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Andrew Wyeth and the Wyeth Tradition, or “the Anxiety of Influence”

Helena Lamouliatte

- 1 Andrew Wyeth, one of the most famous painters of 20th-century figurative American art, was both vilified by a vast majority of critics, and praised by the American (and Japanese) public. When he died in January 2009, the case was far from being settled. Most of Wyeth’s obituaries underlined the discrepancy between public and critical acclaim. He was described in turn as a master technician, an artistic anachronism, a sentimental or even reactionary artist, mostly because of his depiction of bleak rural scenes.¹ Most of the newspaper obituaries also referred to the “Wyeth dynasty” of American painters, in which his father N. C. Wyeth (1882-1945), his sisters Henriette (1907-1997) and Carolyn (1909-1994), and his father’s teacher, the famous illustrator Howard Pyle (1853-1911), were usually included, which further strengthened the impression that he did not belong to the avant-garde. In a recent academic publication, *Rethinking Andrew Wyeth*, David Cateforis points out that Andrew Wyeth mostly received critical acclaim until the mid-1960s, as a master of magic or poetic realism (viii), but in the second half of the 1960s, many critics turned against him because of his stubborn reliance on what seemed, at that time, an antiquated form of subjective expression (ix).
- 2 However, two comments hinted at another dimension in Andrew Wyeth’s art. Marina Vaizey stated that: “One of the canniest assessments is that of Robert Rosenblum: Wyeth was ‘at once the most overestimated painter by the public and the most underestimated painter by the knowing art audience [...] a creator of very very haunting images that nobody who hates him can get out of their minds.’”(Vaizey 2009) In the *Los Angeles Times*, Jamie Wyeth (1946-), one of his sons, declared: “At one level, it’s all snowy woods and stone walls. At another, it’s terrifying. He exists at both levels. He is a very odd painter.” (Nelson 2009) Cateforis also notes the “dark poetry of Wyeth’s imagery” (5), which has been frequently underlined by reviewers since his first solo exhibitions in the mid-1940s.

- 3 Our contention is that the lingering effect of his dismal images stems from a very specific combination of American and European influences, quite unique in American art, inherited in part from his father, N. C. Wyeth, and the illustrator, Howard Pyle. These conflicting attractions exemplify what Harold Bloom called *The Anxiety of Influence*, which was the title of his 1973 famous book on the subject. Indeed, Bloom's analysis of the dynamics between tradition and the individual artist in the literary text, can easily be adapted to art history:

The profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to source-study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images. Poetic influence [...] is necessarily the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet. When such study considers the context in which that life-cycle is enacted, it will be compelled to examine simultaneously the relations between poets as cases akin to what Freud called the family romance. (Bloom 8)

- 4 Since Bloom's theory is built on the classic Freudian model of father/son relationships, it seems particularly relevant to Wyeth's case, as this struggle shaped his maturation as an artist. Sean Burke explains that the artist's "anxiety of influence" is due to "his fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings" (155). Indeed, Wyeth's images can be seen as an intimate "battlefield of psychodynamic forces" (Loreck 24) on which he tries to overcome past influences (his father's and Pyle's) while re/claiming his subjectivity as an artist.

The "Wyeth tradition"

- 5 Andrew Wyeth is thus often associated with "a dynasty of American artists" (Meyer 15), the Wyeth tradition, or sometimes, The Wyeths, which refers to a specific style of painting, placed under the tutelage of the illustrator of classics, Howard Pyle, who was N. C. Wyeth's teacher and mentor in the early 20th century. Andrew Wyeth developed a very personal relation with the art of Pyle, which pervades his own art in a subtle and distorted manner, dating back to the days when he learned drawing techniques by copying Pyle's images (Meryman 1996: 89).
- 6 In her introduction to the February 1975 special edition of *American Artist*, entitled "Three Generations of the Wyeth family,"² Susan E. Meyer writes that there are more differences than similarities among these artists, and that the only things they share in the end is a figurative style of painting and a very intense and emotional attitude towards their art (35). Even though her article does not give any substantiated definition of the Wyeth tradition, it clearly establishes the fact that N. C. Wyeth's art was strongly indebted to Pyle's influence, and as a result, it introduces the expression "The Brandywine Tradition."³ This approach to painting relies on what Meyer calls "corporeal identification" between the artist and his/her subject: "an empathy in which the artist and subject would palpitate with the same life force, would actually become the same" (94). According to David Kunzle, this form of mysticism was extolled by Pyle, who was influenced by the theories of the Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg,⁴ claiming that complete emotional "immersion" in the subject was a necessary step in the creative process (650). Swedenborg's peculiar philosophy had as strong, but largely forgotten, religious impact in America before the Civil War, and it deeply molded Pyle's character and psyche.⁵ Kunzle adds that Pyle's Swedenborgian streak is demonstrated by his choice of subject-matter: "Such spiritualization and

idealization is in keeping with the content of Pyle’s drawings, which are largely of romantic medieval, American historical, and pirate subjects” (650). In his book on N. C. Wyeth, Michel Le Bris uses the expression “mental projection” to describe this phenomenon and points out that this form of spiritualization of art echoes the philosophical roots of German romanticism.⁶

- 7 Neo-Platonism, British and German romanticism, and the writings of Swedenborg also largely contributed to the birth of Transcendentalism, which was one of the major influences of the Hudson River School painters. N. C. Wyeth was a strong admirer of Henry David Thoreau, whom he called his “worshipped friend” (Michaelis 209), and a keen reader of *Walden*, according to David Michaelis’s biography (117, 227). Nevertheless, Alexander Nemerov insists on the fact that the Brandywine tradition, whose sole purpose was book illustration, strongly focused on the phantasmagoric quality of romantic imagery (7). This streak can sometimes be found in Thomas Cole’s images, such as *The Voyage of Life: Youth* (1842), but it was later replaced by a form of mystical rapport to nature in Hudson River School landscapes.
- 8 From a very early age, Andrew Wyeth studied the paintings of his father and was fascinated by the romantic and adventurous scenes that were depicted.⁷ He never met Pyle, but studied his works thoroughly, and was attracted to N. C.’s extensive collection of costumes and uniforms inherited from Pyle.⁸ He was also molded by his father’s teaching with its transcendental emphasis on the importance of emotional truth for an artist: “Intensity of feeling was a quality he valued in himself and nurtured in his family: it was the lifeblood of the artists, the prize for being alive” (Meyer 43). As a consequence, Andrew became acutely aware of his feelings and attuned to his sensations. In numerous interviews he depicted the trance-like feeling he experienced when he suddenly found an object, a person, or a view inspiring. But even if he perpetuated the myth of the artist as a romantic character, he clearly departed from the Wyeth tradition of illustration when he matured as an artist, contrary to the contention of a large majority of critics, as Wanda Corn points out:

Given the aesthetic hierarchies of post-World War II art criticism, when critics called Wyeth an “illustrator,” it was a dismissive critique. Tagging him an illustrator put the younger Wyeth in the same category as his father, N. C. Wyeth, who was best known for his story-telling canvases made on commission to illustrate classics in literature such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island*. (Corn 2014: 72)

- 9 The first exhibition officially trying to put forward common features among Andrew, his son James, N. C. and Pyle was entitled *The Brandywine Heritage: Howard Pyle, N. C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth, James Wyeth*. It was organized in 1971 by The Brandywine River Museum and focused on what was called in the catalogue their “technical facility,” that is to say their outstanding draftsmanship,⁹ though the argument may seem thin. The second exhibition, *Wondrous Strange—The Wyeth Tradition*, at the Farnsworth Art Museum in 1998, focused on subject matter and tried to define the concept of “wondrous strange” as a common element permeating the works of these artists. In the introduction to the catalogue, David Michaelis dwells upon Pyle’s “godlike figure” and iconoclastic teaching method (11), thus molding the Brandywine generation of high-strung and emotional artists prone to melodrama. However, the influence of Pyle on Andrew Wyeth’s work is more complex than these entertaining tales and has far-reaching compositional and technical implications. Michaelis’s foreword gives a broad definition of the concept of “wondrous strange,” using the Greek etymology of the word “fantastic.” The additional texts, written for the catalogue, do not go much

further in helping us fathom its exact meaning. Susan C. Larsen describes Pyle’s images as “violent, visionary, horrifying, and exotic” (16), and she underlines the artist’s strong taste for romance and adventure. Betsy Wyeth points out N. C. Wyeth’s ability to make fantasy emerge out of reality.¹⁰ And Theodore Wolff mentions Andrew Wyeth’s gift for depicting “the wonderful and strange, especially if they can be presented in everyday form and in as straightforward a manner as possible” (91). Although this strategy aiming to pigeonhole Wyeth as an artist deeply rooted in a century-long tradition of American illustrators was highly counterproductive regarding academic and critical reception to his work, it raised awareness about the multifaceted nature of his art.

