Alone with everybody| A critical evaluation of the pioneer American Romantic painter Albert Pinkham Ryder

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ALONE WITH EVERYBODY:

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE PIONEER AMERICAN ROMANTIC PAINTER
ALBERT PINKHAM RYDER

By

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B.A., University of the Pacific

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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My thesis deals with the unwitting Romantic tendencies of the 19th century painter Albert Pinkham Ryder. Born in a Massachusetts whaling town in 1847, Albert Ryder had a most unlikely approach to becoming the premier American Romantic painter. With very little formal training and an austere, humble sense of how to live a life as a painter, Ryder created the most original works in both content and technical approach this country had ever seen at the time.

He was called by friend and fellow artist Marsden Hartley “The first citizen of the moon.” A degenerative eye disease caused him to paint nocturnes primarily, as light, specifically direct sunlight irritated his eyes. Grammar school-educated Ryder was dubbed a “Romanticist”, a term so adamantly theorized as the human ideal for living by European intellectuals. He lived a life that quintessentially fit that of a Romanticist, because he was unaware he perfectly fit the persona of their writings.

He worked on many of his notebook paper-sized paintings for over ten years, layering and erasing paint until he was satisfied, not with a client’s wishes but with his own inner vision. The distinguishing factor that puts Ryder at the top of painting emotion was his lack of interest in the social and intellectual power a painter is capable of wielding on society.

He truly painted to live, or painted out of a genuine internal need. This is a mantra that has been proposed by artists throughout history, but seldom practiced. Albert Ryder was a genuine exception.
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Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
An expert in home-cosmography.”

-Henry David Thoreau¹

The art and life of Albert Pinkham Ryder reflect the philosophical ideas of divinity in nature and the popularity of Romanticism in literature and painting prevalent in late 19th century America. Ryder typified the mold of the “Romanticist” as an unconventional explorer of the imagination, the real and final American frontier. He innocently came upon and thus anticipated modernist abstraction by focusing on form and color alone as the means to arrive at a true depiction of nature. Realism, the style of previous successful American and European art, involved realistic detail and clear narrative to illustrate literal fact, histories, or genres. To Ryder, the keys of ontology lay neither in pictures of exotic, faraway lands nor dramatic reproductions of historical events, but in eldritch, allegorical sea and landscapes painted mostly in a spartan studio in New York City. Ryder believed utopia was “in his own backyard”, indeed, in his own mind.

This paper will cover the Romantic elements in Ryder’s life and art, and show how he was perhaps the only true American “Romantic” painter, and had an unwitting eye on the future of painting – modernism. Modernism in painting focuses on the exploration of the inherent value of formal elements used not dependent on narrative; line, color, and arrangement of forms on a canvas need no context, and should be able to justify a painting as worthwhile in and of itself. Although Ryder used narrative in most

of his paintings, they seem more explorations of arrangements of form and color than storytellers. In the forward-thinking atmosphere of the Industrial Revolution, Ryder was both a sentimentalist and pioneer. He constructed paintings whose subjects appear to be otherworldly, but used new formal techniques to arrive at them. This concern for change and newness pointed right past the staid, Neo-classical European training most artists received during Ryder's time in America.

Very little is known of Albert Ryder's childhood, which has long been a convenient gray area for historians and critics to fill in with their hypothetical reasons for Ryder's style and motives. However, his childhood by the sea ostensibly affected his subject matter and sensibility, and the facts we do know about his youth are strong arguments for putting him in the Romantic vein of painters. His mature style of painting is worthy of putting him at the top of the Romantic painters of his time.

Ryder was born March 19, 1847, in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a whaling town fifteen miles south from the base of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Seven years prior, his family had moved from Yarmouth, a much smaller whaling town roughly halfway out on the needle of the cape, where the Ryders had lived for four generations (then spelled "Riders"). The previous generations were predominately seagoing men, whalers and hands aboard merchant ships. The most common reputation of an 18th century "Cape Codder" was one of extreme stubbornness, a character trait identified with Ryder in later years. When his parents, Alexander and Elizabeth Ryder, moved to New Bedford with their three sons in the decade of the 1840s, it was the most financially successful whaling town in the world. Albert's family lived one city block from the wharf, and he was

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constantly exposed to the port activity. Two of his brothers were involved in the maritime life, though no specifics are given. The author Herman Melville shipped out on a whaler from New Bedford in the 1840s, roughly the same period of Ryder’s youth. Anticipating Ryder’s painting style, he included descriptions of New Bedford in *Moby Dick*, where the character Ishmael wanders the streets on a cold December night looking for lodging. He describes the taverns and lodges as they appear in many of Ryder’s nocturne paintings—“Such dreary streets! Blocks of blackness, not houses, on either hand, and here and there a candle, like a candle moving about in a tomb.”

At age ten Ryder developed a misdiagnosed eye disease or condition that prohibited him from going further in his studies than grammar school. It is unknown what the specific ailment was, but could it have been diabetes, for he manifested several symptoms of it later in life: chronic weakness, obesity, and kidney disease. If he stared at a single object for more than a few minutes at a time, his eyes became inflamed and ulcerated. This was pivotal in forming his painting style, as direct sunlight irritated his eyes and encouraged his nocturnal habits that were to become relevant to his paintings’ subject matter. As Frank Jewett Mather said: “[Ryder] naturally drifted into an owlish sort of life, wandering off into the moonlight at all hours and avoiding the glare of the high sun.”

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5 D, pg. 181
6 Frank Jewett Mather, *Estimates in Art*, pg. 158.
An unknown person's letters signed “G.C.B.” were found in Ryder’s studio at the
time of his death. Although G.C.B’s identity is unknown, these letters provide key
insights into his family, as Ryder rarely spoke of his past. G.C.B. wrote warmly of
Ryder’s father, Alexander Gage Ryder. When he joined the California Gold Rush of
1848, G.C.B. wrote, “Alexander was distinguished for his nobility of character and high
order of courage, morality, and decision, and a splendid specimen of one of nature’s
nobleman; a titan in strength and stature, suggesting in his manly beauty a heroic
coloracter.”

Of Ryder’s mother, Elizabeth Cobb, G.C.B. wrote:

(Elizabeth)... was distinguished for benevolence, self-sacrifice and sympathy-
others’ troubles she made her own – a beautiful woman with a beautiful character.
It has been said of Albert Ryder’s genius that he owed it to his mother, a
passionate lover of little flowers and beautiful things.

These character traits of Ryder’s parents shaped his art. All of his paintings, for
instance, were intimate in scale (roughly the size of a piece of notebook paper) and many
were biblical or mythological in subject matter, alluding to G.C.B.’s character
descriptions. His sister-in-law remarked later in his life: “When he was only four years
old, he would be found lying on his stomach on the floor, lost to the world in his picture
book. He did not care so much about drawing, as long as he had his colors.”

The end of the Civil War had changed commerce drastically in New Bedford.
The whale oil supply was interrupted because the port was being used for military
purposes and most of the whalers were actively involved in the war. People learned how
to substitute coal oil (kerosene) by necessity—this led to the slow extinction of whale oil

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8 G, pg. 12.
9 Elizabeth Broun, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg. 43
10 Lloyd Goodrich, Albert P. Ryder, pg. 12.
as a commodity. By the end of the 1860s, New Bedford’s main industry had been replaced with cotton weaving. Many whaling men exchanged a seafaring life for an eight to ten-hour day working in loom factories. From 1865 to 1873, the Industrial Revolution caused every immediate member of the Ryder family to leave New Bedford for other job opportunities. 11 Albert painted always as if in the past, despite the steam-driven ships and other technological advances that caused his family to relocate. Although no record exists as to how he reacted to the social and economic changes, the pervading themes put him in a nostalgic genre of painting. Single-sail ketches, like the one depicted in *The Toilers of the Sea*, and other small wooden sailboats, Biblical scenes, like *Noli me Tangere*, windmills, and nocturnal landscapes all devoid of any indication of turn-of-the-century technology were Ryder’s subject matter.

New Bedford’s reputation in the late 19th century was one of moral uprightness and independence. Many Quakers, primitive Methodists, and strict Protestants in the late 17th and 18th centuries had come down from the Massachusetts Bay colony to escape the pragmatic, ritualistically regimented English orthodoxy. 12 Little is known of Ryder’s religious background, although he was most likely an austere primitive Methodist. 13 The town prized culture in an unusual way for a New England whaling port of its time, hosting a large number of lectures, concerts, art exhibitions and auctions, usually directed by Leonard B. Ellis, the premiere gallery owner of New Bedford. Ellis’s Fine Art Gallery was located downtown, and although he made his primary income from framing, his picture shows and semi-annual painting auctions were “major social events” in the

13 (His funeral in New Bedford was conducted by a Methodist minister) *Ibid.*, pg. 23.
decade of the 1860’s. As a sign of its prosperity and interest in the arts, during Ryder’s youth the whaling town supported three picture-frame shops. There is no record of Ryder receiving any academic art training in New Bedford, nor is there evidence of art societies.

A small but burgeoning community of artists lived there during Ryder’s youth. It included the well-known German/American landscape painter Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) who was raised across the street from the Ryder home. Although there is no record of their ever having met, it is likely Bierstadt’s vast, theatrically illuminated landscapes were seen by a young Ryder. In 1863, a few years before Ryder left for New York, Bierstadt returned to New Bedford from a ten-year sojourn in Europe in which he had received formal training at the Dusseldorf Academy, and held a show of landscape paintings that received national acclaim. When Albert Ryder left for New York City in the early 1870s, Albert Bierstadt was the most celebrated artist in town. Also in New Bedford were William Bradford, a marine and arctic seascape painter (1823-1892) and Albert van Beest (1820-1860.), a Dutch marine painter. These men painted in a much more draftsman-oriented, realistic style than Ryder, and exhibited their work in New Bedford galleries. Although much different in technique, Ryder used their subject matter all his life, albeit for much different means.

