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In the Remington Moment

Stephen Tatum

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In the Remington Moment

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IN THE
REMINGTON
MOMENT

STEPHEN TATUM

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Designed and set in
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for KK

To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.

| *Mary Oliver*

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Acknowledgments

This book originated as a study of Frederic Remington's prose writings in relation to his artworks, especially the illustrations and oil paintings that accompanied his various essays, short stories, and two novels. But as this study evolved over the past decade, its focus instead became that of Remington's late paintings, while his—and certain of his contemporaries'—prose writings became useful supplements assisting my development of the extended interpretive readings that comprise *In the Remington Moment*. What has remained the same throughout this study's evolution, however, is a two-fold desire: first, to understand better and, in the process, situate both the formal and thematic features of these selected Remington artworks in relation to their historical, aesthetic, and biographical contexts; and second, to try to account for what there is exactly about these selected artworks that, to my way of seeing and thinking at least, endows them now, as we mark the centennial of Remington's death, with continuing aesthetic and cultural significance—with a resonance or power that argues for these artworks as being of more than mere antiquarian interest. On the one hand, the working out of these desires resulted in this book's attempted rapprochement of formal and historical analysis, one whose reach—especially as the book's introduction reveals—includes a transnational theoretical and methodological perspective as well as an interdisciplinary one. On the other hand, the essays of *In the Remington Moment* also strive to account for how Remington's ambitious late paintings materially—and ambivalently—engage with issues of

embodiment, with the stakes accruing from acts of beholding and interpretation or the reading of signs, and with the utopian promise of collective identity—in short, how the paintings engage with the complexities Remington associated with seeing and being in a modernizing world.

In the end, as these pages document, *In the Remington Moment* gradually centers on an ethic or desire for reparation emergent in this artist's late work, one manifested in part through the artist's reworking of his repeated "surround" or "last stand" composition. It is an ethic or desire that courses through Remington's sustained artistic recognition of history's ongoing "dread"—its record of loss, its constants of greed, suffering, and violence. And it is this emergent reparative ethic or desire that provides one answer to the question concerning the potential staying power of Remington's art. In the end, my hope is that the reader of *In the Remington Moment* will experience, even though positioned of course at one remove, the process of engaged and at times unanticipated discovery that this book's core essays unfold. And that its coda *enacts*, in the form of a memoir of observation, of looking at and being in "the Remington moment" over the years, and of how such observation has affected me as I neared and then passed Remington's age at the time of his death in late 1909 as this study unfolded.

While it has taken me a while to frame properly the questions Remington's late work introduce about the moment of the painting and its reception, as well as to work out provisional answers to them along the way, I have been fortunate enough to have several guides who provided critical insights, constructive advice, and continual encouragement in the spirit of friendship. First and foremost, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to Nathaniel Lewis for his unwavering support of this project and his remarkable, generous collegiality in reading and evaluating just about every page of this work in progress. I honor his integrity as a reader—and for his continuing friendship. I would like also to express my deep appreciation to Forrest Robinson, a true friend and mentor, and Zeese Papanikolas, a true writer, who commented very helpfully on the entire manuscript. In addition, Krista Comer, Andrew Hoffman,

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Having lived now at a distance from my parents for over three decades, I realize the many gifts and opportunities they provided for me as well as for my siblings. My mother's restless curiosity as a reader and a world traveler shaped and expanded my cognitive horizons, modeled for me how learning is a lifelong process of discovery. My father introduced me to things "western," and though my trail—which is to say my interests—diverged from his own, through the years he provided financial support when needed and welcome encouragement. Unfortunately, he will not see the published result of a project whose beginning on one level, as I mention in the coda, can be traced to watching John Wayne and Gary Cooper movies in his presence. I miss him. Finally, as always, I must acknowledge my son, Luke, and my daughter, Molly, and my wife, Kathy, to whom this book is dedicated. As the song says, twenty thousand roads I've been down, down, down—but they all led me straight back home to you.

In the Remington Moment

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INTRODUCTION

In the Remington Moment

Perhaps that's what painting is good for. Not so much to fix or represent figures without movement or words, mute or immobile figures where the colors don't change or vary with the lighting—a world sheltered from the wind or bad weather—but rather, to represent a world characterized by an indefinite prolongation of the visible itself: the infinite opening of the visible. | *Jean-Louis Schefer, The Enigmatic Body (1995)*

1. The Interval

Here then, one way to begin, to be in the act of and the moment in the painting. As Jean-Louis Schefer would have it, the value of painting—what either the activity itself or its material result on canvas is “good for”—accrues from its power of transformation rather than its power of representation *per se*. That is, painting with value does not so much “fix,” or embalm, certain colors, figures, and objects as does it “open up,” or liberate, the given or known world through a *re*-presentation of its contours and surfaces. What Schefer calls “the visible itself” thus does not so much constitute the given world of things that meet any beholder’s eye. Rather, “the visible itself” connotes a world of possibility. An emergent visible world, trailed by whatever attendant truths, which gets unconcealed in and by the clearing created in and by the act or the material result of painting.

And too: painting that has value not only transforms the givens of the world so as to produce “the visible itself.” Such painting also transforms temporality or time itself. For painting that’s “good for” something is said to interrupt or puncture or hollow out and deepen mere temporal duration or succession. To use Schefer’s phrasing, such painting “prolongs” rather than closes off the experience of beholding “the visible itself” revealed in and by the painting in the much the same way, I suppose, that lyric poems with value at some point—usually as a result of the cumulative repetition of sounds—transpose the sheer, horizontal, or linear progression of words across the page into a more vertical, layered lyric time, one whose energies deepen and expand the poem’s present moment so as both to enfold a past and to anticipate a future. All told, then, painting that has or can be assigned value

transforms and potentially redeems—here I note Schefer’s translator’s stress on the words “infinite” and “indefinite”—both our ways of seeing and our ways of being in the world. And I hasten to say “our” here precisely because Schefer not only speculates that for the painting to have value it must produce a spatial and temporal interval or gap in which “the visible itself” can emerge. His claim entails that the worth of painting depends also on the *beholder’s* capacity to dwell, in prolonged fashion, in “the infinite opening of the visible” that comes into view in painting that has value, that is “good for” something.