Pyle’s technique and painterly approach

- ¹⁰ Larsen’s comment on N. C. Wyeth’s stylistic specificities offers more food for thought and can be used as a starting point to help us compare his compositional technique to Pyle’s. The latter perpetuated a “European” style, strongly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites—whose art was on view close at hand, thanks to a local collector¹¹—as can be seen more particularly in *Her head and shoulders hung over the space without* (1904) (Fig. 1), or *Vitia and the Governor* (1909), but also by Symbolism, whose influence is obvious in *The Mermaid* (1910), for example (Fig. 2).

Figure 1. Howard Pyle, *Her head and shoulders hung over the space without* (1904)

Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Vol. 109 (June to November 1904)

Figure 2. Howard Pyle, *The Mermaid*. Oil on canvas (1910)

Delaware Art Museum

- 11 Le Bris goes further and claims that this movement constituted Pyle's main source of inspiration: "The Pre-Raphaelites were his primary source of inspiration, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Morris, and also Walter Crane and the Arts and Crafts movement, with whom he shared a taste for images inspired by Celtic legends and English folklore" (15, my translation). Moreover, the Pre-Raphaelites' pictorial motto certainly appealed to Pyle's philosophy, inherited from the tenets of Transcendentalism: "Instead of the artificial chiaroscuro of the Old Masters, they determined to paint their pictures with complete fidelity to nature, studying each figure from a model, and painting landscape on the spot, out-of-doors" (Wood 10).
- 12 If we analyze Pyle's compositional technique more closely, we can clearly notice how his art was indebted to these movements. First of all, the technique by which the sinuous contours of figures are integrated in the overall composition (in *I clutched at his ankle* (1902), for example) seems to be taken from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca* (1877), or *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1872-7) by Edward Burne-Jones. Then, the addition of diagonal patterns as a structural motif is striking in *Then the real fight began* (1908) (Fig. 12), or *We started to run back to the raft for our lives* (1902), when compared to *Isabella* (1849) by John Everett Millais, or *Hésiode et la Muse* (1891), by Gustave Moreau. In addition, the frequent use of curves as an alternate structural element, which can be observed in *The gigantic monster dragged and hacked the headless corpse of his victim up the staircase* (1896) (Fig. 15) or *He lost his hold and fell, taking me with him* (1909), is a basic compositional pattern of the Pre-Raphaelites—see, for instance, Burne-Jones' *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (1884), or *The Golden Stairs* (1880). To finish, the occasional use of very warm and intense colors, as in *An*

Attack on a Galleon (1905) or Marooned (1909), is a common defining trait of both the Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolist movements (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Howard Pyle, *An Attack on a Galleon*. Oil on canvas (1905)

Delaware Art Museum

- 13 As Pyle’s biographers point out in *Howard Pyle: Imagining an American School of Art*, his career reflected the dilemma faced by most 19th-century American artists, who were torn between past European influences and the desire to create a truly American art: “[Pyle’s art] also suggests the continuing U.S. cultural reliance on European norms, a dependency that the flagrantly nationalistic Pyle resisted his entire career but capitulated to in the end” (May xi). Jeanne Fox Friedman states that this paradox lies at the root of the Arts and Craft movement,¹² from which Pyle borrowed many concepts (Elzea 10). It is undeniable that Pyle’s images were deeply grounded in the political and artistic principles of the 19th century:

For just as the term “family values” in today’s American culture encodes a specific political and cultural agenda, so too, the deeper meaning of Pyle’s children’s stories and illustrations addressed in didactic, moral terms the development of a particular form of nineteenth-century medievalism. The style of Pyle’s books promotes the essential equation between timeless medieval virtues and modern morality. (Friedman 78)

N.C. Wyeth and the “American” stylistics

- 14 It took N. C. Wyeth several years to depart from the European tradition and Pyle’s stifling tutelage in order to create a more “American”¹³ style, based on “weighted geometries,” “unsettling spatial shifts,” and “unbroken light” (Novak1995: 230-231). After enduring Pyle’s authoritarian teaching methods, N. C., under the ever-growing

influence of transcendental philosophy,¹⁴ felt torn between illustration, which was his bread-and-butter activity, and the higher calling of Art, which demanded a more truthful depiction of Nature:

Wyeth’s dissatisfaction with the West and with illustration was thus connected to his disagreements, personal and professional, with Howard Pyle, who had taught him the dramatic techniques that he could no longer view as a “stepping stone” to fine art painting. For Wyeth, only fine art painting could depict the larger truths embodied in nature. (Nemerov 47)

- 15 N. C. never resolved this conundrum, since illustration was necessary to sustain his family’s expensive lifestyle, and he had to put fine arts aside—a decision which infuriated Andrew.¹⁵ However, throughout his career, N. C. Wyeth’s pictorial style remained shackled to the visual constraints of illustration,¹⁶ despite a progressive shift to a more personal technique and choice of subject matter that can be called his “American side.”
- 16 If we observe N. C.’s early work more closely, Pyle’s main stylistic features can be found in most Western subjects.¹⁷ We can see the same sinuous contours, warm colors, diagonal or curved patterns, and crisscross strokes of paint in *Rounding Up* (1904), *Cutting Out* (1904-1905) or *Bucking* (1905), for instance (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. N. C. Wyeth, *Rounding Up*. Oil on canvas (1904)

Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, the-athenaeum.org

- 17 However, N. C.’s style evolved rapidly, and as early as 1907, we can notice a radical stylistic change in *The Ore Wagon* (1907), for example (Fig. 5). He started to experiment with a horizontal format, the contours became sharper—figures suddenly stood out against a flat curtain-like background—and he used a softer pastel color palette, even dark and ochre shades for night scenes.

Figure 5. N. C. Wyeth, *The Ore Wagon*. Oil on canvas (1907)

Source: westernartandarchitecture.com

- 18 This new compositional technique can be found in *The Pay Stage* (1906), *The Little Posse/Trail Riders* (1907), *Summer* (1909), and *The Magic Pool* (1906), and brings back to mind Novak's definition of the American stylistic *topos*, encompassing the weight of compositions,¹⁸ the geometry of spatial structure, sculpted by the strong contrast between light and shade, the stiffness of figures,¹⁹ and the visible succession of parallel planes within the image.
- 19 Yet, throughout his career, N. C. Wyeth carefully selected each of the various stylistic options mentioned above, so as to make his images match the narratives he was supposed to illustrate, thus maximizing the need for efficiency required by his craft. In his illustrations of *Treasure Island* in 1911, he chose a very limited color palette, and dramatic Rembrandt-like light effects, as in *The Black Spot* (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. N. C. Wyeth, *The Black Spot*

Illustration for *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Scribner's Sons (1911).