Ryder’s received his first training as an artist from a local leather tanner named John Sherman, who was also an amateur painter and a family friend. According to an

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15 William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams, pg. 15.
interview printed in 1906 in the New York Press, the 59 year-old Ryder told of his amazement when he entered Sherman’s studio as a boy and exclaimed, “Why, if I could paint pictures like that, I’d never do anything else.” \(^\text{17}\) Sherman offered to rent a studio on downtown William Street and let Ryder paint there when he pleased. For no charge and seemingly kindhearted intent, he taught the boy the basics of painting, and encouraged him to copy other paintings. \(^\text{18}\) It is likely that Ryder met or was at least exposed to Leonard Ellis at the studio. Sherman’s studio neighbored Ellis’ gallery, and Ellis is known to have had deep interests in opera and romantic literature as well as painting. \(^\text{19}\)

In one of the few known statements from Ryder regarding his influences, he mentions only his father and great masters such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. “When my father placed a box of colors and brushes in my hands. . . . I realized that I had the wherewith to create a masterpiece that would live through the coming ages.” \(^\text{20}\)

In 1868, Ryder moved to New York City to live with his brother William, a successful restaurant owner. The rest of the family soon followed, and William, the breadwinner, provided for them all in their first years together.

After being turned down for admission by the National Academy of Design, he met a most influential teacher and friend, William Edgar Marshall. Marshall was a painter and engraver who was somewhat of a celebrity, having done portraits of men such

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\(^\text{18}\) Elizabeth Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, pg. 17.  
as Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses Grant. Marshall was well-known for his warm
tonalities of color, and although he was renowned and paid commissions for his portraits,
he preferred to paint religious and romantic pictures on his own time. Bryson Burroughs,
who became curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and who knew both
Ryder and Marshall’s work, commented, “I saw some little paintings by Marshall,
romantic and imaginary, inspired perhaps by the late work of Turner, and the idea has
often occurred that these paintings, while not memorable in themselves, might well have
served as a starting point for Ryder.” As Ryder would soon make his living from
painting the kind of subjects Marshall preferred, it is easy to understand why Ryder was
attracted to him. Despite Marshall’s exacting draftsmanship and ornate detail, his love
of color and its possibilities to warm or cool a picture by extensive layering of thin
applications of paint conceivably affected Ryder and his interests in technique. Perhaps
Marshall’s thin application of paint came from his background in the delicate work of
engraving; however this did not come through in Ryder’s work. What he did glean from
his relationship with Marshall was a value of expression over style and technique. He
would praise even a clumsy painting that touched on emotions over a skilled but
 uninspired effort.

After resubmitting paintings to the National Academy that Marshall had critiqued,
Ryder was accepted, and studied there for four years, from 1871-1875. He followed the
curriculum of life and antique drawing classes, however, received no instruction in color,

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21 (These engravings now reside in the Boston Athenaeum Library.) William Innes
Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, Abert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams, pg. 46.
22 Ibid., pg. 17.
23 Ibid., pg. 17.
24 Broun, Elizabeth, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg. 20.
composition, or design. Drawing, rather than painting, was taught in both the life and antique classes, and the emphasis was entirely on line, which a relatively insignificant element in Ryder’s painting. Thomas Anshutz, a fellow student in Ryder’s antique class, gave the following description of class life:

The Antique is as follows. From the days of ancient Greece and Rome to the present day many fine and perfect figures have been sculptured [sic] of which numbers are in a broken and ragged condition while some are perfect. These are all arranged in halls, alcoves, rooms, etc. Then there comes an art critic (he comes three times per week) who probably says Well your drawing has some good points but you had better not waste any more time on it as it is hopelessly spoiled. By and by you are promoted to the life school.

As Ryder was not a good draughtsman, this atmosphere must have been difficult for him. He taught himself color and other elements such as composition, and most likely received aid from William Marshall. The pervasive question of his signature style is whether Ryder simplified forms and shapes because of an incomplete art training or because he did not wish to carry on in the formal tradition? His diligence in painting and his austere lifestyle suggest the answer is most likely the latter. He never spoke of regret regarding his lack of formal education in painting. In a 1905 interview for New York’s Broadway Magazine titled “Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse”, he stated that he had all the technical skills he needed to produce fresh, meaningful works. He derided imitation and attention to detail:

Imitation is not inspiration, and inspiration only can give birth to a work of art. The least of a man’s original emanation is better than the best of borrowed thought. The artist should fear to become the slave of detail. He should strive to

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25 Mary Jean Blasdale, Artists of New Bedford, (New Bedford: The Old Dartmouth Historical Society, 1990), pg. 163
express his thought and not the surface of it. What avails a storm cloud accurate in form and color if the storm is not therein?27

This article was recorded from memory by writer Adelaide Louis Samson, and the florid style of the language suggests she may have taken some liberties with the prose.28

Details, to Ryder, vex the eye and lead the viewer astray from having a real experience with a work of art. This is the crux of Ryder’s intent as an artist, not to paint a breath-taking likeness of a storm-tossed boat but its equivalent, that is to say, a composition with simple masses of form and color that cut to the essence of its subject, and by the immediacy of simple form are more visually honest in representation than a highly detailed, theatrically lighted and arranged painting of nature by Bierstadt, for example.

Ryder possibly found his style overnight. As a student, he followed the curriculum at the National Academy, and did his best to please his instructors and the art critics who came through class three times a week. It was clear from his critiques that he would never become a groundbreaking draughtsman, but he stuck with the program to the end.29 During the summers Ryder was enrolled in the National Academy, he left New York for his grandfather’s place in Yarmouth. Yarmouth was a sprawling, flat grassland, with few trees, a handful of homes, and sweeping views of the Atlantic ocean. Ryder painted a few pictures outside, evidently the only ones in his career. In 1897, he told a reporter of an epiphany that occurred in his second summer in Yarmouth which seems to have forever altered the course of his work. Trying to finish one landscape in a month,

28 Ibid., pg. 185. 
29 Ib pg. 19.
he became frustrated at the overwhelming amount of detail. Simultaneously he was
discouraged by the fact he had not sold one painting and was entirely supported by his
family. He said in the 1905 *Broadway Magazine* article that as a young man, he, “vowed
to capture nature or give up painting.”30 His determination ended up changing his view
of nature and defining his signature style. He remembered:

> The old scene presented itself one day framed in an opening between two trees. It
stood out like a painted canvas – the deep blue of a midday sky – a solitary tree,
brilliant with the green of early summer, a foundation of brown earth and gnarled
roots. There was no detail to vex the eye. Three solid masses of form and color –
sky, foliage and earth – the whole bathed in an air of golden luminosity. I threw my
brushes aside... I squeezed out big chunks of pure, moist color and taking my
palette knife, I laid on blue, green, white, and brown... It was better than nature,
for it was vibrating with the thrill of a new creation.31

This moment could have been the turning point for Ryder’s devotion to a life of
painting. There is the formula for most of his future work: simplicity of form, clear
divisions of the composition, and contrast of brilliant and dark tones. After he finished
the painting, he spoke of running around the field, “like a colt let loose, literally
bellowing for joy.”32 This is a Romantic statement -- it shows how Ryder put a great deal
of passion in his painting, and felt a great joy when he hit his mark. Ryder realized that
for him to depict nature in its true form, there would have to be a sort of deconstructing
phase of what he saw. The vast and intricate details inherent in a landscape confused him
and caused him to stray from his mark, which was a picture in which he found
satisfaction. Truth in depicting nature was being true to his own vision of what he saw in
nature, not a realistic, detailed reproduction. His epiphany was a precursor to the main

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30 Ibid., pg. 21.
32 Ibid., pg. 13.
argument modernism in art proposed -- in painting, narrative and context are irrelevant, and form alone has inherent power. His paintings were not free of narrative, however, most seem more concerned with formal structure and creating a mood than telling a story. *Constance, Temple of the Mind,* and *With Sloping Mast* are all arrangements of relatively simple forms and for most viewers need explanation to make the viewer understand their literary references. Henceforth, land and seascapes (usually nocturnes) with Biblical or allegorical settings and painstakingly colored simplified forms were to become the staple of his subject matter.

Although he was frustrated about lack of income, his bellows of joy at his stylistic breakthrough certainly did not come from the realization he could sell this picture. He realized the value of form as the most valuable commodity in art. Intellectual content, illusion of depth and ornate detail are vehicles to a picture, but color, light, and simple form in Ryder’s paintings are the meaning *alone,* the essential qualities. This is the core of Ryder’s romantic style; he found, on his own, the abandonment of the restrictive formality of classicism (in which he was immersed at the academy) and embracing newness and simplicity with emphasis on form and color opened the gates to his identity as a painter. As a little boy he was more interested in color than line, and this stayed with him throughout his life, despite his training. He was fated to be independent, prone to sentiment and imagination – the “little boy on the floor with his box of colors, lost to the world.”

Ryder began exhibiting at the National Academy, and his success grew slowly but steadily in New York. He had his first group exhibition in 1875 and in 1877 he was granted membership to the Society of American Artists. They were a New York City-
based group of painters and sculptors who were, by varying degrees, opposed to the artistic monopoly held by the Academy. The Society was founded by poet and Scribner’s Monthly editor Richard Watson Gilder and his wife, the painter Helena de Kay Gilder, in 1876. Their home was dubbed “The Studio” and Society meetings were held there along with a stream of creative personalities such as architect Stanford White and poet Walt Whitman. With this new exposure, Ryder began selling pastoral landscapes to the occasional American collector, but he was by no means a success. His first twenty paintings sold went into private owners hands, and few were loaned to institutions or seen by the public until after his death.