Now if we turn to consider Frederic Remington’s art in light of such claims about the value of painting, certain questions logically follow. To what degree can Remington’s art be said to have value, which is to say be “good for” its representation of “a world characterized by an indefinite prolongation of the visible itself”? What exactly characterizes the spatial and temporal interval prolonged in and by the moment of the Remington painting’s production and reception? What truths get unconcealed about “the visible itself” that is opened up in and by the Remington moment? What are the larger stakes involved regarding seeing and dwelling in prolonged fashion in “the visible itself” as this gets explored in and by the Remington moment of painting? As its title perhaps suggests, *In the Remington Moment* explores these and other questions through a series of essays that variously develop extended interpretive readings of selected paintings produced by Remington during the last four years of his life, the so-called years of critical acclaim.¹ Proceeding for the most part as a spiraling process of discovery rather than as linear argument, these essays’ thick descriptions of and critical meditations on these selected late paintings respond implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, to the above questions. And in turn, these essays’ developing responses to the questions prompted by considering the specific nature of “the visible itself” opened up by the spatial and temporal intervals in Remington’s painting implicitly address a larger question: whether looking at Remington’s art—a century now after his death—arguably can represent an endeavor that’s “good for” something more than antiquarian interest or nostalgic recollection.

To put the matter quite simply here at the outset, I intend through my use of the word “moment” to connote Remington’s artistic production in a particular historical and sociocultural context; the moment the painting at hand arrests or suspends on a primed and stretched canvas; and the moments of these paintings’ reception—including this viewer’s presence over the years to these particular paintings’ present moments. Following in the path of the seminal essays gathered in the 2003 *Frederic Remington: The Color of Night* volume, these essays on one level closely attend to these selected paintings’ existence as distinctive material objects whose moment of aesthetic production is embedded in modern American social and cultural history. Thus they proceed to elaborate the relevant biographical context shaping the artworks’ production; consider their affiliations with other Remington artistic efforts, especially his prose discourse; examine these artworks’ intervention within a matrix of cultural forces, especially certain prose writings and artworks of other figures in Remington’s historical moment (such as historian Frederick Jackson Turner and sociologist Georg Simmel); and track these artworks’ evolving critical reception. On another level, the represented moment in the painting—the singular event of “the visible itself”—prompts these extended critical reflections on what I have come to regard as the unstable yet nevertheless determinate complexity of these selected artworks’ subjects and formal elements: two men and a dog in a canoe on a lake, gazing as darkness falls at some unknown thing or presence outside the frame (*Evening on a Canadian Lake* [1905]); a camouflaged hunter in a canoe preparing to shoot a bull moose (*Coming to the Call* [1905]); three American Indian scouts observing a cloud portent on the high plains near sunset (*With the Eye of the Mind* [1908]); a group of hunters gathered around a blazing campfire as night falls (*The Hunters’ Supper* [c. 1909]); and a mounted, solitary Indian outlier pausing on the prairie under the full moon’s refulgent light (*The Outlier* [1909]).

But of course things are never simple, in the end never that easy to discriminate and regulate, discipline, and control like the “world sheltered from the wind or bad weather” evident in what Schefer would

call irrelevant or useless painting. For the moment of production cannot so easily be segregated from the cumulative moments of reception experienced by the artist as well as by viewers; for the moment of reception in the viewer's present is itself *in* history, itself shaped by any viewer's prior knowledge of art objects and prior acts of interpretation. So on the one hand, the potential problem that emerges is that acts of reception attentive to the larger matrix of cultural forces potentially will gain the world—yet risk in the process losing sight of the singular event of the art object itself. And on the other hand, descriptive critical discourse that monumentalizes the art object, say through various covering abstractions or interpretive frames (e.g., period, genre, movement markers), while certainly offering information about the art object, nevertheless often loses sight either of the art object's historical context that to a degree determines its production or of the art object's singular value and affect—that is, what precisely there is about its features that perhaps can explain its power to summons a viewer to regard it. For better or worse, then, the critical meditations that unfold over the course of these pages attempt to counter these potential problems by melding together what might be called formalist and cultural studies perspectives so as to explore how and why these particular Remington paintings continue to have power rather than to be merely of antiquarian interest. Understanding more thoroughly how and why these paintings' themes and formal elements resonate, how they suggest “openings to the visible” rather than the closing off of perceptual horizons, will illuminate those larger truths and greater ambitions that for the most part have not been recognized, much less granted, by viewers accustomed to looking at Remington as epitomizing, say, one phase of western American art history's address to one phase of the larger history of the United States.²

The degree to which this aim has been achieved in these pages depends, I shall argue, on recognizing, at some point in beholding these paintings and exploring the various connotations of the word “moment,” the very tensions, contradictions, ambivalences, and ambiguities that these paintings' surface subjects and themes typically want

to obscure or even erase. Whether overt or covert, the thematic and formal features I shall highlight in my discussion effectively produce the spatial and temporal interval in the paintings' implied narratives. This interval not only strives to open up and prolong indefinitely "the visible itself," but also to trouble what we might call these paintings' "official" themes and recognizable painterly elements. To anticipate what my later remarks will elaborate in greater detail, in my viewing experience such a recognition was prompted by the manner in which Remington's late paintings, especially the nocturnes, seemed obsessed with conjuring up threshold or transitional spaces and moments in relation to the elemental forms of water, air or sky, fire, and earth. Whether manifested as the shed light and drifting smoke of a campfire or as a shape-shifting cloud form at sunset or as a yellow full moon simultaneously waxing and waning, such elemental forms—along with their multiple symbolic connotations—subtly characterized the interval defining the Remington "moment": the slippage or disjuncture in the most ambitious Remington late paintings between, on the one hand, what these paintings make *visible* in their different renditions of face-to-face human encounters with the visible world, and, on the other hand, what can be *known* for sure, what can be stated with some degree of certainty about the meaning of these ephemeral yet very material things which, for the moment, have emerged in the open space of a lighted clearing.