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Spot_\(Treasure_Island\)#/media/File:TI-BlackSpot.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Spot_(Treasure_Island)#/media/File:TI-BlackSpot.jpg)

- 20 Then, he switched to a Pre-Raphaelite style, with bright and clashing colors for the Robin Hood series in 1917. And finally, for *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1919, we notice that he alternated different styles: American classicism in *The Flight Across the Lake*, stylized sharp shapes for the endpaper of the book (Fig. 8), and an unusual combination of luminism and Italian classicism in *The Battle at Glenn's Fall*.
- 21 We note, however, that N. C. departed from Pyle's 19th-century moral concerns to focus on the construction of American popular myths instead, as Nemerov explains:
- Wyeth theatrically transformed the cowboy into a rope-tossing David²⁰ to express his own kind of realism—a realism based less on appearances than essences. Ignoring the squalor of Stuart's ranch and depicting the cowboy as a mythical hero, Wyeth established the cowboy in his true or 'essential' position even while divesting him of the grimy particulars of his time and place. (Nemerov 41)
- 22 Despite N. C. Wyeth's attempt at crafting a more American style of illustration, we could conclude by saying that form was irremediably subjected to narrative in his art, and he never truly achieved his objective. As Eric Rosenberg puts it: “We know nothing from the picture without the story; the visuals depend on written narrative to caption the image. More even than caption, writing must fill in every hole that stands as sign in the painting” (31). This is certainly the main argument that can be used to oppose his art to his son's. The “signs” in Andrew Wyeth's paintings do not connect with writing.
- 23 Nevertheless, it is an indisputable fact that the son borrowed a few compositional and stylistic techniques from the father.²¹ Nemerov analyzes a recurring feature in N. C. Wyeth's work, which can be noticed in many of his images, despite his use of different styles: the use of a flat backdrop, suggesting a stage on which action is taking place. He

analyses it more specifically in a painting called *Gunfight* (1916) (Fig. 7): “But the scene more literally evokes the theater—specifically the stage—by way of the flat backdrop, the wooden floor on which the figures stand, and the shallow space that condenses the action at the very front of the picture plane. Such stage-like spaces appear in many Wyeth illustrations” (37).

Figure 7. N. C. Wyeth, *Gunfight*. Oil on canvas (1916)

Denver Art Museum

- 24 This theatrical effect is used in numerous interior scenes, such as *Wild Bill Hickok at Cards* (1916), where it is emphasized by the word “stage” printed on a sign pinned to the wall, or in *A Little Game of Draw* (1914) where a painting on the wall is used as a *mise en abyme*, and like a window without a view, it seems to open up the picture space and close it simultaneously (43-44). Nemerov finds a similar technique in exterior scenes like in *Fight on the Plains* (1916), for example. This time, the flat blue sky is used as a backdrop and helps focus the viewer’s attention on the crouching figures. We could refer to numerous other examples like *The Torrent in the Valley of Glencoe* (1913) and *The Death of Finnward Keelfarer* (1914) in which the natural background setting is blurred so that the figures at the front of the image seem to jut out. To finish, the endpaper of *The Last of the Mohicans* (Fig. 8) also shows N. C.’s utter mastery of this technique, with a yellow background cut midway by a canoe dividing the picture plane into two areas, sky and water, into which the shapes of the warriors in the upper half, and their projected shadows in the lower half, seem carefully chiseled. Furthermore, the trees in the foreground, cutting vertical stripes on the picture plane, and isolating the figures into parallel rectangles, create an even more elaborate frame-within-a-frame effect.

Figure 8. N. C. Wyeth, endpaper illustration of *The Last of the Mohicans*. Oil on canvas (1919)

Brandywine River Museum of Art

- 25 This specific treatment of background space, which cuts out the figures in a slightly “unrealistic” way, by emphasizing contours, will become seminal in Andrew’s art. He even took his father’s “backdrop effect” a step further, since it became a standard compositional effect in his art. In Andrew’s art, two recurrent motifs, echoing his father’s artifice, can be found: the sky as blank space,²² and the desiccated hillside motif.²³ Both strategies have a similar impact on the picture plane. They compress perspective by blocking the viewer’s gaze. This creates a visual impression of entrapment, even more so, since the hillside motif is often associated with an isolated figure, as is the case in *Winter* (1946), *Christina’s World* (1948), or *April Wind* (1952).

Figure 9. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*. Tempera on panel (1948)

Museum of Modern Art, New York, moma.org

- 26 As said earlier, Andrew borrowed from his father numerous other skills and painterly effects that could be deemed his “American side,” since he studied his father’s paintings from quite an early age. He often resorted to dramatic contrasts between light and shade, particularly in his early works—*The Woodshed* (1944), *Mother Archie’s Church* (1945), *Christina Olson* (1947), *Brown Swiss* (1957), *Young Bull* (1960). He also developed the same taste as his father for twilight or night scenes—for example, in *Night Hauling* (1944) (Fig. 10), *Two If by Sea* (1995), *Night Shadow* (1978), or *Night Sleeper* (1979).

Figure 10. Andrew Wyeth. *Night Hauling*. Tempera on masonite (1944)

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick ME, <http://artmuseum.bowdoin.edu/Obj9585?sid=27317&x=3894>.

- 27 He frequently used the “theme of frozen movement” (Nemerov 51), of which *Christina’s World* is certainly the most famous example (Fig. 9).²⁴ Lastly, Andrew borrowed the cropped format that N. C. used, for instance, in the endpaper illustration for *The Last of the Mohicans* (Fig. 8). This feature was essential to N. C.’s illustration technique, since it helped emphasize the depiction of action (like a photograph taken on the spot).
- 28 Yet, Andrew modified the cropped format to adapt it to his horizontal compositions, and it became one of the trademarks of his most famous images. The desiccated hillside motif acquired a very personal meaning in his art, since he declared twice that it was a representation of his father. He said to Richard Meryman, his biographer: “The hill [...] seemed to be breathing—rising and falling—almost as though it was my father’s chest” (19968 231). And Anne Classen Knutson quotes Andrew in the exhibition catalogue of the 2005 *Memory and Magic* exhibition: “Over on the other side of that hill was where my father was killed, and I was sick I’d never painted him. The hill finally became a portrait of him” (58). The recurrent motif, which was a metaphor for his father, recalls Harold Bloom’s theory of the “anxiety of influence” with its concept of “family romance.” (8, 62) Christof Loreck interprets it in a way which is particularly relevant to Wyeth’s case: “The poet needs to free himself from the overpowering influence of his precursor in order to write an innovative kind of poetry which would guarantee his place in history” (24). In Wyeth’s images, the representation of his father has a double function: it helps him through his mourning process, but also states the fact that he has ousted his painter-father.²⁵ This emotionally charged relationship was mentioned in Jerry Saltz’s obituary, in which he defined Andrew as: “a son with something to prove” (2009).
- 29 But if we look closely at the respective works of the members of the Wyeth tradition, the most striking feature remains their profound dissimilarities.²⁶ Far from the image of a naïve folk artist, it seems that Andrew Wyeth carefully honed a highly personal and elaborate style, synthesizing various influences, among which were the few stylistic elements mentioned above, borrowed from his father, that he combined with some of

Pyle’s painterly and compositional effects. The fact that Andrew was often described as an outstanding technician²⁷ is worth mentioning. This ability stemmed from his father’s classical fine art teaching methods. It was also strengthened by Andrew’s fascination with Albrecht Dürer, which he developed from a very early age. The old European master’s influence pervades every aspect of his art and is manifest in Wyeth’s unrelenting interest in Pyle’s works.²⁸ Dürer’s and Pyle’s influences constitute what we could call Wyeth’s “European side.” Throughout his career, he never strayed from a very accurate drawing technique, paying attention to every detail, and delineating sharp contours. Richard Lacayo (2009) describes it as: “a flinty, granular realism [...] with the kind of brushwork that specified the world in almost molecular detail,” which could be opposed to his father’s rather more Impressionist and retinal process of representation. Michael McNay wrote an excellent description of Andrew’s specific form of realism:

[Andrew Wyeth] worked in a tradition that might be called American isolationism, and that stretched back to the mid-19th century. It operated quite outside the Impressionist exploration of retinal impressions and the avant-garde movements that followed, and instead rendered appearances with a hyper-realist fidelity impossible in nature, but which gives a heightened sense of the moment and the place depicted. (McNay 2009)