A few years into his relationship with the Gilder’s, he met and was represented by the artist, dealer, and New York City gallery owner, Daniel Cottier. Cottier was a glass stainer by trade and in the 1870’s, along with glass stainers John La Farge and Louis Comfort Tiffany, a champion of the American decorative-arts movement. The decorative-arts movement took off in America when a book published in 1872 by Charles Eastlake, Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details created a great interest in interior decoration. The 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition exhibited decorative glass, ceramics, fabrics, and other wares, spreading a taste for interior design to millions of fairgoers. Cottier took Ryder under his wing, giving him two shows in his gallery and enlisting him to paint decorations for interior furnishings made by his craftsmen. Unfortunately, only one of those works remain, a gilded leather

Elizabeth Brown, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg. 28.
Elizabeth Brown, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg. 43.
Ibid., pg. 54.
screen upon which Ryder painted a forest landscape with various gold and black glazes. The translucent glazes over gold underlayers on leather was a technique favored by Cottier, as it gave a piece both emanating and reflected light. Cottier encouraged experimenting in his decorative business, such as mixing glazes with different ingredients, and experimenting with decorating different materials and light sources. Each company that produced decorative objects was constantly trying to find new ways to convey light and visual effects to please wealthy customers around the world (Cottier had studios in London and Australia when Ryder became his friend.) Light reflected off gold foil and the illuminated coloring of stained glass could have been new sources for Ryder to approach color in oil painting. Perhaps decorative art, and its concern for subtle and brilliant surface light, reminded Ryder of the transformational visual epiphany he experienced when he was in Yarmouth that caused him to "bellow for joy."³⁷

In the early 1880’s important American art collectors began to show interest in Ryder’s work, most notably the pioneer of contemporary American painting, Thomas B. Clarke, who purchased two major works, The Temple of the Mind and Christ Appearing Before Mary. Clarke set buying precedents for American art in the late 19th century; he purchased American paintings, predicting their value would someday rise to the prices their European counterparts had then. From 1872 to 1899, he purchased a handful of Ryders, and amassed a collection of over four hundred works.³⁸ Ryder probably became financially independent around 1880, when he moved out of a hotel owned by his brother, where the rest of the family lived. He remained in New York for the rest of his life, but traveled to England twice briefly, and spent the summer of 1882 in Europe and

³⁷ Elizabeth Brown, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg. 55.
³⁸ Ibid., pg. 75.
North Africa with two friends sculptor Olin Warner and painter R. Swain Gifford from the Academy. This was the sum of his documented travels and he was known to avoid contact with people for weeks at a time, and labor long hours over his paintings.

In his lifetime, Ryder was well respected by most of his peers to the point of having a small cult following. All documentation related to his critics and letters from friends, regardless, of their opinion of his painting, describe him as a morally upright, taciturn, and kind-hearted man. By the early 20th century his labors came to fruition -- he had received awards such as a silver medal from the Pan-American Exposition of 1901 for three of his paintings, *Jonah, Siegfried and the Rhine Maidens,* and *The Temple of the Mind.* The National Academy of Design awarded Ryder a full membership in 1906, and he was elected to the board of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1908.

Arguably, the culmination of his success came in 1913, when he exhibited ten paintings in the famed New York Armory Show, or officially “The International Exhibition of Modern Art...” The show exposed unique new painters of the time from Europe and America, and the organizers built into the exhibition the beginnings of modernist art, including paintings by Europeans Eugene Delacroix, Francisco de Goya, Eduard Manet, Paul Gaugin, Camille Corot, and Vincent van Gogh. Compared to the abstract compositions and shocking colors of Europe’s radical artists, the American painter’s contributions seemed conventional and regressive – with one exception. Albert Ryder had ten works exhibited in the center galleries, and were praised by art critic Charles Caffin:

“Old man Ryder,” he is apt to be called by the young generation of painters, yet in the quality of his work he is much nearer to the modern expression of intellectualized emotion than all but a few of the young men. In his unobtrusive
sincerity he, in fact, anticipated that abstract expression toward which painting is returning and may almost be said to take his place as an old master in the modern movement.\textsuperscript{39}

With ten paintings, Ryder's works outnumbered any of the French Impressionists. This exhibition gave him living status as a painter of contemporary ability, an unwitting progressive artist in his handling of paint, yet grounded in romantic, dreamy subjects. His career formed a bridge between European classicism and American modernism. Ryder died at the age of seventy in 1917.\textsuperscript{40}

The idea of Ryder as a complete recluse is a myth encouraged by early writers and critics. In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Ryder's success was at its peak while he was alive. His work was sought by eager patrons and collectors, and he was gaining attention by a wider public, mostly artists, but also collectors, critics, and even museum curators, such as Roger Fry, then the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Fry, in a 1908 article on Ryder in the \textit{Burlington Magazine} expressed delight in his subjects, technique, and how he thought the painter lived outside the constraints of modern society.\textsuperscript{41} This led art critics like James Gibbons Huneker to take advantage of the myth being built around Ryder, who wrote a fictitious article about a reclusive painter named Arne Saknussem, "a painter of genius, but known to few."\textsuperscript{42} This was a fictitious character, the name taken from a Jules Verne story, yet the description molded around Ryder. In 1905, art critic Joseph Lewis French wrote in \textit{Broadway Magazine} that Ryder often "...dined on a crust

\textsuperscript{39} Broun, Elizabeth, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder}, pg. 2
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, pg. 239.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.}, pg. 98.
\textsuperscript{42} William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams}, pg. 98, (see Goodrich, pg. 244, footnote 14).
of bread and water,” having no personal knowledge whatsoever of his habits.\footnote{Ibid., pg. 98.} Although he was in his studio more often as he got older, in Manhattan he had many friends and patrons who took him under their wing from the beginning of his years there, with whom he remained close until his death.\footnote{William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams}, pg.40.} He would dine with friends and occasion beer halls for nights out, but was otherwise a private man. He made it clear to friends that having visitors to his studio was a disturbance, yet on occasion a visitor received a warm welcome. Art historian Sadakichi Hartmann recalled meeting Ryder for the first time:

Ryder was a pleasant man to talk to. Although somewhat inaccessible and aloof from chatter and social diversions . . he was genial and easy enough to get along with. He would have a kind remark to make about this or that, but his utterances seemed to be devoid of enthusiasm. That quality he reserved for his work, he was off duty when he talked with visitors.\footnote{Ibid.pg. 80.}

From most accounts of strangers meeting him, this is the common description—a gracious but aloof man, taciturn, shy, yet hardly a hermit. Yet titles like Louis Samson’s “Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse,” and the heading for an article for the New York \textit{Evening Mail} in 1915 “A Hermit Painter and His Followers,” were common titles for press about the artist. Perhaps literature and the changing industrial society were instrumental in Ryder’s success.

The year Ryder was born, the American writer and Romantic Henry David Thoreau came out of the woods after living over two years alone (July 1845 - September
1847) on Walden, an isolated pond in Concord, Massachusetts. His book, *Walden*, was widely published and enjoyed by the American public. Thoreau explains his intentions:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. . . I wanted to live deep, to suck all the marrow out of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan... Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.

Compare this quote from Louis Samson’s perhaps romantically embellished (this was assumed by critic Joseph Lewis French because of the stylized wording) Ryder quote from her interview:

I have two windows in my workshop that look out upon an old garden whose great trees thrust their green-laden branches over the casement sills... I would not exchange these two windows for a palace with less a vision than this old garden with its whispering leafage — nature’s tender gift to the least of her little ones... The artist needs but a roof, a crust of bread, and his easel, and all the rest God gives him in abundance.

He was easily molded into the archetypal lone soul, who had foregone the earth’s sensual pleasures to seek and create the sublime. It is interesting to note Thoreau intentionally went into the woods to experience isolation for two years, then returned to civilization to write about its splendor. Ryder lived most of his life in spartan and often isolated conditions, and only spoke of its virtue when asked. In terms of the archetype, Ryder seems a more genuine Romantic. Romanticism has a myriad of definitions, yet a

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47 Ibid.

48 Broun, Elizabeth. *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, pg. 143.

common strain is that unwitting passion or a lack of premeditation in one’s “Romantic” lifestyle gives it a sense of greater authenticity.

Solitude and the sounds of nature also must have been appealing notions to the second generation of the American Industrial Revolution, from the big cities with their pollution and factory day jobs, and to even rural areas (remember the whalers in New Bedford who had to give up the open seas for work at a cotton mill.) In 1880’s New York City, the labor papers such as the Report of the Bureau of Industrial Statistics complained that the condition of the average laborer was growing worse and becoming more dependent on capital and longer hours. 51,000 workers, one in seven, in New York City were below the poverty line.. That is not to suggest that these workers knew Ryder or that his intent was to react to these conditions in his painting, but at times the sentiment for a simpler, solitary existence must have touched many people, making an idealistic recluse/painter lifestyle sound mysterious and attractive.

Another possible benefit for Ryder’s mystique could have been the Scottish novelist and essayist Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894). His famed Treasure Island(1883) and Kidnapped(1886) were tremendous successes in the United States in the mid 1890s In the novel Treasure Island, Chapter One (“The Old Sea Dog”) opens with a young boy, Jim Hawkins, recalling the day a haggard pirate came into his father’s Inn one night. The old man asked if there were many other men around the inn, and decided

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51 (Unfortunately, out of the copies sold in America, most were bootlegged and the Stevenson estate only received 2,000 pounds from the sales) Frank McLynn, Robert Louis Stevenson, (New York: Random House, 1993), pg. 218.
he would stay when he was told there were not. Hawkins recalled the disheveled man’s character:

He was a very silent man by custom... all evening he sat alone in a corner of the parlour by the fire... mostly he would not speak when spoken to... how that personage haunted my dreams... On stormy nights, when the wind shook the four corners of the house and the surf roared up the cliffs, I would see him in a thousand forms.  

The beginning of the novel *Kidnapped*, a young boy, David Balfour, tells how he left home for good in search of adventure:

I took the key for the last time out of my father’s house. The sun began to shine upon the summit of the hills as I went down the road, the blackbirds were whistling in the garden lilacs, and the mist that hung around the valley was beginning to die away.

Later, Balfour ends up on a small brigantine in a storm where, “The sky was clear, it blew hard, and was bitter cold; a great deal of daylight lingered; and the moon, which was nearly full, shone brightly.” These descriptions of wave-beaten cliffs and stormy seas at dusk are reminiscent of Ryder’s painting. The lone characters coming in from or setting off to sea could have easily whetted the public’s appetite for this myth to be perpetuated in other areas of interest, based on their popularity. Perhaps the great success of Robert L. Stevenson helped perpetuate Ryder’s image in the press. 19th century tales of piracy along the Scottish coast inspired Stevenson to write these novels about piracy and lone adventure at sea. Ryder’s seascapes with old galleons, such as *Shore Scene* (*Pirate’s Island*), *Smuggler’s Cove*, and certainly *Scottish Castle* could have been inspired by these novels, or could have benefited from their success. Ryder sold both

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53 Ibid.
paintings to the prominent American art collector James Inglis.\textsuperscript{54} in the 1890s soon after their completion.