Put simply, this interval between what is seen and what can be known opens up "the visible itself," in the process not only summoning the regard of figures within the frame but also summoning the viewer's apprehension.³ It is this interval that these essays for the most part begin to explore in prolonged fashion, in the process of dwelling in the moment in the hope of articulating not only what I have known and in some instances have felt about Remington's painting, but also that which I didn't realize, due to some rush to judgment and desire for meaning, I had already known and felt due to the lingering residue of mystery that always haunts the established cognitive horizons in the Remington moment.

In Remington's late paintings, then, this repeated juxtaposition of

a figurative desire for the coherence of meaning alongside the natural world's visible, sobering reminders of transience and metamorphosis provides an opening to his art. An opening that will help us begin to reconsider and account for the emergence of "the visible itself" in the Remington moment which accrues from these selected artworks' characteristic rhythmic oscillation thematically between abandonment or solitude and communion, and formally between composition and decomposition; their simultaneous forwarding of competing modes both of attention and of temporality; and their overall topographies of ambivalence and ambiguity in which the nested relations among the elements gathered in pictorial space complicate whatever official meanings the paintings' represented moments seemingly want to relay. Interestingly, all these issues regarding the nature of what becomes visible in the "moment," all these emergent questions about the nature of beholding prompted by recognizing the recurrence of threshold spaces and this interval between the visible and the known in Remington's art—these were crystallized not only by my coming across Jean-Louis Schefer's thoughts on what painting might be "good for" but also by my comprehending of a particular model of aesthetic reception forwarded in a scene that references Remington's art in Austrian writer Peter Handke's 1972 novel *Short Letter, Long Farewell*.⁴ Or perhaps the truth is this: that what I already knew and had begun sensing about the resonance of Remington's late paintings I didn't know I knew and sensed until reflecting on the contours of reception modeled by this specific scene I chanced to come across in this novel.

2. This Precarious Light

"You'll only find that kind of yellow light in the Western paintings of the last century," said the painter. "That light doesn't come from somewhere else, the sky for instance, it's given off by the ground itself. In Catlin's or Remington's paintings the sky is always pale, smoky, and colorless, you never see the sun, but a strangely deep yellow shines from the ground and lights up the faces from below. In all those pictures yellow is the dominant color: wagon wheels, powder smoke rising

from rifles, the teeth of dying horses, railroad tracks—everything shimmers yellow from within; it makes every single object stand out as in a coat of arms. Nowadays you see imitations of that yellow wherever you go: the signs on parking lots, the markings on highways, the arches of the McDonald’s restaurants, traffic lights, U.S.A. T-shirts.” “The yellow arrow of the Holiday Inn,” I said.

In the scene that opens the second half of Peter Handke’s novel *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, an unnamed narrator stands in a garden outside a St. Louis–area home as night falls, sipping wine and watching his friend and traveling companion Claire putting her daughter to bed in one of the home’s bedrooms that opens onto its backyard and garden.⁵ He is standing in this garden with the home’s owner, an old friend of Claire’s, a man who paints movie posters and “episodes in the settlement of the West, landscapes with covered wagons and riverboats.”⁶ As this scene unfolds, this unnamed narrator, the painter—and eventually the painter’s wife—all become transfixed in the garden by the play of the setting sun’s light on a nearby bedroom’s bare interior wall. Indeed: they behold its glowing light until it seems to them as if, in the end, “there was only the bare wall, which, as the darkness deepened round about, shone more and more brightly, with an even, deep-yellow light, which the wall seemed to generate rather than reflect.” Eventually, as the above excerpt from this scene suggests, the movie poster painter makes sense of this dramatic sunset lighting effect by first alluding to the “strangely deep yellow” color found in certain nineteenth-century “western” paintings by such artists as George Catlin and Frederic Remington. He then claims that both the particular “even, deep-yellow light” on his bedroom’s bare wall in this moment and the “strangely deep yellow” evident in certain Catlin and Remington artworks contrast with all the “pale imitations” of this color observable in the cultural artifacts and popular iconography of everyday commercial life in the twentieth century. Thus, in striking contrast to the corporate yellow of McDonald’s arches or to Holiday Inn neon sign arrows, this painter of western movie posters and historical

scenes of frontier settlement asserts that the “even, deep-yellow light” shimmering on the canvas created by his bedroom’s bare white wall essentially produces “a color that makes you remember. . . . And the longer you look at it, the further back you remember, till you reach a point where you can’t go any further. At that point you can only stand there and dream.”