- 30 We could object to McNay that some European artists, the Symbolists and the Surrealists, to name but a few, refused the “Impressionist exploration,” and remained faithful to the technique of “augmented realism” that Wyeth perpetuated in the United States, along with the Precisionists, and more recently the Photorealists. Nevertheless, Wyeth’s relentless exploration of figurative art and techniques, in spite of the overwhelming presence of abstraction after the Second World War, impacted his critical reception to such an extent that Wanda Corn recently coined this phenomenon “the Wyeth curse” (60). Eric Rosenberg reminds us of the persistence of Romanticism and romantic tropes well into pre-1945 American culture²⁹ which served “as a foil to the disconcerting uncertainties of the modern and its forms of representation and aesthetic” (27). Wyeth’s choice of rural subjects, which conveyed “poetic meaning,” “nostalgic realism,” or even “poetic or symbolic qualities” according to various critics (Cateforis 5-6) was viewed as a clear rejection of modernism.³⁰ David Cateforis also underlines the fact that the 1960s were a turning point because of the rejection of “subjective expression of the kind pursued by both Wyeth and the abstract expressionists” (ix) by pop art and minimalism. Indeed, in 1960s American culture, realism as an art form was progressively equated with political conservatism³¹ and considered as a backward trend. Sharon Monteith explains how, at the end of the 1950s, minimalism, with artists such as Frank Stella, started to decry painting as illusion (123), and then, in the 1960s, Andy Warhol’s “commercial realism” questioned the material of production itself (37). At that time, Wyeth’s “old-fashioned” way of figuring mimesis and deadpan form of realism, which questioned neither figuration nor the commodification of art, became an easy target.

Andrew Wyeth and the figure of Howard Pyle

- 31 Nemerov quotes an interview of Wyeth in which the latter talks about Pyle’s influence on his work, and comments on the specific aspects of the illustrator’s art that particularly caught his eye. Andrew was struck by Pyle’s ability to convey the “essence”

of a scene, and his optimal use of technical effects, which made him focus on one of its most significant aspects, rather than clutter the image with an overabundance of distracting details.³² As a result, Wyeth often used a similar technique, which could be described as “shifting the focal point.” This made him choose an unexpected angle, an unconventional format, or a surprising rendering of classic subject matter, in order to strengthen the expressiveness, or complexity, of a scene. This is the reason why many of his images have a defamiliarizing quality, despite their seemingly simple subjects.

- 32 A more specific analysis of *The Quaker* (1975) will help us illustrate this point (Fig. 11), since it shows a perfect example of Wyeth’s personal use of Pyle’s technique.

Figure 11. Andrew Wyeth, *The Quaker*. Collotype (1975)

Source : <https://missfolly.tumblr.com/post/8940445549/andrew-wyeth-the-quaker-1976>

- 33 The painting represents a wall section, showing, on the left, a snowy landscape through an open window, and on the right, the left part of a fireplace, from which two costumes are hanging.³³ We can see the back of a Quaker frock coat, and the front of an elegant and expensive-looking “fop’s coat” (Wyeth 103). The opulence of the morning coat, with its fine green, blue and red stripes on a golden background, matching buttons, and pale pink lining, shimmering in a beam of light coming from the right-hand side of the picture,³⁴ stands in sharp contrast with the plainness of the Quaker coat, and the bare shadowy surroundings (sanded floor, wooden window frame, walls painted in olive green, carved wood and brick fireplace).
- 34 Although the focal point of the image is the Quaker coat, the viewer’s gaze is attracted by the open window, on the left, and by the garment standing in full light, on the right. In this image, Wyeth twists Pyle’s technique, since the multiplication of focal points makes it difficult to establish clearly on which part of the picture the viewer’s eyes and attention should focus. He thus de-hierarchizes the picture plane, and renders

interpretation more complicated, which contrasts with Pyle's strong focus on "the essence" of a scene. Wyeth, for his part, seems to favor an aggregate of essences.

- 35 The window does not offer a pleasant and warm counterpoint to the rarefied atmosphere of the room, since it opens onto a barren landscape. Leafless and spidery branches bar the foreground view, and we notice a grid of tangled naked branches, in the background. The yellow grass is covered with patches of snow. The scene is bathed in a cold winter light, sharpening contours and contrast, which is opposed to the darkness of the hearth, gaping at the viewer, like an ominous black hole. The stylistic tribute to Pyle is obvious. However, Wyeth did not choose a quiet scene, like his memory of the Quaker anecdote, and evoked the illustrator's darker side, which enabled him to convey drama, without resorting to heavy-handed effects. One could illustrate Pyle's mastery in this field by mentioning, for instance, the hands holding a gun, which jut out of a trapdoor, leading to the hold in *Then the real fight began* (Fig. 12).

Figure 12. Howard Pyle, *Then the Real Fight Began* (1908)

Illustration for Captain Scarfield (1921).

Howard Pyle's *Book of Pirates: Fiction, Fact & Fancy Concerning the Buccaneers & Marooners of the Spanish Main*, Harper and Brothers, Plate facing p. 200, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pg_200_-_Then_the_Real_Fight_Began_\(color\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pg_200_-_Then_the_Real_Fight_Began_(color).jpg). Book accessible here: <http://www.archive.org/details/howardpylesbooko00pyle>

- 36 There is also the door slightly opened and revealing a terrified figure, who echoes the viewer's fear as he/she beholds *The gigantic monster dragged and hacked the headless corpse of his victim up the staircase* (Fig. 15). To finish, we could also mention a gaping door, the black rectangle, right in the middle of Catherine Duke quickened her steps (1904), situated next to the heroine's face and allowing the viewer's imagination free reign (Fig. 13).

Figure 13. Howard Pyle, *Catherine Duke quickened her steps*

Illustrating Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's story "The Gold".
Harper's Monthly Magazine (December 1904)

- 37 However, as far as Wyeth's art is concerned, the technical device is not an efficient narrative trick, used to maximize or prolong the impact of the tale. The window on the left in *The Quaker* does not offer any interpretive clues, it merely enhances the pervading ominous feeling. The shadow on the floor is the plain reflection of the frame; there is no hint of upcoming drama. The exhibition of old clothes, which belonged to Pyle, may be a subtle and melancholy way of portraying the illustrator, and his taste for theatricality—something which Wyeth himself shared. Yet, the staging of the scene, the bare but intricate composition, show that Wyeth has been able to distance himself from the swashbuckling tales favored by Pyle to create his own specific atmosphere. Thus, in this sort of double portrait, the Quaker coat stands for Wyeth, while the fop's coat symbolizes Pyle, although they seem to represent the two sides of the same coin or the two opposite poles to which Wyeth is attracted as an artist.
- 38 The second element borrowed by Wyeth is the meticulous rendering of architectural textures. There are too many examples in his works since it was a quintessential part of his art, but we could mention two exemplary images, in which there is a complete focus on this aspect, such as *Weatherside* (1965) and *Cooling Shed* (1953) (Fig. 14).

Figure 14. Andrew Wyeth, *Cooling Shed*. Tempera on panel (1953)

Philadelphia Museum of Art

- 39 In Pyle's images, architectural parts often constitute minute details, although the painstaking attention that he devoted to them shows the extent of his technical abilities. We could mention the stone house and wall, in *Catherine Duke quickened her steps* (Fig. 13), the stone wall of the house, and the wooden window frame in *Her head and shoulders hung over the space without* (Fig. 1). The door, woodwork, wooden staircase, and the walls in *The gigantic monster dragged and hacked the headless corpse of his victim up the staircase* are also perfect examples of Pyle's craft (Fig. 15).

Figure 15. Howard Pyle, *The gigantic monster dragged and hacked the headless corpse of his victim up the staircase*

In *Ole Virginia* by Thomas Nelson Page (1896), 1st-art-gallery.com

- 40 Yet, what seemed to be mere details, subordinated to an overarching narrative strategy, become in Wyeth's art a systematic pattern, and a pictorial technique, verging on Precisionism. Moreover, architectural elements sometimes invade the whole picture plane and are treated as autonomous subject matters—for instance in *Cooling Shed* (1953) (Fig. 14), *Brown Swiss* (1957), *Hay Ledge* (1957), or *Groundhog Day* (1959).