An emphasis on emotionalism was taken up in the art world in America in the latter half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The 19th century also saw more European intellectuals consider themselves “Romantics.”\textsuperscript{55} Ryder’s subject matter of lone ships at sea and haunting nocturnes gave him the stereotype that became his legacy as an artist. The term “Romantic” is commonly applied to Ryder’s work, due to his approach to painting and subject matter. The word, in its original use refers to the Romances, supernatural literature and poetry of the Middle Ages, which included, for instance, the legendary tales of King Arthur.\textsuperscript{56} Romanticism, in the latter context, is a term used to describe philosophical, political, social, historical and artistic changes that occurred in the latter 18\textsuperscript{th} and the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century in Europe. The broad theme behind the Neo-Classical period that preceded Romanticism was the idea that the collective population should be working toward the common good in society. Romanticism championed the dignity of the individual. It was essentially a backlash to excessive faith in reason and science, or conversely, a lack of faith in faith.\textsuperscript{57} Stemming from German literature, philosophy, and the cultural upheaval brought about by the French Revolution of 1789, Romanticism, or “The Cult of Enthusiasm” came into verbal currency in Europe around the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{54} Elizabeth Brown, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder}, pg. 149.
\textsuperscript{55} Halsted, John, \textit{Romanticism}, (Lexington: D.C. Health and Company, 1965), pg.ix
\textsuperscript{56} Brittan, Kirk, ed., \textit{Landmarks of Western Art-Romanticism}, Cromwell Productions, 1999.
\textsuperscript{57} Halsted, John, \textit{Romanticism}, pg.viii.
Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), a Swiss-born French philosopher, stated in his “Discourse on the Arts and Sciences” (1750) that material progress in society had undermined the possibility of sincere friendships, and thus the advancement of science had not been beneficial to mankind. He championed the rights of the individual, saying that, “man is born free, and forever lives in chains”.

Rousseau would often quote the philosopher Aristotle, who said that Romanticism is when a thing is wonderful rather than probable; in other words, when something goes beyond the normal sequence of cause and effect in favor of adventure.

It is unlikely that Ryder had any background in Aristotle’s writings, yet this paraphrase embodies his work; every one of his nocturnes and seascapes is imbued much more with wonder and adventure than probability.

According to Rousseau, the prime mark of genius is the refusal to imitate – again, Albert Ryder’s painting fits the quote more so than any other American artist of his time.

Karl Wilhelm Friedr.ich von Schlegel (1772-1829) was a German writer, critic, and philosopher, and contemporary of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Schlegel deeply influenced the German Romantic movement in literature, especially poetry – he is held as the person who established the term romantisch, or romantic, in a literary context.

According to Schlegel, Romanticism is that which depicts emotional matter in an imaginative form. Schlegel encouraged blending different literary forms and developed the idea of romantic irony, the irony distinguishing a created work of literature and the author’s intent. This idea of romantic irony is interesting to put to Ryder’s work – can

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59 Halsted, John, Romanticism, pg.10.
you distinguish his work from his intent? I do not think it is possible to compare romantic irony in literature with painting, except with Ryder there is an escape clause, and it deals with a notion involving Romanticism Schlegel held dear in regards to poetry:

The Romantic kind of poetry is still in a state of becoming; in fact that is its real essence: that it should eternally be becoming and never be completed. No theory can exhaust it, and only a divinatory criticism would dare attempt to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free . . .

In many of Ryder’s paintings, it is impossible to separate work from intent, because he reworked them until his death. It is possible but highly unlikely that Ryder ever read Schlegel’s works, much less took them to heart, and yet he followed his doctrine of the quintessential Romantic. Ryder had a highly evolved Romantic character, one that seemed to come purely from his persona, without instruction from external influences or philosophical doctrine.

Little is known about how much reading Ryder did for his literary sources, yet what scraps of information are available point to the fact he was no avid reader. Despite this, his paintings’ appeal to the public could have stemmed from contemporary popular literature, such as Robert L. Stevenson. The fact he read the Bible and Shakespeare are well-documented from his downstairs neighbor Charles Fitzpatrick, others are not. Two books that were in his possession at the time of his death were *Practical Hints on Light and Shading in Painting* (seventh edition; London, 1864), a book by John Burnet an English art theorist, and *Rural Beauties*, a picture book of W. Pearson’s etchings of cottages in the English countryside. These were taken by his friend and painter, Philip

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Evergood. Although no further information exists regarding Ryder’s reading, his nature and lifestyle does not seem one prone to reading literary theory in German or criticism. Considering Ryder’s sparse biography, it is interesting to note how well he fit into the doctrines of so many Romantic writers, in his spiritual, humble existence and singular vision in painting.

The German poet and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was born in Frankfurt, began studies at the University at Leipzig when he was 16 (1765), and returned to his hometown at the age of 22 (1771) with the intention of practicing law. What he actually began was the most visible literary career in German history, not founding but serving as the center of the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement, involved with his literary friends. Founded in 1772, the *Sturm und Drang* (literally translated: storm and stress) movement aimed at establishing new political, cultural, and literary forms for Germany. Goethe is considered a Romantic-era pioneer, yet he seems more of a “Renaissance man” in the modern sense. Unlike Ryder, Goethe led a dynamic social life involved in a multitude of subjects, and was a frequent traveler. Ryder shared the Romantic sentiment Goethe championed, but most likely did not know how to contextualize it, and certainly did not share the same worldview of science, law, and philosophy. Goethe was a poet, philosopher, scientist, lawyer, novelist, and certainly a critic whose taste in art, with few exceptions, was in Greek Classicism. However, he favored the work of German Romantic landscape painters Caspar David Friedrich and Philip Otto Runge, and for literature praised Shakespeare’s works from the first *Sturm

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63 Hardin, James, ed. *German Writers in the Age of Goethe* (NY: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1990) pg. 52.
und Drang meetings until his death. Shakespeare was Ryder’s favorite author, and he made \textit{The Tempest} and \textit{Macbeth} the subject of two of his paintings. He believed vehemently in the power of the individual over broad generalizations of a given population, and this resulted in controversy as he was seen as anti-nationalist by many of his own people. To be misunderstood and have great concern for the individual fits in a Romantic category, but his complexity of views and plural interests put him more in the construct of a “renaissance man,” or intellectual visionary. A friend of Goethe’s, Karl Goedeke, spoke of Goethe’s drive in the early 1770’s, “die Gedanken selbst, wie sie waren, zu denken und zu dagen” (to think and say the thought itself as it really is). Later in life, Goethe abandoned his “Storm and Stress” philosophies, and took to a world of Greek revivalism, where he championed tranquility, peace, and order in philosophy (and painting), and considered the Romantics of his time a hinderance, backward thinkers who favored loose emotions. He remarked that the Romantic writers wrote “as though they were ill, and the whole world was their hospital.”

Ryder’s paintings, in his later years (from the mid-1880s on), are almost exclusively nocturnal land and seascapes. Ships, lone figures, simplified clouds, and the moon, are recurring objects in his small canvases. It seems, based on the amount of time he would spend working on these paintings, that these objects must have been codified in some way in his mind. Ryder created his own set of symbols, and left their definition open to the viewer. A poet and Romantic philosopher of the late 19th century, Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), wrote extensively on what constitutes Romanticism in the arts. He

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64 Ibid., pg. 52.
65 Ibid., pg. 55
66 Ibid., pg. 60.
wrote that the Romantic school in Germany was simply the revival of poetry of the Middle Ages as manifested in songs, sculpture, and architecture, in the art and life of that time. Romantic art had to represent, or rather, suggest the infinite and purely spiritual relationships between man and his surroundings and had recourse to a system of traditional symbols to reveal the "...mystical, marvelous, and extravagant elements in the works (of art)." Heine wrote of his friend and contemporary in German poetry, Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853). Tieck was a Romantic poet, dramatist, novelist, critic, and translator. Heine reviewed Tieck's book, <i>Heartfelt Sentiments of an Art Loving Friar</i>, for a German literary journal. He mentioned Tieck's opinions on painting:

Tieck had presented the naïve, crude beginnings of art as models for sculptors and painters. The piety and childlike quality of these works, which are revealed by the very awkwardness of their technique, were recommended for imitation. He uses Fra Angelico as a paradigm, but recommends copying the old German painters who copied the Italians, for their work is more childlike.

Ryder here again fits the design a German Romantic had for the essence of proper Romantic painting; with his simplified forms, lack of concern for realism or illusion of depth, he can be considered "primitive," or childlike in his technique. Although no critical records or derogatory reviews of his work are known to exist, there is a strong probability that some of the art critics of Ryder's time, steeped in classical realism, must have harbored or expressed opinions of his work as lacking in realistic, draughtsman-oriented realism.

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69 Ibid., pg. 9.
70 Ibid., pg. 19.
Ryder’s approach is embodied yet again to a Romantic poets – Ryder’s friend Charles de Kay described him as “not religious, but a very spiritual man.” Ryder never mentioned a religious denomination and never belonged to a church, and freely chose his painting’s subjects from the bible, mythology, or literature. Yet in his poetry and letters he constantly mentions God – Ryder had done precisely what another German Romantic, Friedrich von Hardenberg proposed. He was a very spiritual man, a man who had fashioned God in his own original image. Hardenberg (1773-1801) was a quintessential Romantic, a fervid idealist, enthusiastic follower of the French Revolution, and a poet who died very early in life, at 28. In his early twenties he renamed himself “Novalis,” which loosely translates to “of the open field.” He grew up in the German town of Jena, considered the birthplace of the Romantic movement; Tieck, Schlegel, and Goethe were also natives. Novalis spoke of art in a more reactive tone that his contemporaries, his is the voice of one adamant for change- “Do not squander faith and love in the political world, but offer your innermost self in the divine world of art, in the holy, fiery stream of eternal development.” He stated his views of qualification, “Only someone who has his own religion, his own original view of the infinite, can be an artist,” and, “The artist is thoroughly irreligious – he can therefore work in religion as in bronze.” Novalis wrote of the unimportance of realism in poetry, just as Ryder

71 Elizabeth Brown, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg. 116.
74 Heinrich Heine, The Romantic School, pg. 225.
75 Heinrich Heine, The Romantic School, pg. 223.
demonstrated the unimportance of reality in his painting. Novalis stated “The more poetic, the more true. An illusion is as essential to truth, as the body is to the soul.”