And yet Handke orchestrates the scene so as to trouble this movie poster painter’s proposition that there exists a crucial difference between the more authentic yellow light visible in Catlin’s and Remington’s paintings and the latter-day, more inauthentic popular culture or commercial reproductions of yellow. Consider how as this scene unfolds it seems initially to be the case that the setting sun obviously provides the source for this lighting effect on the bare canvas of the couple’s white bedroom wall. However, we are told that by the time this garden scene opens the sun has in fact already dropped “behind the Missouri plains.” Perhaps, then, it is instead this painter couple’s television set that produces this compelling “even, deep-yellow light”? However, we soon learn that their television set, whose sounds the narrator hears during this moment, sits out of sight in an adjacent room. So then, as the movie poster painter finally observes, perhaps it is the bare white bedroom wall that serves “to generate rather than reflect” this sunset event of color. Regardless, the point remains that there is a fundamental uncertainty about the origin of this “even, deep-yellow light.” So: is the “cultural” (western art; commercial signage) finally indistinguishable from the “natural” (colored light)? Put differently, is the “natural” fact of a midwestern sunset’s yellow light indistinguishable from the “cultural” productions of color, redefined in the end not only as our personal histories (memories and dreams) but also as the dominant culture’s disseminated images and mythic national narratives, its corporate brand names and logos?

Indeed, along with these emergent questions, there is even more to consider about the ironies and subtle contradictions surrounding the movie poster painter’s interpretation of this yellow light’s sudden appearance. For one thing, regardless of the uncertainty surrounding

this color's source, Handke's movie poster painter still wants to stress how sighting this "even, deep-yellow" light ultimately "makes you remember." And as we can see by the invocation of popular song titles from the 1960s the group will mention in a word association game that immediately follows this sunset moment, the movie poster painter further presumes that the work of recollection prompted by such color nevertheless will enable the retrieval of the historical past's reality and, in the end, an understanding of its truths. For as Handke's unnamed narrator comments at another point in the novel, this movie poster painter was one of those artists "unable . . . to conceive of sketching anything that did not exist: his landscapes had to be exact imitations of real landscapes, the people in them had to have really lived, and they had to have done what they were doing in the pictures."

From this perspective his movie posters and historical paintings of western settlement offer a kind of documentary realism, grounded by a belief in the ability of his (and others') painted representations to imitate or correspond with reality ("real" landscapes and people who "really lived") and, as a result, to represent certain absolute truths about the historical past. Still, as we have seen, he also concludes that the work of retrospection prompted by gazing at such yellow colors—whether these appear in the natural world or in, say, Remington's painted world—ultimately reaches a point "where you can't go any further." And at this furthest limit of recall, the crucial truth is that one basically "can only stand there and dream." Regardless of his apparent faith in the possible realism of painted representations, and regardless of his interpretive logic's opposition of authentic originals and their latter-day popular culture imitations, the movie poster painter's logic of authenticity paradoxically conflates the productions of nature (sunlight) and of culture (art; mass culture iconography) and kneads together what we might call the objectively real external world ("real landscapes") and the subjectively imagined internal world (memory and dreams). And like the movie poster painter at this point in the novel, Handke's unnamed narrator—essentially an outsider attempting to understand his own personal history through American culture (and vice

versa) —resembles, in critic Nathaniel Lewis’s words, “a postmodern neurasthenic, turning to regional *simulations* for his West cure.”⁷

Now this unnamed narrator’s journey of western discovery near the end of the twentieth century seems different only by degree, rather than kind, from the analogous “West cure” sought at the beginning of the twentieth century by such modern neurasthenics as, to name a short list, Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, and Frank Hamilton Cushing. But whereas for Handke’s fictional movie poster painter, the western artworks of Catlin and Remington represent his primary “regional simulations” for understanding the overall course of western American frontier history, for Handke’s unnamed narrator the movies of director John Ford instead constitute the primary “regional simulations” informing his particular therapeutic journey of discovery. In concert with the many references throughout the novel to yellow ribbons, this garden scene’s extended focus on the characters’ affective response to an “even, deep-yellow light” calls to mind Ford’s 1949 western film *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, starring John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara. Moreover, just prior to this sunset scene in the garden, Handke’s narrator describes his viewing of Ford’s 1939 film *Young Mr. Lincoln*, starring Henry Fonda. In fact, so moved is he by this particular Ford film that he declares his intention to visit the director when he and Claire, and her daughter Benedictine, eventually reach California on their westward journey. “I’m going to tell him that I learned about America from that picture, that it taught me to understand history by seeing people in nature, and that it made me happy. I’m going to ask him to tell me what he used to be like and how America has changed since he stopped making pictures.”⁸

Handke’s movie poster painter seems unaware of the logical contradictions and the ironies attending his critical reflections. In this regard he represents the kind of painter who strives, to use Schefer’s words, “to fix or represent figures without movement or words, mute or immobile figures where the colors don’t change or vary with the lighting.” By contrast, the novel’s unnamed narrator eventually understands—during his visit with Ford in the novel’s climactic scene—that

no fixed, stable ground of empirical fact lies behind or beneath the dominant culture's visual representations of western scenes of historical settlement in film, poster or commercial art, and landscape painting. "Nothing is made up," Handke's fictional character based on the real-life director John Ford somewhat paradoxically tells the novel's narrator about his movie productions: "It all really happened." From this alternative perspective, it seems that one can only know and perhaps even eventually understand history through artistic simulations—in this case through a visual cultural archive whose serial projection of images are taken to present the "real" thing, as truthfully "seeing people in nature." For my purposes, the point is not so much that artistic simulations such as John Ford's western movie productions and Remington's western paintings veil or distort or falsify any so-called historical reality (the movie poster painter's ultimate concern), or that artistic simulations are dependent on and hence subservient to a prior historical record (a position registered by some early Remington art critics), as much as that such artistic simulations transform the very objects, events, and figures under scrutiny, in the process both defining that reality and providing, implicitly or explicitly, what must be regarded as its contingent rather than absolute truths. In other words, it is as if the overall lesson advanced by Handke's 1972 novel about his narrator character's therapeutic journey of western discovery is to recapitulate and, in the end, to extend further the concluding wisdom uttered in the final spoken words of Ford's movie *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962): "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