Figure 16. Andrew Wyeth, *Groundhog Day*. Tempera on panel (1959)

Philadelphia Museum of Art

- 41 These pictures reveal a strong affinity with Gothic tropes, revolving more specifically around the depictions of the Olson and Kuerner farms (though a similar pattern can be found with other buildings that were repeatedly painted by Wyeth, like Mother Archie's Church, the Winfields' house, or *The Mill*³⁵). In a chapter of his book devoted to the study of Gothic fiction, aptly entitled “Abodes and architectural issues” (“Demeures et problèmes d'architecture”), Maurice Lévy stresses that the architectural component is an essential prerequisite for Gothic fiction.³⁶ This rule might be applied to Wyeth's art, since its Gothic penchant is manifest in the way the Olson and Kuerner farms became tantamount to a writer's fictional settings.³⁷
- 42 Just like the memory of his father was turned into a recurring motif, Wyeth's fascination with Pyle reached an intimate form of symbolism that he used on several occasions to question the figure of the artist and his “painter-function,” to use Michel Foucault's concept. Three of Wyeth's self-portraits—*Trodden Weed* (1951), *Dr. Syn* (1981) and *Break-up* (1994)—betray an underlying reference to Pyle, and depict a haunted vision of himself, as a man, and as an artist.

Figure 17. Andrew Wyeth, *Trodden Weed*. Tempera (1951)

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

- 43 *Trodden Weed* is a very special painting in Andrew's career (Fig. 17). In 1950, the artist had to undergo surgery, and during the operation, his heart stopped beating. He later recounted that while he was floating off, in a trance-like state, he had a vision: "He saw in the blackness a medieval figure, handsome, almost princely in his furs, moving toward him across the tile hospital floor. It was Dürer, who held out his hand to his disciple. Wyeth started forward; then pulled back. The figure withdrew" (Meryman 1996 284). The dream was certainly influenced by Wyeth's reading at that time—his wife had just offered him a biography of the artist that he took to the hospital (Ibid). However, it had such a lasting effect on him that he pictured himself in a painting, wearing boots that had belonged to Pyle, and that he actually wore to take long, invigorating walks during his recovery period.
- 44 Apart from the anecdotal narrative, it is interesting to see how Wyeth merged two tutelary figures, Pyle as an intimate reference, and Dürer, the old European master, to create one of his most famous images. Several aspects of Dürer's technique can be found in *Trodden Weed*. Sharp contours outline the shape of the figure, which stands out on the background (there is no chiaroscuro effect). Wyeth focuses on the depiction of textures—leather, fabric, and dry grass have replaced silk, fur, and the myriad wisps of curly hair. The booted feet stride across a hill, covered in dried yellowy grass (one of Wyeth's famous motifs, as we have seen earlier). The destructive gesture is symbolized by a horizontal black line, picturing a blade of grass crushed by one of the boots. The headless character, moving along and wearing old-fashioned knee-length boots, might stand for the relentless march of Thanatos. As far as the artist is concerned, it could be death itself, coming to get him in the guise of one of his favorite masters.³⁸ These boots could also stand for Pyle's ghost striding across the Pennsylvanian hills and bringing

back the memory of his legacy. They might represent Wyeth himself, as an artist haunted by old masters. In *Trodden Weed*, Wyeth depicted himself as rising from the dead, his steps guided by the secular figure of Pyle—and not by God. Using the metaphor of the boots, he reclaims his “artist-function,” showing that he has recovered his creative power by symbolically stamping the ground, so as to regain possession of “his” hill, one of his favorite motifs and also a metaphor for his father, as seen earlier. This strategy brings back to mind Jacques Derrida’s words about Van Gogh’s shoes (a text in which he criticizes Heidegger’s denial of the artist’s presence in the work of art):

What Heidegger allegedly neglected, ignored (“overlooked”), is the “personal” and “physiognomic” aspect of these shoes [...] here [Van Gogh] shows the shoes *face-on*, coming toward us, looking at the spectator (“as if facing us”), staring at us, a staring or stared-at face, with individual traits, wrinkles, a “veridical portrait of aging shoes.” [...] The reattachment is so tight (absolute) that [...] they *are* Vincent Van Gogh from top to toe. *To shoe equals to be*: you should reconstitute the full consequence of that. (Derrida 370)

- 45 The overpowering desire of possessing the object, which is usually associated with the creative drive, is pictured in its utmost ambiguity in Van Gogh’s and Wyeth’s paintings. Michel de M’Uzan coined the concept of “narcissistic expansion” (141) to describe this psychological urge.
- 46 Beyond the metaphor of the artist, or a tribute to one’s elders, Derrida sees in Van Gogh’s shoes a way of “figuring painting” (“figurer la peinture”). This metaphor could easily be used for *Trodden Weed*, which might then represent Wyeth’s own *self-portrait-cum-manifesto*:
 - [...] the shoes are there in painting, they are there for (figuring, representing, remarking, de-picting?) painting at work. [...]
 - painting at work, like the painter in action, like pictorial production in its process? (Derrida 372)
- 47 Dr. Syn is another enigmatic self-portrait, staging more specifically the scopic drive this time (Fig. 18). Wyeth admitted that this strange painting was a self-portrait³⁹ and he painted it in the aftermath of another surgical episode.

Figure 18. Andrew Wyeth, *Dr. Syn*. Tempera on panel (1981)

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

- 48 He depicted himself as a skeleton, wearing a military fitted coat belonging to Pyle, and velvet slippers, sitting on a stool in the top room of a lighthouse, and looking in the distance. On the right, a cannon is pointing towards the ocean through an opening in the wall. Wyeth gave some interesting information about *Dr. Syn*; he didn't use a random skeleton as a model but an x-rayed image of his own.⁴⁰ He even went so far as to represent the different and numerous parts of his skeleton, even the ones hidden underneath the clothes.⁴¹ Michael Taylor contends that Wyeth was inspired by Symbolist painter James Ensor—an artist who often used the skeleton motif, as in *La Mort et les Masques* (1897) or *Squelettes se disputant un hareng saur* (1891)—or by the Surrealist painter Paul Delvaux (see for example *La Vénus Endormie*, 1944). Yet, these works rather belong to the more general category of the “dances macabres” (or “dance of death”). Indeed, the skeleton motif was used differently by the Symbolists and the Surrealists. In Wyeth's image, the introspective pose, and implicit reference to the artist himself, evoke the *memento mori* tradition, a sub-category of *vanitas* paintings. According to Ingvar Bergstrom, the genre of *vanitas* painting requires the presence of three specific categories of objects: symbols of terrestrial life,⁴² symbols of the transience of things and/or death,⁴³ and references to an afterlife or resurrection.⁴⁴
- 49 Wyeth's self-portrait combines elements from the first two categories (a skeleton, a military jacket—a symbolical armor—and a cannon), which place his work within a European tradition. Indeed, *memento mori* are quite rare in American art, and William Harnett was one of the few to use the genre.⁴⁵ Thus, Wyeth combined various sources in *Dr. Syn*: architectural details, such as the marble tiled floor, which seem to belong to a Dutch painting; motifs borrowed from European art history, like the Symbolist movement; and both European and American references in terms of subject matter, the

tradition of *vanitas* paintings, through the skeleton and other symbols standing for the painter’s mortal condition, and the transient nature of his art. The fact that Wyeth used, once again, clothes that used to belong to Pyle, might indicate his need to ponder on old masters’ legacy, as if he was taking stock of his place in American and Western art. The observation platform, the cannon and the reflective pose of the skeleton represent the scopic drive, a subject that Wyeth began to explore in *The Revenant* (1949). Wyeth comments on the artist’s deadly desire to absorb reality in its minutest details, even though, this wish is doomed to failure. The act of seeing is pictured as a weapon: the artist watches and destroys reality at the same time.