Among the most important European artists that made the transition into Romanticism in painting is the Frenchman Theodore Géricault (1791-1824). Géricault was known for his contemporary equestrian paintings of members of Napoleon’s cavalry, and most notably for a painting that captured the contemporary subject of a French maritime disaster, titled *The Raft of the Medusa*. Géricault was a well-to-do man with no formal training, yet was determined to be a great painter, once quoted as saying “I want to shine, to illuminate, to astonish the world.”

His paintings appeared classical in subject and detail, yet his for his lack of training he compensated with unique, layered brushstrokes, letting the viewer know he was physically engaged with the canvas. Géricault could be formally considered Ryder’s protégé, showing the application of paint on a canvas with a sense of honesty, he used the medium without attempt to disguise the brushstrokes. This was unlike his contemporaries such as the famed French Neoclassicist Jacques Louis David (1748-1825), whose brushstrokes were hardly visible to give a heightened sense of reality. Géricault’s main romantic sensibilities were his unique handling of paint and depiction of emotion, especially towards the end of his life when he painted patients of a local Parisian lunatic asylum. Plumbing the depths of extreme psychological depravity in painting gave a heightened sense of emotion, very similar to some subjects of Géricault’s Spanish contemporary, Francisco de Goya (1746-1828).

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77 Brittan, Kirk, ed. *Landmarks of Western Art- Romanticism*.  
78 Ibid.
Ryder’s approach to becoming a painter of renown was quite simplified compared to Goya’s, however at the end of their careers they were both artists whose subject matter stemmed purely from their minds, albeit to much different ends. Goya began his career as a portraitist after extensive formal training, and eventually became the painter for the Spanish Court. His paintings of court life are richly colored, expertly drafted, and show a great sense of realism in the accuracy of the royal portraits. In 1792, he was struck with an unknown illness, and after he became completely deaf in 1793 his romantic tendencies came forth in his painting. His brushwork loosened considerably, his subjects became phantasmal, such as solitary figures surrounded by demons, (perhaps self-portraits) and the mythical Saturn devouring his children. In this period he produced the infamous *Disasters of War* series, a series of etchings graphically depicting the bloody atrocities that occurred during the conflict between Spain and Napoleonic France from 1811-12. Goya’s main Romantic traits were his unblinking honesty in the depiction of inhumanity, as well as his slow personal descent into madness and the attempts made to actualize his own inner demons in painting. Someone who existed outside the bounds of society, such as Goya, Gericault’s asylum patients, was seen as Romantic, albeit tragic.

Another French Romantic painter, Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863), was to achieve great fame in his own lifetime. He was renowned for his mastery of light and rich color—he once said that “Color gives the appearance of life,” and “The work of a painter who is not a colorist is an illumination rather than a painter.” He shared many traits with Ryder’s approach, in formal concerns, use of allegorical and literary-based subject matter. His subject matter often was rife with struggle, rebellion, and death. In 1824, he

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painted drama and tragedy in allegorical paintings, such as *The Death of Sardanapalus*, an exotic, far east painting/adaptation of a play penned by the English Romantic poet and author, Lord Byron. He also painted a grand battle scene titled *The Massacre at Chios*, depicting an event in recent history where Turkish soldiers butchered the inhabitants of the small Greek island of Chios. Perhaps his most renowned work is of the 1830 July revolution in France, titled *Liberty Leading the People* (1830.) Liberty, an allegorical female figure, leads common Frenchmen forward, tricolore in hand, breasts bared. Intense emotion, dramatic subject matter, and a heightened awareness and sensitivity to color classify Delacroix as Romantic.

Romanticism was a disjointed, non-linear movement, perhaps a term made as much for convenience as historical fact. The controversy over Romanticism that continues to this day has roots in the impact of the French revolution and the social changes and conflicting ideas that spread with it. The controversy is that “Romanticism” has become a blanket term to generalize many different small groups, German, French, and even English (posthumously) who were using the term for their own ends. For instance, in Germany scholars distinguish between Late and Early Romantic, yet you will not find Goethe in either one.

It opened questions to all traditional forms and values in the visual arts, and here Ryder, a seemingly “primitive” painter, formally became a part of the new Romantic era. The basis is founded on the questioning of the European affinity for science and all things logical; the French Revolution in particular is considered a cornerstone of change in art.

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80 Brittan, Kirk, ed. *Landmarks of Western Art- Romanticism.*
history and thinking models of an ideal in classical order, as bloodshed of one’s own
countrymen could not be described by reason.

Ryder was shocked at an early age by the ravages of war on his soil, as is shown
in his earliest known poem, a personal reaction to seeing soldiers return from the Civil
War in coffins to New Bedford:

Roll the muffled drum, wail the shrieking fife
Halpine’s in his home, only his remains come.

And we hold the breath, in the presence of death
And we hold the breath, for men who faced death
Veterans every one.

It wakes within the brain ah so dull a pain
Wakes within the frame both a chill and pain
Ah so dull a pain.\(^9\)

One Romantic artist whom I will discuss later that Ryder was known to have been
influenced by was the English painter J.M.W. Turner. An 1893 article in the *New York
Times* about the Astor Library, said: “Sometimes, on an afternoon, the bushy-bearded
Albert P. Ryder . . . can be seen waiting at the desk with a book on art, Turner’s ‘Liber
Studiorium,’ and the like . . .”\(^8\) There are, however, some European and American
painters he was likely exposed to based on similar subject matter.

J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) was an English painter widely celebrated during his
prolific career. During his life, he executed more than five hundred oils and thousands
of watercolors, drawings, and sketches.\(^3\) Of all Romantic painters, Ryder seems most
closely aligned with the character, subjects, style, and impetus of that of Turner. Yet

\(^8\) Elizabeth Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder*, pg. 17.
again, Ryder seems a more genuine Romantic. Turner did premeditated research to arrive at an understanding of how to paint a subject he must have assumed the public would be interested in. Ryder tied himself to the mast of his mind, and there found all the secrets he needed to paint haunting scenes of nature. Turner's paintings never questioned the Industrial Revolution's rightful place in early 19th century life; Ryder's subject matter ignored it altogether, all his subjects traveled by horse or wind. He painted land and seascapes, primarily contemporary depictions of English countrysides and harbors, and his work had a strong relationship with the Industrial Revolution. His favorite machine subject, the steamboat, was depicted hundreds of times, primarily in watercolors where he experimented with different brushwork to convey the dynamism of this invention that came about in the mid-18th century and was still being perfected. Turner was a painter prodigy, exhibiting at London's prestigious Royal Academy at 15 years of age, and he became a full member at 27. Turner studied the science of light and color, specifically a theory of unknown derivation that yellow was the closest to the production of white light in a painting, a belief that Turner made into his technique for depicting grand, sun-drenched skies. He also was known for studying weather patterns whenever he traveled around Europe, one time refusing to leave Venice, Italy, until he had experienced a range of weather conditions. His land and seascapes up until the 1830's were painted realistically in a classic manner, it was not until then his paintings began to show Romantic elements, he began to show concentrations of color and light effects without regard to traditional principles, showing less structural details of his subjects and using

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85 Ibid.
more experimentation. In 1842, he completed a storm-tossed seascape *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbor’s Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead*. This painting was the culmination of roughly a three-year period of studying the actions of steam-driven boats of all varieties, coming and going from the port of Plymouth. The painting is very similar in style, subject, palette, and composition to Ryder’s *Flying Dutchman*(1880s). *Snowstorm*, like *Dutchman* is a painting of a centrally located ship awash in a storm. The two are basically studies of sea-motion, mist, and light, compositionally arranged around a vortex, in which the picture emanates from the center of the canvas in a series of sweeping brushstroke gestures. The paintings are both reactions to the violence of the elements. Both Ryder and Turner concern themselves with a romantic perception of vulnerability at nature’s hands and feelings of danger faced and survived. Much like German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich’s painting whom I will discuss, their subjects both address the realization of human inadequacy in the face of nature, and a sense of necessity to bear personal witness to this melancholy yet stimulating reality. Turner was an experiential observer of nature, and alleged not only to have been on this very boat he painted during the storm, but he had the crew tie him to the mast for over four hours so he could watch the effects of the storm firsthand. He said of the painting, “I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like.” Another revolutionary painting he finished in 1844 was of a locomotive, titled *Rain, Steam, and Speed*. In the 1840s, England was going through a sort of ‘train-mania.’

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87 *Ibid.*, pg. 82.
88 *Ibid.*, pg. 82.
89 Harden, Mark, “J.M.W. Turner.”
locomotive was traveling across the English countryside at speeds in excess of 90 miles per hour, by far the fastest train in Europe. Turner was a passenger on this line the same year he finished the painting, and remarked he had put his head out his window for over ten minutes to observe the speed and its visual effect on the landscape. In it, Turner employs a method of underpainting called ‘stippling,’ which is a repetitive series of applying small, short touches of paint which together produced a soft or evenly graded shadow. In the painting, sky and river landscape are dissolved in a haze of freely applied yellow, ochre, white, and light siena oil paint, giving an impression of the contrasting movement of driving rain and a speeding train. His biography qualifies him as a Romantic; full of introversion and public speculation. He was shy by nature, capable of intense emotion such as outbursts of sadness and anger, and became more eccentric as he got older. In the late 1840s, he cut off all ties with the Royal Academy, would not let anyone watch him paint, and rarely spoke even to his closest friends. He disappeared from his home in 1850, and was found three months later by his housekeeper, known only as Mrs. Booth, hiding in a house in Chelsea. He died the day after he was found. Mrs. Booth never knew his real name, or that he was a famous painter, and the regulars at the local tavern Turner frequented for years only knew him as an impoverished naval officer named Admiral Booth. Turner either genuinely wished for privacy, went mad, or he was personally involved in padding his own Romantic myth. Turner pointed towards abstraction and manipulation of formal elements as crucial to new painting. The English art critic Haldane Macfall wrote of him in 1920, “All that is vital in modern art was born

90 Ibid.
out of the revelation of Turner." Turner’s art is Romantic in his application of intense color, freedom of line, and his ability with his machine-paintings to turn objective reality over to depicting the dynamism these machines create, like Ryder’s seascapes, not to paint the actual fact but the equivalent. It is understandable Turner was considered a proto-impressionist. Turner was aware of the German Romantics, he read the works of Schlegel, Heine, and was particularly fond of the 19th century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel and his writings on Romanticism. Hegel published Lectures on Aesthetics in 1816, where he stressed Romantic art’s necessary qualities of “absolute internality, to the subjective inwardness, to the heart, the feeling, which . . . seeks and finds its reconciliation only in the spirit within.”