So Handke's fictionalized version of a real-life movie director is exactly right to say, "Nothing is made up," for at bottom everything is "made up." As the overall trajectory of the novel also suggests, the visual surveillance of images and material objects takes place in a succession of present moments in which viewing subjects, for better or worse, discover some continuity between their aesthetic encounters and the narratives of their personal lives. For the subtext of the novel's final scene—anticipated by the narrator's motive, expressed during the earlier garden scene, for meeting Ford in the flesh—is that

any “exact imitations of real landscapes” and any visual representations of what “really happened” by a Catlin, a Remington, or a John Ford are always informed by cultural, social, political, and—as this Handke scene stresses—*affective* investment. Consider how the painter’s observations during the garden scene progress through a graduated, incremental play of perceptual substitutions: from the sun’s light to its apparent reflection on an interior bedroom’s bare white wall; from this white wall’s “even, deep-yellow” light to its color analogue in western paintings by Catlin and Remington; from these cultural artifacts to the more personal zone of remembrance; from memory’s recollection of the past to, finally, the stuff of dreams. As this model of reception would have it, when prompted by an unexpected sighting of a distinctive color at sunset—or perhaps, say, when looking at a certain Remington painting’s handling of yellow in an art museum—one’s remembrance of the irrevocably lost historical real, as this remembrance now saturates and shapes the present moment, will nevertheless arrive at a point where—in the simulated real world characterized by “the indefinite prolongation of the visible itself”—“you can only stand there and dream.”

So what should we take away from this transnational literary perspective’s staging of the viewing moment as a perceptual progression from a fidelity to nature’s light to the projections of one’s “dreams,” a progression that—as I have stressed in my reading of the novel’s model for reception—opens up a disjuncture between what one sees and then can understand, that conflates historical registers and myth or legend, and that cognitively speaking erases the boundary between external and internal worlds? For one thing, this transnational literary perspective provides us with a shorthand formula for marking Remington’s late-career turn to his mind’s eye’s projections of the historical past, and especially his late interest in the symbolist or tonalist aesthetic, where the pictorial surface seemingly braids together, as Lewis remarks about Handke’s painter figure, “personal history, American history, and some deeper sense of a mythical past.” For another thing, this model of reception subverts the idea of “the moment” itself as a

discretely bounded entity. Here the present moment of concentrated looking at this “even, deep-yellow light” turns out to be saturated by a past registered on personal, national or tribal, and mythical levels. Here, too, looking at “the visible itself” opened up by the slanting light of sunset gestures toward a future that will evolve from the visual and affective energies released in this expansive present moment. And still a third thing: looking at the “even, deep-yellow light” by Handke’s main characters leads to their absorption in and by the play of color on the canvas provided by the bare wall. In this interval forged by an emergent color’s presence, the beholder’s bounded subjectivity gets transformed into an absorbing and absorbed *intersubjectivity*.

In general, then, the key features defining this model for thinking about reception as an opening to the art object’s moment oscillate between the contending impulses of containment and release. The sudden presence of a distinctive colored light defamiliarizes the everyday world and momentarily unsettles given cognitive horizons, allowing for the possible “indefinite prolongation of the visible itself.” Then an interpretation emerges to contain this color phenomenon, which is to say to adjudicate and stabilize its potentially manifold meanings. Handke’s painter of historical scenes of western settlement *composes* meaning: the natural world’s yellow color has its analogue in certain paintings; certain Remington paintings (and those of Catlin) are said to represent not only western American art history but also to condense the overall course of western American history into their images and themes.

And yet, as I have stressed here in my reading of this scene, the indeterminacy surrounding the origin of this colored lighting effect undercuts the painter’s interpretive closure as well as his faith in the logic of documentary realism, returning this model of reception to a focus on the ephemeral, flowing, sheer material presence of light waves. *And yet*: affective responses to the emergent presence of color blur temporal boundaries. Indeed, as these serial perceptions slide from the external world of nature through cultural constructions to the internal world of cognition and imagination, the empirical fact of yellow color in the

novel's garden scene, as Nathaniel Lewis concludes, "seems to evoke a primary moment at the dawn of history, a moment in which memory fades into dream, but it's unclear whether he [the painter] is talking about personal history, American history, or some deeper sense of a mythical past."⁹ This slippage of historical registers not only expands the idea of "the moment" but also implies that acts of reception as well as acts of painting should prolong "the visible itself" rather than drive toward the closure of interpretation. *And yet*: in the end the perceptual play between empirical fact and subjective dreams and desires activated during the act of reception of art that is "good for" something blurs the inside/outside of the frame boundary, in the process configuring reception as a threshold space of exchange and reciprocity. A space of relation or affiliation whose interval of light and color raises such larger questions for exploration as: How is it that I know the world? Or: how is it that, or what manner of, beholding enables one to know a self and its being in the world?

3. This Precarious Life: On Composure and *Evening on a Canadian Lake (1905)*

A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed the finished painting. | *Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936)*