- 50 The title is also interesting (beyond the obvious homophony with the word “sin”) since it is taken from the adventure novel by Russell Thorndike, published in 1915, in which the main character, the Reverend Doctor Christopher Syn—a former pirate known as Captain Clegg—leads a double life, and also goes by the name of Scarecrow, as the head of a fierce gang, *The Night Riders* (Taylor 40). The title of the painting is a further reference to Pyle and to illustration, but mostly alludes to duplicity and guilt, which strengthens the reflexive power of the *memento mori*: faced with impending death, a man solemnly reflects upon his life and his mistakes. The reflection upon the function and obsessions of the artist is coupled with a moral questioning, which ties the image to the ancient codes of the *vanitas* genre, based on an internal duality, as Norman Bryson said: “The interest of *vanitas* pieces may in fact lie in their fully self-conscious acceptance of their ‘internal flaw.’ The genre changes at once if we begin with the hypothesis that the *vanitas* is deliberately built on paradox, and that the conflict between world-rejection and worldly ensnarement is in fact its governing principle” (116-117).
- 51 Our last example is *Breakup* (1994), which belongs to the category of the “covert self-portrait,” since, without additional information, it is impossible to grasp the meaning of the image (Fig. 19). Contrary to the other examples, this painting does not contain any obvious reference to Pyle, except the depiction of a dramatic and macabre scene that the latter particularly enjoyed, as shown earlier.

Figure 19. Andrew Wyeth, *Breakup*. Tempera on panel (1994)

Private collection, Source: <https://theartstack.com/artist/andrew-wyeth/breakup-2>.

- 52 Wyeth painted a bronze sculpture of his hands, surfacing out of an ice block, floating on the thawing Brandywine River (Knutson 54). The hands are in the foreground of the picture, leaving fingerprints in the snow, which suggests movement. In the middle of the picture, we can see water, and blocks of ice, breaking loose, because of thawing. In the background, we notice a yellowish field with patches of snow; and in the distance, a forest and a small stripe of grey sky. *Breakup* exudes a cold and bleak atmosphere, despite the hopeful title. The image might allude to Pyle's painting, *Then the real fight began* (1908), in which a man's hands, one of them holding a gun, spring from a hatchway, so as to shoot pirates (Fig. 12). However, the effect produced by Wyeth's scene is quite striking, and mildly horrific, contrary to Pyle's dramatic depiction of an assault. Wyeth, who generally avoided the genre of self-portrait, once more used an oblique way and the reference to a genre—the fantastic—to portray himself in this picture. He reduced his body to mere limbs, but, quite symbolically, chose his hands which seem to be animated by an urge to move (or, more specifically, to paint) and function without any bodily attachment. One could conveniently adapt to Wyeth's painting an allegory used for writers by Maurice Blanchot who spoke of “persecutory prehension” for writers plagued with a “sick hand.” “The ‘sick’ hand that never lets the pencil go, that cannot let it go, because it does not really hold what it is holding; because what it holds belongs to shadow, and the hand itself is a shadow” (67-68). The description of the creative impulse, as pictured by Wyeth, is once again ambivalent. The thawing process hints at rebirth, and art is shown as a primeval drive capable of overcoming elemental powers; while the pervading gloom, and the block of ice clamping the hands like a vise, may also evoke the artist's inner suffering and battle against an uncontrollable, but vital, urge. Despite the creative process, it seems that the artist cannot suppress a latent feeling of guilt and anguish, inherent to the act of painting. Wyeth's transcendentalist fantasy of becoming Emerson's “transparent

eyeball”⁴⁶ has often been quoted in his interviews: “I wish I could paint without me existing [...] When I’m alone in the woods [...] I forget all about myself, I don’t exist. [...] But if I’m suddenly reminded of myself, that I’m me—then everything falls to pieces” (Meryman 1965: 114). Wyeth’s self-portraits show the remaining pieces of an artist, overburdened with obsessions and suffering. These self-portraits, in which the artist depicts mostly body parts or his skeleton, further demonstrate that a deep Gothic undercurrent exists in his art, as defined by Robert Miles: “The Gothic is a discursive site, a carnivalesque mode for representations of the ‘fragmented subject’” (4). Furthermore, in each of these paintings, Wyeth either resorts to Pyle’s imagery, or includes overt references to the illustrator, thus betraying both admiration and anguish towards the illustrator’s tutelage. Howard Pyle is another “aesthetic patriarch” (Burke 154) whose influence the younger artist must overcome.

Conclusion

53 Analyzing Wyeth’s stylistic influences has allowed us to grasp the complexity of his art on both thematic and compositional levels, despite disparaging criticism. This article aims at offering a more coherent understanding of the emergence of Andrew Wyeth’s compositional style and technique, as well as an aesthetic background for some of his well-known motifs. In the end, he borrowed fewer elements from his father’s art than from Howard Pyle’s, although the cropped horizontal format and the “backdrop effect” can be considered seminal structural elements of his work. And even though Pyle’s influence on Wyeth’s art is certainly stronger than what could initially be expected, it was transposed in a minor key, suffusing Wyeth’s images, but stripped from the most glaring tricks pertaining to the illustrative function of Pyle’s paintings. Reading Wyeth’s paintings in the light of Bloom’s theory of “the anxiety of influence” may help us grasp the “haunting” quality of Wyeth’s images mentioned by Robert Rosenblum in our introduction. Wyeth was torn between the influence of his elders, his complex relationship with his father, and the construction of his own artistic subjectivity. This emphasis on the subjective side of art is certainly what may help define him as a modern painter. Donald Kuspit aptly sums up the paradoxical nature of Wyeth’s art: “reliance on tradition—both as a model for the insightful rendering of human experience and as a source of technique—is his way of dealing with modern anxiety” (182).

54 Wyeth’s self-portraits, and their numerous references to Pyle, allowed us to show that the dark side of Wyeth’s work goes beyond the generally accepted historical justification,⁴⁷ and has more subjective associations for the artist than the postwar generation’s *malaise*. Wyeth’s images picture the intrinsic duality of life by defamiliarizing the everyday reality, according to the process described by Viktor Shklovsky in *Art as Technique*:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (Shklovsky 12)

55 This strategy is combined with a subdued Gothic *modus operandi*, stemming from his own reading of Pyle’s works, sharing a few traits with the original canon, but re-

configured through the prism of the artist’s obsessions. Maurice Lévy proposes an all-encompassing definition of the genre, which aptly defines the mood pervading Wyeth’s art: “The same Gothic reality which is also life, seen in the light of this other thing lurking within” (xxvi), which corresponds to the “shift from realism to the imaginary”⁴⁸ (8) that is often noticed in his paintings.

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NOTES

1. See the obituaries written in 2009 by Henry Allen and Bart Barnes in *The Washington Post*, Mark Feeney in the *Boston Globe*, Richard Lacayo in *Time*, and Marina Vaizey in *The Independent*.
2. She defined the *Wyeth family* rather broadly, and in addition to Andrew’s son James, and his father N. C. Wyeth, we can find N. C.’s two daughters, Henriette Wyeth (1907-1997) and Carolyn Wyeth (1909-1994), his two sons-in-law, John McCoy (1910-1989) and Peter Hurd (1904-1984), as well as Georges Weymouth (1936-), the husband of his granddaughter, Ann Brelsford (the daughter of John McCoy and Henriette Wyeth).
3. “Trained by Howard Pyle, the famous master of American illustration, Newell Convers Wyeth adopted and broadened the distinctive approach to painting that has been termed ‘The Brandywine Tradition’” (Meyer 35).
4. Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a scientist who began to experience dreams and visions that he called a spiritual awakening. One of his biographers, David Duner, mentions “this influential visionary’s esoteric theology and doctrine of correspondences” (2).
5. Jill P. May and Robert E. May state that “one of the most popular ‘unconventional’ religious faiths sweeping across America before the Civil war, Swedenborgianism was founded on the prolific writings of the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist, philosopher, and bureaucrat Emanuel Swedenborg. Though Swedenborg faced ostracism in his native land for his radical views of heaven and earth, his creed spread to the United States in the early nineteenth-century, gaining many adherents in the Philadelphia area and engaging many artists throughout the United States” (4).
6. “Kant would have talked about ‘transcendental schematism,’ Schelling about ‘the power of transfiguration of the symbol,’ and Schleiermacher, who read the Neo-Platonicians, about ‘creative imagination’: Howard Pyle truly followed in the footsteps of this tradition, which originated in the core intuition of German romanticism” (Le Bris 15, my translation).
7. “Off the foyer was the room where his father’s greatest illustrations were stored. [...] Andrew, spellbound, steeped himself in his father’s work. He lugged pictures almost his own height into the studio where NC stood painting [...]. When Andrew leaned an old illustration against a table, NC stopped work and talked about the scenes and answered questions from his son, the only person in the family interested in these past pictures” (Meryman 1996: 54).
8. “For Andrew the heart of the studio was the huge collection of costumes stored in chests. Dressed in these authentic uniforms—some inherited from Howard Pyle, whose pictures Andrew was also studying—Andrew could actually be the characters that excited him” (Meryman 1996: 55).
9. “In the work of Andrew and his father, Pyle’s faith in illustration as ‘a ground to produce painters’ has proven justified. Andrew’s son, James, thanks to his father’s instruction and direction and to his own application, has more than adequately shown his command of that technical facility which Pyle took for granted as a necessary means” (McLanathan 14).
10. “*The Giant* (1923) [...] celebrates the human power of fantasy emerging out of reality” (Larsen 17).
11. Most art historians agree on the fact that Pyle was influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites. Larsen explains how Pyle became familiar with their paintings: “Within Pyle’s Wilmington community there existed a remarkable and useful storehouse of wonder and delight, the legendary Pre-Raphaelite collection assembled by Samuel Bancroft Jr.” (16). Kunzle goes back in time to the European tradition: “But the weight of the European tradition hung heavily over Pyle. He was of course conscious of his debt to the Pre-Raphaelites, the Victorian engravers generally, and Dürer—of whose works he actually made pastiches” (649).