George Inness (1825-1894) was an American landscape painter, raised in upstate New York and later Newark, New Jersey. His works are all landscapes, surroundings he observed in New York, New Jersey, and Europe, where he traveled extensively. His style was similar to Ryder’s, yet Inness’ forms are still ensconced in the neoclassical realism Ryder was breaking from. Ryder’s landscapes are a natural progression into modernism, a further deconstruction of formal elements, simplicity of vision, and an appreciation of evocation rather than technical proficiency. As Inness progressed as a painter, his works loosened their brushstrokes and tonal variations much like J.M.W. Turner’s evolution; Inness became more experimental with atmospheric effects of storm and sky, such as the 1893 oil Across the Meadows, Montclair. In this landscape comprised of swirling, evident brushstrokes of muddied greens and dark browns, a figure crosses a misty

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91 Ibid.
93 Ibid., pg. 15.
meadow. The delineation of sky and land is hard to discern, and yet in the mist, the figure is clearly visible, an impossibility in real nature. What Ryder shared most with Inness was a love of experimentation, of bending the rules of reality in painting. Of reality, Inness said, "One must be wary of transcribing things too precisely, you then get a linear impression only, and produce a work more or less literary or descriptive. You must suggest to me reality – you can never show me reality."94 He was determined at an early age to become a painter, and in the 1840s he moved to New York City to study under the successful French landscape painter Regis Gignoux.95 Gignoux taught his to mix color and showed him how to arrange landscape compositions, and Inness quickly lost interest with him, wanting to stake his own identity in painting. He wanted to surpass Gignoux and abandon the same methods of realism mixed with idealism of nature all contemporary painters were following, especially those of the prevalent American art movement of the time, the Hudson River School. Inness said of his goals, "Every artist, who, without reference to external circumstances, aims truly to represent the ideas and emotions that come to him in the presence of nature, is in the process of his own spiritual development, and is a benefactor to his race."96

He is associated with the Hudson River School, though did not follow their ideals nor was he ever considered a member. The Hudson River School was led by landscape painter Thomas Cole (1801-1848), an English-born American landscape painter. The School, consisting of other landscape painters such as Asher Du and and Thomas Moran

94 Sears, Clara Endicott, Highlights Among the Hudson River Artists, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), pg. 54.
96 Sears, Clara Endicott, Highlights Among the Hudson River Artists, pg. 184.
was active in 1825-1870, and championed painstakingly detailed landscapes with panoramic compositions. The Hudson School was devoted to detail and idealizing the setting, generally works were of the Hudson River valley in upstate New York. Inness' work started selling moderately well after showing at the National Academy of Design in 1844, where young Ryder would attend decades later. As Inness exhibited a few works every year at the Academy until shortly before his death, it is almost certain that Ryder was exposed to his work. A description of Inness in the *Dictionary of American Biography* sums up Inness' propensity to fulfill the Romantic stereotype, at least in character:

Innes was always a mystic, and he loved metaphysical speculation. Beginning as a Baptist, he went over to Methodism, and at last became a Swedeneborgian. His three hobbies were art, religion, and the single tax. “He was,” says Van Dyke, “supernatural even for an artist. His personal appearance bore out these psychological qualities. He looked like a fanatic. With his piercing gaze, his long hair, the intensity of his expression, and the nervous energy that marked his action, he was a formidable person.”

His abandonment of the realistic ideals of painters of his time caused him critical setbacks throughout his life, looking at Inness' style as brutish and crude was an easy target for many art critics of his time. In 1849, a critic from *The Knickerbocker Magazine*, wrote a common review in Inness:

Mr. INNES [sic] . . . his foreground trees are the same color with his middle-distance hills, and over the whole picture a sad and heavy tone pervades, and wounds the eye. The young artist should study the *colors* of nature, and not so much the mere *form*.

Innes' style began to loosen and show more attention to form in landscape during his later years. This style change coincided with his strong belief in the teachings of

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Emanuel Swedenborg. Inness had long questioned his faith, and was alleviated to find Emanuel’s teachings after searching many religions.\footnote{Clara Endicott Sears, Highlights Among the Hudson River Artists, pg. 188.} Swedenborg was an early 18\textsuperscript{th} century Swiss philologist who became very interested in spirituality and eventually (in 1745) alleged to exist for the remainder of his life in both the natural and spiritual worlds, having realized the universal laws of spiritual life.\footnote{Resnick, Harvey. (2002, August). “Swedenborg.” The Swedenborg Association. Retrieved April 29, 2003 from the World Wide Web: http://www.swedenborg.net/} Swedenborg was a pantheist who looked inside himself for piety, saying “The soul makes its own world.”\footnote{Matthiessen, F.O., American Renaissance. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), pg. viii} Inness’ deep spirituality and sense of experimentation in painting gave him the title of an American Romantic. He spoke of depicting ‘emotions,’ and painting as a ‘process of spiritual development.’ These notions are paraphrased perfectly from Ryder’s aims as an artist.

Another such probable influence was Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), a German-born landscape painter who traveled extensively through northern Germany, and settled in Dresden. His painting subjects are very similar to Ryder’s, morning mists, dusk, the sea, and he was a master of depicting light effects based on a close observation of nature. If there was one theme Ryder and Friedrich truly shared, it was that of the hopeless struggle of man in the face of nature. If there is one difference between the two, it is painting technique. Their subject matter is similar, and their palette is comparable, but Friedrich’s smooth manipulation of tones, accurate figures, detailed, proportionate trees and flat surfaces are polemic to Ryder’s globular suggestions of sky and earth. If the nature of Romanticism is the development of introspection and constantly nurturing the individual discovery, Ryder follows as a Romantic of a higher order. Friedrich knows
what he is doing, he is an expert draftsman, colorist, and seems to have his compositions premeditated judging by their glossy outcome. If in fact Ryder’s recurring themes of the ships, the sea and moon referred to some allegorical meanings, Ryder certainly never let us in on them. Friedrich aimed for a premeditated goal, to portray the mysticism of nature, achieves it, and considers a painting done. A painter cannot work on a painting slightly larger than a piece of notebook paper for many years and claim to know what they are doing, except being involved in an act of discovery. Romanticism in painting allows emotion to dominate reason and education, yet Friedrich could not have painted in his high style without a formal education or approaching the canvas without some sense of reason and intent for order and structure.

Friedrich’s landscapes are smooth, ethereal visions, arrived at by layering backgrounds many times with thin applications of oil. Friedrich was considered a Romantic because of his subject matter and his reputation as an outcast. He was solitary by nature, and ran into critical trouble in his lifetime for some religious paintings, namely one, *Cross in the Mountains*, 1807-08, depicting Jesus on the cross facing three-quarters away from the viewer. A well as having Jesus face away from the picture, the crucifixion is a small part of a landscape, where as in the legacy of the subject, Christ on the cross usually dominates the image. Often, Friedrich would place a few minute figures or a solitary one in a landscape that dwarfed them, to the point where sometimes the people are difficult to spot. Friedrich’s paintings are well-executed, showing an extensive formal art training background, usually with a moody, dusky background contrasted by a color-contrasted, realistic foreground of details in nature (forests, beaches

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102 Koerner, Joseph, *Caspar David Freidrich and the Subject of Landscape*, pg. 59.
at twilight, churches in the fog, etc.) He was a great exponent of using symbols in landscape, and wrote about the allegorical meanings some of his subjects had. Certain objects had certain meanings according to his writings about his art; a mountain symbolized immovable faith, a crumbling abandoned abbey represented a church shaken by the Reformation, a galleon being devoured by pack ice in the north Atlantic represented the temporality and transitory nature of earthly things.

It is important to realize the Romantic artists in Europe from the period of 1790-1850 did not mention a dream world in which to escape, rather the creation of a real world in which to live: the exploration of reality was the fundamental attention of Romantic art. Classicism, or realistic narrative art, perished to the imagination, and the Romantics refused to go on imitating forms whose contents had evaporated. To Ryder, as to all true Romantics, nature was not a remote, external phenomenon, but the accompaniment of man's emotions of wonder, fear, and ecstasy.

Sir Edmund Burke, the 18th century Irish odd-job poet and political philosopher, wrote of worthwhile art having two categories. On the one hand, there was beautiful or tranquil art. This was the most popular art sold in Europe and in particular England, where Burke wrote and lived. Comforting, aesthetically pleasing pastoral landscapes or grand historical paintings were in vogue for wealthy patrons to adorn their estates, country homes, and urban flats. On the other hand were paintings sublime in subject

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103 Ibid., pg. 23.
104 Ibid., pg. 87.
105 Ibid., pg. 53.
106 Halsted, John, Romanticism, pg. 25.
107 Ibid., pg. 25.
109 Brittan, Kirk, ed. Landmarks of Western Art: Romanticism.
matter, that is, paintings beyond and therefore bigger than beauty, larger than man himself. Ryder’s work undeniably fit into the latter, less commercial and more forward-thinking category. A few patrons of his time wished to come home to relax fireside and take in one of his dark, storm-tossed seascapes, but his appeal was by no means commercial. Ryder’s art was appreciated for its simple, form-based romantic concerns, involving solitude and longing -- hardly comfortable conditions to any viewer or buyer of contemporary art then..

The over-arching theme of the disjointed term romanticism was one replacement of individualism over the collective society, in human thought and condition. Art critics of Ryder’s time were concerned with the self, alongside the increasingly self-concerned artists and their relation of art to nature and society, and fundamental problems of human existence in a pluralistic world of industry and individuality. The Romantic movement was on Ryder’s side, and he seemed to know little or nothing about its effect, or that he was subject to this new school of critical thought.