What this model of reception based on the transnational perspectives offered by a Jean-Louis Schefer and a Peter Handke means concretely with regard to the issues, problems, and questions raised in the Remington moment of production and reception is the task this book's essays undertake. To anticipate briefly the general tenor of my remarks with regard to how the Remington moment arguably resists the drive for interpretive closure and, in the process, represents a world characterized by the prolongation of the visible across a threshold space of exchange and absorption, let us consider Remington's *Coming to the Call* (1905). In this particular nocturne, for example, both in the spatial

interval between the hunter's leveled rifle and the bull moose's silhouetted form and in the temporal interval between the hunter's aiming of the rifle and his pulling of the trigger something else gets unconcealed. This something else resonating in this threshold space and moment is on one level the inherent ambiguity permeating the hunter's calls and responses, as well as the overall grammar of looking that saturates the painting's composition. This ambiguity, together with this painting's formal investment in silhouettes and cast shadows and its predominant yellow tones, betrays the brooding undercurrent of anxiety informing the painting. As if at this transitional moment and on this threshold space where land meets water "the visible itself" is not so much the hunter's calling a prey animal out of hiding as it is the hunter's (and viewer's) being called out to contemplate in displaced form the future moment of his own death. Along with such other nocturnes discussed in these pages as *The Love Call* (1909) and *The Outlier* (1909), *Coming to the Call* thus seemingly suspends or punctures its implied narrative's closure so as to open up this rather sobering aspect of "the visible itself": how at the end, regardless of the compelling beauty of the nonhuman world that often calls us out as night falls, our human predicament is ultimately to be alone, to dwell—as Remington's hunter and prey animal do here on this canvas surface—in that spatial and temporal interval between the visible that greets our eyes and all that in "the visible itself" finally exceeds our cognitive and affective ability to know, much less master, it, no matter how strong our desire and how steady our aim.

Such a hard truth released in and by the painting's moment fosters what some viewers through the years have regarded as Remington's morbidity. Such a hard truth underlines what some viewers have regarded—and continue to regard—as his abiding, melancholy nostalgia for a premodern America. Certainly such a truth grounds what Nancy K. Anderson rightly calls "the dark disquiet" evident in all of Remington's nocturnes.¹⁰ Still, as if perhaps through some reflex or rebound effect, Remington's most ambitious late nocturnes also qualify this focus on estrangement and isolation by means of a compensatory

stress both on the sheer adjacency of human and animal bodies and on the ritualized gestures that bind such bodies together into a kind of loose collective identity or occupational group. In his *Evening in the Desert, Navajoes* (1905–6) or *Trail of the Shod Horse* (1907) or the great *With the Eye of the Mind* (1908) discussed in the “Looking at Sky” essay here, for example, this felt desire for communion is made visible as the act of beholding with the eye gets translated into bodily gestures, such as the outstretched arms and gesturing hands and pointing fingers of Indian scouts formed into a group by their joint sighting either of an apparitional cloud form or of tracks inscribed on the earth’s hardpan surface, these signs echoing the picture writing on the canvas performed by the painter’s labor with the brush.

Such *deictic* gestures of pointing and the ritual repetition of the shared labor of hands in other late Remington paintings essentially relate, which is to say *affiliate*, Remington’s figures to each other and to the natural world through which they walk or ride horses or float in canoes. Such gestures and such labor, these paintings imply, will also possibly reunite the group. Spatially elaborated by the circumference of the circle composed by a group of men ringing a fire (*The Hunters’ Supper* [1909]; *Around the Campfire*, Remington’s last painting [1909]), or, as we see in *The Outlier*, a nocturne produced during October of Remington’s last year, by the rising full moon and its benedictory light, in this alternative valence of the Remington moment corporeal subjects are not estranged from but rather relate to, indeed are joined with, other bodies. And in certain passages in these paintings, as a result of Remington’s gauzy application of pigment with a flat brush, these figures are further imagined as being sutured to the round earth—to the bodies of water, fire, and the scarves of cloud forms that environ them. And that will receive them in the end. Precisely to the degree, then, that human bodies and hands engage in shared occupational tasks—say, the hunting and preparing of meat; the ritual offering of food and drink; the sharing of song and stories—the human sentence of isolation and the palpable erosion of human memory that predominates in one version of the Remington moment can be deferred and possibly even redeemed.

Thus the utopian promise nurtured by these nocturnes is to remember a certain fantasy of intimacy with the body. An intimacy realized via contact along the edges and boundaries of other human and animal bodies and material objects. And an intimacy realized along the lines of Handke's intersubjective model of reception, in that the grammar of looking performed by figures inside the frame, who serve as the artist's and viewer's surrogates, models for us a mode of prolonged, concentrated looking at the manifold things of the visible world. In order to illustrate more concretely this utopian promise in relation both to the stakes involved in the Remington moment of production and reception and to the overall trajectory of this book's extended interpretive readings of selected Remington late paintings, I want to consider, by way of concluding this introduction, *Evening on a Canadian Lake* (1905), the companion painting, so to speak, to Remington's *Coming to the Call* that I shall discuss at greater length in the next essay.

In this nocturne, arguably one of this artist's masterpieces, Remington highlights two men in a canoe, their shared labor with paddles now arrested as they look out to study something seen or heard in the distance. Between the two men a dog alertly sits amid their gear and provisions, partially covered by a red blanket. This combined animal-human group's reflections feather the lake water's rather limpid surface. The rippled traces of the men's work with paddles and the encroaching line of shadows from shoreline trees complement the rather elongated V-shaped opening between the trees in the painting's background, the extremities of their branches subtly illuminated by an unseen light source, whether the moon rising above or the sun setting behind the invisible horizon behind the trees.

Thought about as a birchbark containing vessel, the floating canoe here at the painting's center provides a safe haven for these represented figures and thus frees them to gaze into the distance, their space of beholding extending beyond the picture frame and, in effect, intersecting with the viewer's space of beholding at an imaginary point before the canvas support. If the painting can be said to resonate, to solicit our prolonged attention, I think it is in large part because its features

coalesce on this canvas surface to forge Remington's version of what Gaston Bachelard would call "the floating bark idyll." Whether in visual or aural form the "floating bark" idyll is seductive, Bachelard proposes, primarily because it produces an overall calm feeling of reverie, a mental state grounded by what he calls "the unconscious memory of the joy of rocking, the memory of the cradle in which people experience in every fiber of their being a joy that knows no bounds."¹¹ From this perspective, then, Remington's representation of a symbolic nurturing container rocking peacefully in the calm water expresses in displaced form that nostalgic desire for a redemptive return to the first safe home we have ever known, but from which we have been exiled since birth. And like the floating bark itself, the potential liberating ("no bounds") pleasure defining Bachelard's concept of joy depends on and emerges as a result of its dialectical relation with forms of containment or enclosure. So it occurs to me that the potentially redemptive pleasure of "a joy that knows no bounds" produced through visual contact with the "floating bark" idyll transpires precisely to the degree that the rhythmic play of color (or sound in the case, say, of a bedtime lullaby) annuls the distance from the affective core of the self created by repression.