12. Fox Friedman says that: "Pyle embraced this paradox of a nostalgic looking back towards the Middle-Ages for a more practical foundation of American morality. The Arts and Crafts movement in America, as exemplified by such proponents as Charles Eliot Norton, helped to meld art and Victorian morality into just such a moral aesthetic. Norton, the first professor of Fine Arts at Harvard joined with his friend John Ruskin to found the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts. In Norton's work, this moral aesthetic is seen in his deep-seated belief in the ethical and moral superiority of American forms of republicanism" (82).

13. As far as the question of light is concerned, Novak also adds: "Homer's light does not, through its own tangibility, challenge the fundamental integrity of shape and matter [...] he always maintains the unbroken identity of individual shape" (*American Painting* 140).

14. "At this time and for the rest of his life, Wyeth read Thoreau avidly; it is not difficult to detect the philosopher's words behind the artist's adulation of a gentle and simple nature" (Nemerov 47).

15. Andrew Wyeth supposedly said to Richard Meryman: "My brothers and sisters loved him dearly,' Wyeth says angrily, 'but I don't think they realized how he bastardized his art to give them the life they wanted. We were wonderful until we got older. Then we ruined him.'" (1996 80).

16. As Alexander Nemerov explains in an article about N. C. Wyeth: "Wyeth was an 'obvious' or theatrical painter because, as an illustrator, that is what he was supposed to be" (37).

17. Nemerov explains that N. C. started to sell his own work right after joining Pyle's school and demand for this type of subjects remained strong for several years: "For the next few years, Wyeth was virtually overwhelmed with commissions for illustrations, most of them on a western theme. By 1910, however, he had become dissatisfied with western subjects" (45).

18. "The problem of weight is another challenging element in the precarious task of making distinctions between the American and European vision. There is an insistence on a geometry of spatial structure [...]" (Novak 2007: 144).

19. "Homer's figures respond to a gravitational pull similar to that of our three-dimensional world. [...] Homer's people are set like rocks [...]" (Novak 2007: 142).

20. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's David on view at the Borghese Gallery in Rome.

21. Wanda Corn summarizes this in a recent article: "There were other aspects of N. C. Wyeth's practices that left traces on Andrew's work. N. C. used traditional narrative and realist devices to tell stories: colorful period costumes, figures in vigorous action, theatricalized still-lives, and stage-set interiors. Andrew Wyeth was similarly drawn to the expressive potential of clothes, human gestures, and still-life elements. But he transformed these inheritances into a style of muted colors, precise descriptions, emptiness, and silence, N. C. Wyeth's landscape paintings were intensely colorful and thickly painted without the sparseness, tension and moodiness of the younger Wyeth's work" (Corn 2014: 73).

22. See *Teels Island* (1954), *Dil Huey Farm* (1941), *Off Shore* (1967), *Snow Hill* (1989), *Pentecost* (1989), *Airborne* (1996).

23. See *April Wind* (1952), *Winter 1946* (1946), *Christina's World* (1948), and *Spring* (1978).

24. For further details on this subject, see my Ph.D dissertation in which "frozen moment" is called "*procédé de figement*" (Lamouliatte-Schmitt 2011: 183-193).

25. Corn underlines the fact that the complicated relation between father and son was a trigger for Andrew's inspiration: "He often dragged up memories from his psychologically loaded relationship with his father" (Corn 2014: 73).

26. Michael R. Taylor underlines that there were more similar features in Wyeth's early works, when he was still using oil painting and mimicking the "Plein Air" technique: "Wyeth's earliest oil paintings reveal a profound debt to the work of N. C. Wyeth, under whom he had received a severely disciplined studio apprenticeship, as well as artists his father admired, such as Daniel Garber, William Lathrop, and other American impressionists of the New Hope School. These oil

paintings lacked the assurance of Wyeth’s best watercolors, however, and were rarely exhibited” (30-31). There are a few examples: *Spring Landscape at Kuerners* (1933) and *Georges Island* (1938). Wyeth briefly attempted to adapt this style to tempera painting, as for example in *Charlie Irvine* (1937) and *Dead Gull* (1938), but he quickly moved on to a more personal approach.

27. In *The Guardian*’s obituary, Michael McNay (2009) used these exact words: “master technician;” Valerie J. Nelson and Myrna Oliver (2009) in *The Los Angeles Times* also mentioned the painter’s technical skills: “master of the magic-realist technique;” Richard Lacayo (2009) in *Time* stressed that this ability bothered a lot of art critics: “That his technical capabilities were so apparent only made it more annoying to some critics.” To conclude, Kathleen A. Foster interviewed by Larry Rohter (2009) from *The New York Times* declared: “Kathleen A. Foster, the senior curator of American art and director of the Center for American Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, said, ‘There is no question that there has been a polarization of opinion’ about Wyeth and his work. ‘He was a kind of virtuoso whose work was intensely modern, with an enormous emotional resonance,’ she said.”

28. Dürer was also one of Pyle’s favorite painters.

29. He explains that “in fact, much of the history of American painting prior to 1945 has been dependent on a couching of the nascent modern in the Romantic ideology, whether the latter be called nationalism, or Americanism [...]” (Rosenberg 27).

30. Ann Landi wrote in *ARTnews*: “For much of his career, Wyeth’s paintings were dismissed as sentimental and contrary to the avant-garde spirit that made midcentury American art great” (59).

31. From a strictly political perspective, the fact that Wyeth was suspected to lean towards the Republican Party, or in any case, to tangle with the country’s political elite, was certainly considered an aggravating factor by most art critics, as Wanda Corn explains: “There were reasons to align Wyeth, the artist, with the Republican Party [...] in 1959 the artist had made a watercolor portrait of Dwight Eisenhower for a *Time* magazine cover, and in 1970 President Nixon and his wife hosted a one-man Wyeth exhibition in the East room of the White House. [...] Wyeth had also been at the White House in 1963 to receive the Medal of Freedom from President Lyndon B. Johnson, having been nominated by President John F. Kennedy. Much later, in 2007, President George W. Bush awarded Wyeth the National Medal of Arts” (Corn 2004: 78).

32. Recalling what his father had said about the illustration classes of Howard Pyle, Andrew Wyeth told an interviewer: “For one class a student did a picture of a meetinghouse. It showed the Quakers sitting and thinking, heads bowed, as they do before one of them stand up and speak. Pa recalled, “Pyle looked at it and remarked, ‘Well, that’s a very good graphic picture of what takes place in a Quaker meeting. But, listen, in my experience at Quaker meetings [...] the thing that I remember the most, which to me is the *essence* [emphasis added], is looking out the window and seeing a horse tethered at his carriage, his head moving up and down, and a sultry, misty landscape beyond.’ That idea conveyed more of the quietness of the meetinghouse than did the picture of all those people sitting around. And that’s where Pyle was a master” (Nemerov 44).