No description of how Ryder painted exists except the works themselves. His painting techniques were as unique and unconventional as the man himself. When he discovered his style in the fields of Yarmouth, his description of epiphany put him in the direct “alla prima” or “peindre au premier coup” technique.\(^{110}\) His style was more complicated than the norm of his time. Ryder worked on many of his notebook-sized paintings for over a decade, overpainting, scumbling, and excessively glazing works. Many were purchased years before actual completion, with the patron checking in with Ryder every few months. Ryder kept paintings promised to buyers until he was satisfied.

\(^{110}\) William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, pg.175
with their release. He was known to have said some patrons had learned patience from
him, and were kind enough to only come around his studio once a year.\textsuperscript{111} His main
problem with his painting’s longevity was the slower drying of underpainting. He would
often layer his paintings with thin veils of oil on top of thick globs of wet oil, causing the
surface to dry more quickly than the underneath. This would cause the lean surface paint
to contract on drying and tear away from its substrate causing a wrinkling of the
surface\textsuperscript{112} Witnesses to Ryder’s studio saw blobs of paint slide down some of his
canvases and dry in knots at the base. He was also known to apply alcohol to his glazes,
and commonly wipe paintings down with a wet rag when potential patrons visited in
order to increase a painting’s sheen. This would cause permanent discoloration and
dullness of glazes over time.\textsuperscript{113} Ryder’s work is a restorer’s nightmare, and none of his
paintings have maintained their original luster or vibrance. Many critics and fellow
painters like Marsden Hartley and Arthur B. Davies wrote of the rich, wet luster his
colors had initially in their writings of Ryder’s work.\textsuperscript{114} Most works have become
significantly darkened or almost indiscernible. This is another Romantic quality in his
art, if unintentional; like Edgar Allen Poe’s crumbling estate in the \textit{Fall of the House of}
\textit{Usher} or perhaps the ultimate vanitas painting that ages despite Dorian’s eternal youth in
Oscar Wilde’s story of \textit{The Portrait of Dorian Grey}, Ryder’s paintings are slowly

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{111} Mather, Frank Jewett. \textit{Estimates in Art}, (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1931)
p.156.
\item \textsuperscript{112} William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams}, pg.178
\item \textsuperscript{113} William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams}, pg. 178
\item \textsuperscript{114} Mary Jean Blasdale, \textit{Artists of New Bedford}, (New Bedford: The Old Dartmouth Historical Society, 1990), pg. 221
\end{itemize}
disappearing from view, right before our eyes. A quote from a 1905 magazine interview tells of his romantic and religious approach to his subjects:

The canvas I began ten years ago I shall perhaps complete to-day or to-morrow. It has been ripening under the sunlight of the years that come and go. It is not that a canvas should be worked at. It is a wise artist who knows when to cry halt in his composition, but it should be pondered over in his heart and worked out with prayer and fasting.\textsuperscript{115}

Organic form is a concept associated with Romanticism from the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century, and came to maturity in the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. “Organic” suggests living, growing, and developing, and is based with something with a root, basic, and fundamental.\textsuperscript{116} Ryder’s paintings are in fact growing old quicker than most work of their time, nearing indeterminate form, visual illegibility -- is this not uniquely romantic? George Inness once said, “A work of art is beautiful if the sentiment is beautiful.” John Walker, former Director of the National Gallery of art in Washington, responded:

Yet it is a hazardous doctrine, as Ryder, a genius among early American painters, was to prove. Interested only in “sentiment”, he violated all the laws of his craft, which in the end proved disastrous. His poetic canvases, overloaded with pigment, have cracked and darkened until they threaten to vanish entirely.\textsuperscript{117}

Inness stated if the sentiment is beautiful, the work is thus. I see the malady befalling Ryder’s canvases as tragic and beautiful. The fact they have a curtailed life expectancy compared with most other paintings of the time is uniquely sentimental and romantic, although not Ryder’s intention.

\textsuperscript{115} William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams, pg. 176
\textsuperscript{117} John Walker, National Gallery of Art, (Washington: NY, Abrams, 1984), pg. 546
The fact that Ryder worked on his canvases until he thought they were ready, sometimes with many years passing, is a direct indication of his anti-commercialist and high personal standards. If he was in need of money, he could have easily cranked out sunset after sunset, or whatever fast-selling, commercial subject he saw fit to paint. He did not think in these terms; painting for Ryder was a way of life, a clear means to an end. In describing his philosophy of life as a painter, he wrote:

"The artist should not sacrifice his ideals to a landlord and a costly studio. A rain-tight roof, frugal living, a box of colors, and God's sunlight through clear windows keep the soul attuned and the body vigorous for one's daily work. The artist should once and forever emancipate himself from the bondage of appearances. . ."\(^{118}\)

This sense of austerity doubtless came from whatever Protestant work ethic he was exposed to in New Bedford, and these sentiments put him in a self-appointed monasticism. Amid the burgeoning city life of turn of the century Manhattan, Ryder lived an estranged aesthete's existence; Marsden Hartley gave Ryder the title of "The First Citizen of the Moon."\(^{119}\)

His fifteenth street Manhattan studio in the 1870s remained his sole place of work except for his rare trips. It became a place of curiosity in and of itself. Rumors of the recluse tucked away in his decrepit closet caused many unannounced visits from people in the art community. One visit on a rainy November evening in 1907 was recorded by Salvator Anthony Guarino, a young artist who admired Ryder-- "Shall I ever forget that square room fairly littered with every imaginable thing from onions to bedroom slippers,


and the old white bust of someone or other wearing a hat that cast a deep black shadow over his eyes?"\textsuperscript{120}

He would not allow anyone to clean or arrange his studio, as friend and fellow painter Arthur Davies reminisced, saying his living quarters were "untidy and disorderly to the extreme."\textsuperscript{121} He said there was hardly enough space to turn around, and his priceless paintings lay around in piles. When Ryder was destitute to the point of not being able to afford canvas, he would saw out a piece of his old headboard above his tiny bed to use as a painting surface.\textsuperscript{122} He was often found uptown by acquaintances wandering in bedroom slippers, studying the night sky. These characteristics, although seemingly matter-of-fact traits to Ryder, fueled his reputation of the visionary hermit.

Ryder was a second rate, yet prolific writer and poet. His poems are related to those of the English Romantic poets, Henry Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, and Percy Shelley were among his favorites.\textsuperscript{123} He was following in the legacy of these poets' subject matter in nature, as his poem "The Voice of the Forest" affirms:

\begin{quote}
Oh ye beautiful trees of the forest, grandest and most eloquent daughters
From the fertile womb of the earth: when first ye spring from her
An infants puny foot, could spurn you to the ground. . . .
Stoop and kiss my brow with thy cooling leaves
Oh ye beautiful creations of the forest.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{120} William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams}, pg. 220.
\textsuperscript{121} Elizabeth Broun, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder}, pg. 185.
\textsuperscript{122} William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams}, pg. 221.
\textsuperscript{123} William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, \textit{Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams}, pg. 211.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., pg. 51.
Ryder's concern for man's relation to nature is imbued with spiritual meaning, romanticized and idealized. It would not be fair to call the Romantic poets simply 'nature poets.' Certainly Ryder was related to this type of poetry that often used aspects of landscape (such as change) to describe the most human characteristic, contemplation. Curiously, in a time of plain-air painting and writers holed up in their studios, Ryder painted almost all of his paintings inside his tiny studio, and wrote poetry outside, usually in downtown parks. A patron recalls seeing him sitting in a downtown Manhattan park one windy afternoon, writing poetry, lost in his own world, with many written pages stirring around him in the breeze.

The English Romantic poets in their 18th century manifestos seem to sum up Ryder's philosophy on art and life. Samuel Coleridge (1772-1834), John Keats (1795-1821), and others carried on the notions set about by William Blake (1757-1827), Percy Shelley (1792-1822), and William Wordsworth (1770-1850) of the persona of a poet-prophet who writes a visionary mode of poetry; and the use of poetic symbolism, especially by Blake, where objects are charged with a significance beyond their physical characteristics. This could have been Ryder's manifesto; his forms take on a life of their own, and use realism as a springboard or stepping-off point (for him to reach his ends).

Much of Ryder's work directly or offhandedly refers to writers of the romantic era. One great example is The Temple of the Mind, c.1883-85. At the turn of the century, Ryder told an interviewer he regarded this painting as his masterpiece, one that had "cost

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127 Day, Aidan, Romanticism, pg.2
him the most work of any of his paintings." It is a reference to, not an illustration of Edgar Allen Poe’s “Haunted Palace,” a poem originally published in 1839 and later incorporated in his short story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In the story, an eldritch, stately man, Roderick Usher, is found by a friend in a deteriorated state, in an even more deteriorated mansion. Roderick regales his friend with stories of the home’s past gaiety and pomp, having been “a stately palace, decorated with banners yellow, glorious and golden, celebrated by a troupe of Echoes…” yet no more: “But evil things, in robes of sorrow, assailed the monarch’s high estate; . . . And, round about his home, the glory that blushed and bloomed is but a dim-remembered story of the old time entombed.”

Ryder’s painting is, with elusive figures melting into a darkened foreground of a landscape reduced to darkened, tonal forms. Tone was crucial to Ryder; he was quoted as saying: “Tone is a kind of feeling.” These tones have darkened over the years to hues of dark greens, almost black greens, and browns. This has enhanced the gloom of the subject; Poe’s three Echoes are replaced by three Graces who have been expelled from the manor, while a no longer distinct cloven-footed faun marches up the steps, clearly satisfied in having banished the “erstwhile ruling graces.”

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moonlight permeating the picture with an impossibly brilliant light parallels Poe’s story. Ryder is well-known for a moonlight that provides a theatrical, unrealistic, and spiritual guiding light for his wayfarer. Poe wrote many times of Roderick Usher’s guest walking through the eerie grandeur of the manor:

One of the phantasmagoric conceptions of my friend, partaking not so rigidly of the spirit of abstraction, may be shadowed forth, . . . A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault, . . . smooth, white, . . . No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch or other artificial light source was discernable; yet a flood of intense rays flowed throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.  