Furthermore, as I came to appreciate and better understand, through recurring sightings of this 1905 painting in print reproductions or in museum exhibitions over the past two decades, this striking thread of red on either side of the upright dog in the canoe—its aura subtly registered at either end of the canoe by the men's burnished complexions and their sashes—also underscores how *Evening on a Canadian Lake* is a highly composed painting. Its pictorial space harmonizes color; its composition of figures and forms in pictorial space strives for balance, symmetry, and proportion. *Composition. Compose. Composure*—this matrix of related nouns and verbs signifies an achieved coherence, the successful integration of disparate elements into a unified (symmetrical; proportionate) whole. Thus, the composed human body or face—as well as, say, the composed body of a written text or the composition of a painting like *Evening on a Canadian Lake*—registers mastery through

the willed disciplining of disparate elements into harmony. As suggested by the colloquial phrases “get it together” or “keep it together,” composure’s overall aim is to build, maintain, and protect the integrity or wholeness of a body or inner being or object against whatever things or forces—say, passion or instinctual excitement—that would otherwise put that body or being in disarray. From this perspective, “composing” connotes the act or *process* of obtaining this desired self-control or self-possession, whereas “composure” and “composition” identify the *product* of such vigilance against any threat to the body’s or being’s or object’s integrity. But whether thought about as process or product, the initial point is that this matrix of words associated with “compose” and “composure” conceptually invests in a fantasy of control based on the repression of the fear of abjection to perceived dangerous things or forces.¹²

Thought about as a defense mechanism vital to the project of identity formation and maintenance, “composure” manifests itself visually in art and architecture through “composition,” through the organization of space and the regulation of the relations of entities within its parameters. Yet as we can begin to see with Remington’s strategic use of red accents in *Evening on a Canadian Lake*, a crucial paradox exists with regard to the work of composing and its desired end result of “composure” or “composition.” For the continuous patrol work of demarcating the boundaries and preserving the integrity of a (personal; familial; group; national) body or being inevitably unearths or encounters unruly gaps or holes in the form of uncanny anxieties, transgressive desires, and repetition compulsions at the very center of being. In *Evening on a Canadian Lake* for example, the alert gaze and wary pose of the lead paddler and the vivid yet somber gash of red marking this man’s sash and the blankets that cover the group’s supplies and gear at the center of the canoe actually complicate the rather infantilizing “joy” Bachelard associates with the “floating bark idyll.” Like the tensile strike point of a match, and like the compelling force of the campfire at the center of *The Hunters’ Supper* (c. 1909) that I will discuss in the “Looking at Fire” essay, this gash of red flaring up within the cobalt darkness of the

environing sky, earth, and water also symbolically connotes the presence of a combustible desire. That is, in this moment both composure and composition are troubled by the color red's paradoxical presence: its symbolic association with blood, passion, or desire; its chromatic merger of Eros (creativity; illumination) and Thanatos (extinction; death). Remington's interval of red provides a haunting reminder that the glimpses of human and nonhuman beauty achieved by the viewer's surrogates in the canoe are simultaneous with an awareness, even an anticipation, of their pending extinction.

Thinking about "composing" as a process and "composition" as a produced ultimately *noir* space of anxiety provides us with one way to understand Remington's obsessive deployment of what critics have recognized as his preference for "the surround" or "last stand" composition. Though at times Remington's prose discourse certainly registers his desire to witness the overflow of "Berserker passion" rather than the modern military techno culture's disciplined bodies and regimented minds, his "surround" compositions characteristically represent composed figures. As exemplified by the foreground figure in the often-reproduced *Fight for the Waterhole* (1903), such figures must distance themselves from the affective core of their selves in order to survive the threats posed to their bodily integrity by the alien Others who seemingly flow like ghosts through the surrounding desert's or plain's blank openness. As such figures compose themselves and as their surroundings compose them, what comes to the foreground in Remington's western American "surround" version of the classic *noir* space of anxiety over abandonment and abjection is the necessity of judgment and the importance of autonomy in the competitive struggle for existence.

So the human and animal figures in *Evening on a Canadian Lake* look out from their floating bark into the near distance and begin to compose themselves in response to some emergent yet invisible threat out there in the gathering darkness, out there beyond the picture frame. Whatever camouflaged person, animal, or thing that draws the lead paddler's concentrated gaze remains indeterminate. However, what is

determinate in this interval of reception is how this floating container composes these three figures as a kind of working family, so that—like the bedroom wall in Handke’s garden scene—they and their feathery reflections seem to generate as well as reflect the generous light. With the result that the beauty of their realized form and reflection potentially redeems the approaching night’s aura of formlessness.