33. These costumes belong to Pyle’s collection of old garments (Wyeth 103).

34. On the floor we can see the projected shadow of an unseen window located beyond the right-hand side of the painting’s frame.

35. *Mother Archie’s Church* is the name of a church and also the title of a 1945 painting. The Winfield’s house is represented in several paintings, like *Two Family* (1977), *Winfield’s Porch* (1983), *Rag Bag* (1986), or *Fast Lane* (1987). The Mill belonged to the Wyeths’ estate, and is pictured in *Night Sleeper* (1979), *Flood Plain* (1986), and *Last Light* (1988), for example.

36. “L’imaginaire, dans ces romans, est toujours logé” (Lévy xxviii).

37. For a more detailed analysis of the importance of these houses in Wyeth’s art, see Lamouliatte-Schmitt (2012).

38. Wyeth recounted the same anecdote in his 1995 autobiography, and this narrative highlighted the symbolic aspect of Dürer’s apparition: “Before the operation I had been looking at Albrecht Dürer’s *Works*. During the operation they say my heart stopped once. At that moment I could see Dürer standing in black, and he started coming at me across the tile floor. When my heart started, he, Dürer—death—receded. So this painting is highly emotional—dangerous and looming” (33).

39. “[Wyeth] was telling me about a self-portrait he’d made four years ago as a birthday present for Betsy. [...] He painted himself as a skeleton, seated in the watchtower of a lighthouse looking out to sea. The skeleton wears a blue and gold War of 1812 naval jacket that once belonged to Howard Pyle [...]” (Meryman 1996: 383).

40. “Wyeth didn’t use the old studio skeleton (which he still has) as the model for Dr. Syn, but instead used an x-ray of his own body. That disconcerting fact turns the painting into a traditional *memento mori*, as Wyeth, with cannon at his side, sits staring out to sea facing his own mortality” (Taylor 40).

41. “But [Wyeth] didn’t stop there: underneath the tempera of the coat, the parts of his skeleton that don’t show—his ribcage, his spine, his problematic hip—have been painted where they may never be seen at all. ‘You take the coat off and you’ll see the whole thing!’ he said. ‘If they x-ray it they’ll find them!’” (Schaire 50).

42. “[...] such as books, scientific or artistic instruments, valuables or collectables (shells, coins, precious metals), tobacco and pipes, musical instruments, arms and armors, food and drink, games and plaster casts” (Bergstrom 154).

43. Bergstrom lists “skulls, human or animal bones, watches or clocks, candles, oil lamps, soap bubbles, flowers, and empty, broken or knocked-over glasses” (154).

44. According to Bergstrom: “wheat, laurels or ivy forming a wreath under a skull, or arranged on top of it, like a crown” (154).

45. Barbara S. Groseclose points out in an article about the 19th-century American painter, William Harnett that he only made three paintings matching the criteria of the *vanitas* painting: *Mortality and Immortality* (1876; the original title was *Life and Death*), *To This Favor—A Thought From Shakespeare* (1879) and *Memento Mori—“To This Favour”* (1879). Groseclose points out the specificity of Harnett’s choice of subject matter: “All the items in *Mortality and Immortality* and *Memento Mori—“To This Favour”* may be classified as either “symbols of transience” (in addition to the skull, the candlesticks, hourglass, wilted rose) or “symbols of earthly existence” (books and music). Because these elements in combination were to this point rare in American art but typical of the seventeenth century, it seems permissible to assume Harnett culled them from some as yet unidentified Dutch or Flemish source” (55). Nevertheless, Harnett strictly conformed to the European tradition, contrary to the other American artist Charles Bird King (1785–1862) who made a few famous paintings resembling *vanitas*: *Poor Artist’s Cupboard* (1815) or *Vanity Of An Artist’s Dream* (1830). However, they do not strictly follow the European rules of the *memento mori* as Chad Mandeles points out: “In general, King’s work reflects unfavorably upon the conditions of the contemporary artist, indicating his poverty, and his vain hopes in the face of public indifference” (Mandeles 56).

46. This expression is taken from a famous excerpt of *Nature* by Emerson: “In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (Emerson 6).

47. Wanda Corn, one of the few Wyeth’s specialists, said in her doctoral thesis: “Another feature linking Wyeth to contemporary artists of the 1940s is the predominance of death and decay in his work. These themes—dark and sober—replaced the more buoyant regionalist ones of the early

1930s. This was indicative of the changing mood of the war years [...] Sometimes these themes were handled allegorically or symbolically, sometimes expressionistically [...] or sometimes, as with Wyeth's dead birds, dried leaves, ruined and abandoned buildings, within a modified regionalist context" (Corn 1993: 86-7).

48. My translations.

ABSTRACTS

This article aims at assessing the true impact of the Wyeth tradition on the art of the American painter, Andrew Wyeth. Indeed, from an early age, the art prodigy was tutored by his father, the famous illustrator and painter N. C. Wyeth. Parallels were also drawn later between the younger figurative painter and his father's teacher, the renowned illustrator Howard Pyle. However, we contend that the fabrication of this dynasty of American realists has done more harm than good to the critical reception of Andrew Wyeth's art. Since the mid-1960s, Wyeth's images have been vilified by most critics and art historians who focus on their supposedly illustrative and theatrical tricks. Nevertheless, some of them hint at a dark and less congruent dimension in Wyeth's art, while being unable to pinpoint it precisely. By examining more closely Wyeth's compositional strategy and pictorial technique in the light of his predecessors, this paper suggests that the artist has created a very personal and original synthesis of European and American influences, with a deep Gothic undercurrent. Wyeth's problematic relationship with his father has also generated a range of obsessive visual tropes betraying his struggle, as a man and as an artist, with what Harold Bloom called "the anxiety of influence". Lastly, a thorough analysis of some of his occasional self-portraits will attempt to shed light on Wyeth's complex and morbid depiction of the figure of the artist as a troubled soul.

Cet article souhaite évaluer l'impact que la « Wyeth tradition » a véritablement eu sur l'art du peintre américain Andrew Wyeth. En effet, le jeune prodige a été dès son plus jeune âge comparé à son père, le peintre et illustrateur N.C. Wyeth, qui a assuré l'éducation artistique de ses enfants, et en particulier celle d'Andrew. Une filiation artistique fut également rapidement établie avec le célèbre illustrateur de livres pour enfants, Howard Pyle, qui avait lui-même été le mentor de N.C. Wyeth. Nous souhaitons néanmoins démontrer que l'invention de cette dynastie de peintres réalistes américains a contribué à discréditer l'art d'Andrew Wyeth auprès des critiques et historiens d'art, en les confortant dans l'idée que ses images ne sont que des illustrations dont la théâtralité est accentuée par une mise en scène aux effets grossiers. Certains critiques perçoivent cependant parfois une dimension plus sombre et une forme de non-congruence dans l'art de Wyeth sans toutefois pouvoir l'expliquer. Cet article se propose d'étudier la technique picturale et les stratégies de composition de l'artiste à la lumière des œuvres de son père et de Howard Pyle, afin de démontrer que Wyeth a opéré une synthèse très personnelle et originale entre des influences américaines et européennes, sous-tendue par un topos Gothique. La relation difficile que Wyeth entretenait avec son père a également engendré des tropes visuels obsessionnels démontrant qu'il était sous l'emprise de ce que Harold Bloom a appelé « l'anxiété de l'influence », relation conflictuelle qu'un artiste entretient avec ses prédécesseurs. Ce réseau d'influences thématiques et esthétiques est particulièrement visible dans certains des rares autoportraits de Wyeth, où l'artiste est figuré comme un être torturé au travers de toiles complexes et morbides.

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Mots-clés: Wyeth Andrew, art américain, Wyeth N.C., Pyle Howard, réalisme américain, narrativité iconique, anxiété de l'influence, autoportrait, Gothique, métaphore de l'artiste

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