“Ghastly and inappropriate splendor” is a perfect description of the use of light in many of Ryder’s signature paintings. After seeing many of his paintings, one stops looking for a natural light source; light emanates from whichever area of the canvas Ryder wished, many times from multiple areas, giving his paintings a more allegorical than realistic feel.

A constant theme for Ryder is the seascape with, what historian Lorenz Eitner refers to as, “storm tossed boats.” One example is the painting “Constance,” a classic literary reference from “The Man of Law’s Tale” from Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales.

Constance, a woman who faced Job-like hardship in her life, was set adrift three times on the open seas by jealous siblings -- the last time with her infant daughter for three years. Yet, they were given sustenance by God throughout their ordeal:

... Who bad the foul sprites of the tempest, Bothe north and south, and also west and est, Anoyeth neither see, ne land, ne tree? Soothly the commander was that of He that fro the temprest aye this womman kepte... with enjoys fyve and fisshes two, to feede. God sente his foyson (plenty) at hir grete neede.  

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134 Ibid., pg. 102.  
This painting shows Ryder at his strongest, using extremely simple forms to convey a simple, melancholy and spiritual message. Two lonely souls lie adrift in a humble little dinghy without mast or rudder, open to the elements. Constance is looking fervidly up to the heavens. As the poem tells, although they were adrift for three years, God did furnish them with fresh water and nourishment. The painting takes place in the moonlight, true to Chaucer’s poem, but Ryder uses basic form and haunting light to point to a religious moment rather than a realistic one. The critic Lloyd Goodrich explained: “He (Ryder) was one of the few religious painters of modern times in whom one feels not mere conformity but profound personal emotion.” This painting could be a metaphor for Ryder himself, nourished by the Lord, pure in heart but essentially isolated in modern society. This notion of man turning inward, embracing his inherent solitude is one of the rewards a romantic life promised — spiritual fulfillment.

The Lorelei is a haunting nocturne that was worked and reworked from the mid-1890s until Ryder’s death. The subject comes from a poem by the German Romantic poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) of the same title. Heine’s poem was translated and widely published in America, and was put to music by the composers Franz Peter Schubert and Franz Silcher. Friends recall him often humming the tune. The precipitous rock rises above the Rhine in Germany and legend tells of a temptress who lives there, a siren figure whose enchanting songs would cause mariners disaster:

A boatman in frail bark gliding, bewilderd by love’s sweet pain
He sees not the rocky ledges, his eyes on the height, on the height remain.

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137  Ibid., pg.158
138  Halsted, John, Romanticism, pg.24
139  Elizabeth Broun, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg.249
The billows surrounding, engulf him, both bark and boatman are gone!
The sorrow by her charmed singing, the Lorely, the Lorely hath done...140

A boatman is barely visible in the right foreground, and the Lorelei is nowhere to be seen. Ryder added and removed her countless times over the years, and painted over her before he died. He wrote to the woman who commissioned him, Helen Corbett, in early October of 1899: “It was not until this day I felt the witching maiden was placed where she should be.”141 Only on the day of his death was the woman informed she would soon receive her painting. The canvas is a swirl of dark blues, with the rocks shifting their outline in every direction, simultaneously receding and spilling into the viewer’s gaze. Two opposed rocky peaks frame a cloudy moonlit sky in a series of diagonal shapes. The painting was reworked to the point that Ryder refused to discuss it for months at a time. His downstairs neighbor Charles Fitzpatrick said when he heard a rasping sound on the floor above, he knew he was rubbing down the Lorelei, starting the same canvas anew.142 This is one of many examples where Ryder unwittingly fulfills Schlegel’s doctrine of the true Romantic artist, a man who is never finished with his works. The endless discovery and rediscovery of new potential is the end of painting unto itself. As with the Temple of the Mind, Ryder used Romantic literature as a stepping off point to reach his own aesthetic aims. His aims seemed to evolve with the process of painting, as he repainted this canvas entirely three separate times, according to Charles Fitzpatrick. Yet his reworking led to its demise, three restoration attempts have failed to give it its original luster and the blue hues that were praised by Fitzpatrick and Corbett.

140 Broun, Elizabeth, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg. 249.
141 William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams, pg. 149.
142 Elizabeth Brown, Albert Pinkham Ryder, pg.249
The weight of many overpaintings has caused extensive cracks and wrinkles, and in many places the paint has peeled off. Ryder seemed to know little of the proper handling of oil paint, or if he did, he paid little heed to the process. With The Lorelei, Ryder fulfilled Schlegel’s statement of the true Romantic visionary never quite attaining perfection, yet committed to a life of constant attempts. The buyer deemed it, “a little world unto itself.”

Another seascape nocturne with a romantic literary reference is titled With Sloping Mast and Dipping Prow, n.d.; the title is an excerpt taken from Samuel Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” In it, a mariner is condemned to sail the seas for wantonly killing an albatross. He is pursued by a ship piloted by a “... Spectre-woman and her Death-mate, and no other on board the skeleton ship... .

"Alas, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on my soul in agony."

The mariner achieves salvation only after he finds true love of a woman, and after his sin is redeemed, he must travel the earth and tell his story as penance, spreading the word of love for all living creatures. Ryder’s Sloping Mast does not follow the story, but captures the mood of gloom and longing in its composition and eloquent arrangement of simple forms. With a fantastic moon ahead of them, these huddled mariners head to sea with a sense of melancholy steadfastness. And where to? What for? The vast, compressed body of water in the background appears empty, so they are conceivably heading out to sea. This conjures the notion that the first order of these men is survival.

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143 Ibid., pg. 250  
As Goethe made Faust say, “The beginning was not the Word or the Thought, but the Deed.” Action denotes effort, strife, and risk—qualities these men in the tiny boat seem bound to face. This is similar in theme and content to Ryder’s *The Flying Dutchman*, middle to late 1880’s and later; a Dutch mariner is forced to commandeer a ghost ship forever with the opportunity to go ashore once every seven years, and, like Coleridge’s mariner, he must find true love to be set free. This painting is considered by foremost experts William Homer and Lloyd Goodrich to be his crowning achievement in romantic painting. The *Dutchman* howls through the tumultuous sea, with terrified mariners in the foreground. The seas are deadly, and a vision of the *Flying Dutchman* was considered an evil omen. The treatment of the paint is glowingly tumultuous, the sea and sky seem to melt into one another despite the temperature contrast of the skies’ golden yellows and the black-blue hues of the ocean. Water here has truly taken on a life of its own, hopelessly compacted and swirling, with the center of the danger focused around the mariner’s ragged and sail-torn little boat, their gesticulations echoing the chaos around them. There is a divine light bathing the scene, as if this grotesque vision of the ghost ship is the last thing these unfortunate, storm-tossed seaman will see.

No object escapes the warm bath of golden light, evoking similarities with the works of J.M. Turner. Romantic artists such as Ryder were traditionally against the materialistic view that only the tangible exists, and they made room in their vision of

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reality for the world of dreams, the ineffable in man, nature, and the supernatural.  

Ryder furthered his creative process by selling this painting in 1897 with an accompanying poem he wrote, which alters the great Nordic myth by giving it an even bleaker ending than the original. Ryder was a person who loved poetic suggestion, but as with the rest of these subjects, felt free to alter the allegory, as if following details was a facet of previous movements, such as Classicism. The German Romantic painter Ludwig Richter talks of a spiritual crises he suffered during a stay in Rome during the 1820s. He wrote: “I felt like a lonely navigator on the open seas who is driven by the wind and the waves, without compass or rudder; night in the sky and no star for a guide.” Richter echoes the sentiments of Ryder’s seascapes, where man is not the master of nature but rather its victim. The image of the drifting boat, whether in raging seas or completely becalmed as in Constance, was used by painters such as J.M. Turner, Caspar David Friedrich, and Marsden Hartley until the end of the century as a metaphor for moral or religious fates of men, or a symbol of a distressed humanity isolated in a menacing universe. Disguised allegory in painting was not in vogue during Ryder’s time, the public preferred earlier subject matter, such as the narrative illustration in the paintings of Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863), modern realism in such paintings as Gericault’s Raft of the Medusa (1819), and Caspar David Friedrich’s landscapes. As with most trends, Ryder completely ignored this, preferring allegorical subjects personalized to fit his inner visions. However ‘primitive’ and modest, these tiny paintings depict an effort to retain the vital reality of images of nature, capable of offering hieroglyphic signs of feeling and

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148 Halsted, John, Romanticism, pg.25  
149 Eitner, Lorenz, The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat, pg. 287  
150 Ibid., pg. 288
thought. The great German religious and symbolist painter Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810) wrote of this quality in painting in 1802: “In representing the most significant and vital reality around us, we render symbols of the world’s great forces... These symbols we use when explaining to others great events, beautiful thoughts about nature, and the sweet or terrible sensations of our soul.”

The essence of Albert Ryder’s painting lies in his approach to life as an artist as well as the surface of his canvases. He lived in relative solitude without concern for excess, and thus fit the mold of a “Romantic” painter. At the time of his death, Ryder left few statements regarding his work. Compared to him, the Romantic painters of his time seem florid, over-intellectualized, and “cooked up.” Ryder’s paintings are odd, individual, and sincere. When you buy a Ryder landscape, you are buying a piece of work as well as a part of Ryder himself – considering he worked on some paintings for ten years or more, even in a little 8.5”x11” panel, you may buy a great deal of Ryder the man, at least his time! As beautiful and delicate George Inness’ landscape paintings may seem, or how hauntingly serene a Caspar David Friedrich landscape appear, these works were painted to impress by their painstaking detail. This inherently distances the painter from the picture. Ryder’s paintings sometimes took many years of reworking, and they seem more genuine in their unique attention to the sensuousness of the forms and pure attention to paint on the canvas. A true Romantic, the spirit of Ryder to this day occupies his paintings. “The First Citizen of the Moon” seemed to paint to convey visions rather than create them.

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151 Ibid., pg. 290 
152 William Innes Homer and Lloyd Goodrich, Albert Pinkham Ryder: Painter of Dreams, pg. 142
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