Looking in concentrated fashion at the moment depicted in *Evening on a Canadian Lake* thus discloses a hierarchy of motivations and—like the four other paintings discussed in the following essays—arguably reveals Remington’s late-career transformed understanding not only of “the visible itself,” but also of “composure” and “composition.” In this alternative emergent perspective, “composure” and “composition” thought about as fantasies of self-sufficiency based on repression get reformulated as a drive to realize a psychosomatic integration of body and mind. From this perspective the self actively composes itself—“gets it together” or “keeps it together”—by performing a kind of self-holding. It performs this self-holding not so much in reaction to an external (or internal) threat to its overall integrity or wholeness, the sense of the subject being under siege that we typically in Remington’s “surround” compositions. Rather, as signaled by the searching gazes and the particular mode of attention represented on the canvas, it performs self-holding to keep open the possibility of the subject’s eventual discovery of an environment in which the need for such self-holding and self-possession can be let go. So from this perspective, composure as self-holding constitutes a deferral of sorts, a hope for its own eventual negation—for its own release. In this sense composure is prospective or anticipatory rather than merely reactive and defensive. And too: the environment in which such protective self-holding could be extinguished would most likely be one where the conditions for reciprocity and the mutuality of recognition obtain. Such an environment could be visualized—as we will see, for example, in my discussion of *The Hunters’ Supper*—as a threshold space of exchange; such a protective holding environment could be visualized as a birchbark containing vessel floating on a glassy lake.

To my way of seeing, then, a comparison of the composition of the human and animal collective in *Evening on a Canadian Lake* with the composed prone cowpuncher figure who gazes toward the viewer in the foreground of the earlier *Fight for the Waterhole* condenses the overall trajectory of Remington's artistic career. This trajectory arcs from the early fantasy of preserving the male body (and symbolic maternal body) from persecutory attack (the "surround" composition and waterhole as symbolic womb or tomb) to the later utopian impulse where the drive for "composition" and "composure" is rather to repair symbolically and chromatically a precarious, brittle world littered with fragments and ruins. This emergent reparative desire is expressed through Remington's revision of the "surround" composition: bodies now facing each other, ringing the fire's outdoor hearth; bodies now ringed, gathered together either by landscape forms and the light of a full moon or by means of an intersubjective, mutual space of beholding.

Of course, as we shall see especially with regard to the cloud formation in *With the Eye of the Mind* and the derealized, attenuated combined human-horse figure in *The Outlier*, some bodies will reappear in the open as ghostly presences—as uncanny human and animal remnants from the past, simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar shapes riding or writing in the sky or on the earth, beholding those who behold them both inside and outside the frame. So in their different represented moments these Remington figures regard us as well as compose themselves and their world. In their different ways these paintings I shall discuss constantly seek our regard, by which I mean something similar to Walter Benjamin's notion of concentrated, absorptive attention. Even if in the end—as I shall ultimately argue about the *Coming to the Call* nocturne—a misfire of gazes haunts the sense experience resulting from this particular painting's staging of a twilight opening up of the visible. Even if the curtained presence of the white canvas tent flap in *The Hunters' Supper* conjures up not only an opening for creation but also, in its resemblance to a shroud or winding sheet, the blankness of the void, which is to say the great mystery of death. As a result, in the paintings I attend to in the following pages, their singular moments of presence characteristically produce a transient *noir*

interworld, a threshold space or holding environment where the palpable and impalpable, where the real one sees and the serial recollections of one's mind's eye—where these intermesh and qualify each other's presence, positioning all the beholders gathered in the moment betwixt and between what can be recognized and what meanings or significance can be rightly known.

Emergent in these intervals and underlying these paintings' truth exists a residue of an ethical impulse whose foundation in aggressive violence testifies to the precariousness of all life, especially the precarious lives of both human and nonhuman Others. Whose capacity to injure as well as be injured and whose existence as both predator and prey is—in Remington's threshold space of exchanged gazes and calls—also our own. Flowing out of these paintings' spatial and temporal intervals, this emergent recognition of the precariousness of life breeds aggression, fear, and anxiety. And yet this moment of recognition, this beholding of the Other in “the visible itself,” also challenges our capacity to mourn properly the accumulating losses that define the overall arc of human and animal life. A capacity to mourn that, if realized, could in fact lead us to savor, affectively as well as intellectually, a fuller sense of life. Attested to in Remington's art by the natural world's transient, mutable forms and by the occasional ghostly luminescence of its human figures, this ethical impulse generated by the precariousness of life, like painting that is “good for” something, redefines “the visible itself” as a desire for reparation. So certain material bodies and objects appear in the paintings that interest me here as rather spectral entities, as the haunted and haunting residue of the past whose presence, while pressuring the present moment of beholding, just might suddenly disappear before one's eyes, vanish into thin air—like Remington's father did when he died during his son's eighteenth year.

Whatever its source—I shall variously mention an anxiety over abandonment, over one's vocational identity or “calling,” over the visible evidence of aging, decline, and mortality—Remington's transient, *noir* interworld results in a rather unstable form of nostalgia. Remington's unstable nostalgic mode troubles those who have and still would



1. Frederic Remington, Untitled (*Ghost Riders*, altern. [c. 1908–9]). Oil on board, 12 x 18 in. (30.48 x 45.72 cm). Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming; Gift of the Coe Foundation (53.67).

consign his work to the dustbin of sentimentality or to mere antiquarian interest. It is as if the discontinuous moments of illumination in his nocturnes and sunset moments resemble magic lantern slide shows in which disparate images magically materialize, in serial fashion, out of the darkness and then, after a brief moment of illumination, are suddenly plunged back into darkness prior to the next slide being lit up. Always, then, the encroaching power of darkness, the pressure toward decomposition and extinction. Nevertheless, as evident in, say, the creamy, serpentine line of solar intensity inscribed on the back of the Indian scout at the center of *With the Eye of the Mind*, the final gift of these particular nocturnes is to offer vivid part objects that—like the intervals created by flickering spots of light—stand out in relief against the encroaching realm of darkness. Contest the bounded enclosures formed by a stand of pine trees or a sloping ridgeline. The horizontal rails of a wooden fence. The stretched white canvas of a prairie schooner or a Sibley tent. A scarf of cloud forms unfolding across the seemingly limitless canvas of the evening sky.