet unlike these paintings, the success of the endeavor remains far from inevitable simply by virtue of its immensity.

The separation of *Geist* from Nature has here reached a new level. The man continues his struggle in spite of the storm, almost indifferent to it. The storm rages in the sea regardless of the man, unable to alter the course of his actions but also ultimately indifferent to them. But this mutual indifference is not at all a reconciliation. It is rather that the two realms are finally seen to be distinct. As with *The Veteran in a New Field*, however, *Driftwood* represents a troubled consciousness. *Geist* is in trouble; it has turned the technologizing rationalism of industrialization upon itself. It *has*, contrary Pippin's observation concerning the modernist program,'liberated' itself from its'Natural home.' But it has failed to build a suitable home outside of Nature. Alienated from itself and from Nature, it seemed possible that *Geist* might still discover some solution to these problems in the future. Yet when *Geist* turned its new power on nature, it succeeded mostly in destroying Nature, anonymizing and dehumanizing itself in the process. In *Driftwood*, we see this entire drama played out over a single canvas. Homer had failed to find a concrete resolution to these problems, and *Driftwood* seems primarily an expression of despair.

Yet the fact that the painting *represents* a failure – a failure on Homer's part, to be sure, but only because this was one of the broader historical failures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – does not mean that the painting is *itself* a failure. Indeed, recalling the original essence of art, *Driftwood* is without question an "address to the responsive heart" (Hegel 2004, 78). Hegel was convinced that the importance of art had run its historical course, largely because he thought that the institutions of the state and civil society had

reconciled some of *Geist*'s most damning contradictions. This turned out to be wrong. As such, an expression of *Geist*'s attempt to make peace within itself, and between itself and Nature, was still necessary. But Hegel also remarks that "the work of art brings before us the eternal powers that hold domain in history" (Hegel 2004, 11). Homer, I claim, does bring these things before us. And his paintings, therefore, represent this: *Geist*'s troubled sadness over its inability to reconcile itself with itself *or* with Nature.

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