

Reflections on Painting in Marsden Hartley's Poem "Lewiston Is a Pleasant Place"

In the summer of 1937, the painter Marsden Hartley, who was also a poet and an essayist absorbed with Emerson and Whitman as well as the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme and Meister Eckhart, returned to paint in Maine, where he was born 60 years earlier. He had six more years to live. There, moving about and working in different locales, gathering memories of his childhood, he found the self he composed in a poem, "Lewiston Is a Pleasant Place," which appeared three years before he died in a collection called *Androscooggin*, named after

the river that flows through the town. The poem is full of revelations about his paintings. In "Lewiston Is a Pleasant Place," Hartley announces that he is returning "to instances that are the basic images/ of my life as it now is." The dreams of his youth in Lewiston, nurtured by nature in the vicinity of David's Mountain, a hill that rises above Bates College, were interrupted by economic necessity. In 1892, at the age of 15, he was forced to abandon school and work in a shoe factory in nearby Auburn. Only in 1896, after rejoining his family in Cleveland, Ohio, and working in a marble quarry, did Hartley begin to study art with a local painter. Subsequently, scholarships to art schools in Cleveland and New York brightened his future, and by the age of 30 he began to exhibit his work. He never forgot the pain of his youth, redeemed



Eight Bells Folly: Memorial to Hart Crane
University of Minnesota Art Museum

Marsden Hartley, 1993
Gift of lone and Hudson Walker

*I admire my native city
because
it is part of the secret sacred
rite
of love of place.
My childhood which was
hard, it is always
hard to be alone at the
wrong time . . .*

The central drama of Hartley's childhood must have been the death of his mother, which occurred when he was only eight. Death was to become a major theme in his paintings. Indeed, those persons he loved were most powerfully celebrated in paint only after they were lost through death, such as the handsome young soldier

B Y G A I L L E V I N

for John B. Van Sickle, *Horatiano Amico*

only by adult life:

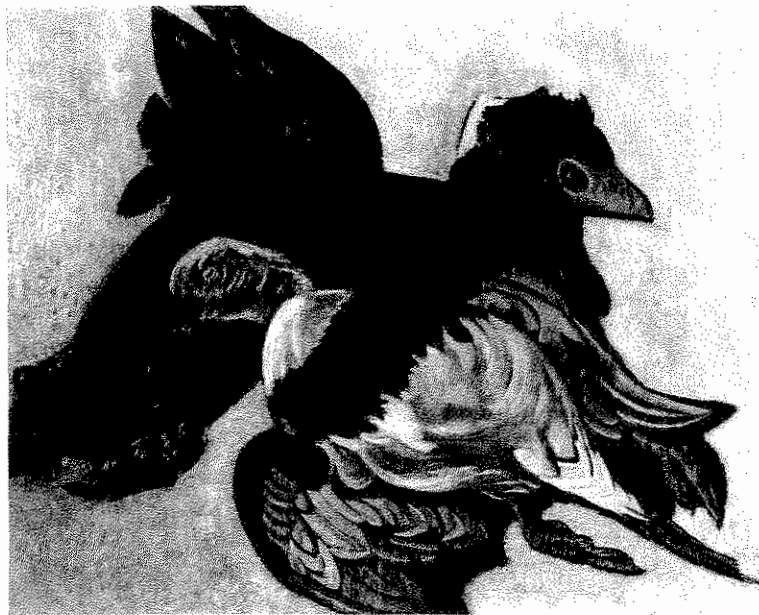
*On the breast of David's Mountain
many an adolescent dream was slain,
later to be snatched from an early death
when manhood gave them back their breath
again.*

Mountains were one of Hartley's basic images. Whether these images were the mountains of New Mexico or the Bavarian Alps, the rock formations of Dogtown in Gloucester, Massachusetts, or the coves and islands off the coast of Maine, each place is particular and recognizable in his paintings. He depended on place for inspiration, which is one reason he felt the need for lifelong travel in search of subjects. He opens his poem about Lewiston by announcing his devotion to place:

Karl Von Freyburg, whom Hartley memorialized in his 1914 "Portrait of a German Officer," or Hart Crane, whose portrait, "Eight Bells Folly," was painted a year after Crane's death in 1932, or Alty Mason, the young Nova Scotia fisherman whose portraits were painted in the late '30s after he was lost at sea. In "Lewiston Is a Pleasant Place," Hartley speaks of death with pointed force as "drama number one," although he displaces the death of his mother with the earlier death of a white kitten, which he calls the "image of all that was to come after."

However diminutive to the adult, this death, to a child, looms large, much as a remembered pasture in Lewiston "which for/ us children was the Asia and Africa of/ our first impressions." Hartley relates his boyhood imagination and awed sense of scale to the exoticism

of non-Western cultures, which he investigated in the Trocadero Museum in Paris, the Museum for Volkerkunde in Berlin, or in other collections of the art of Asia and Africa. Early on he acquired some curios such as a much-loved Siamese Buddha—"this silver laid in wax," he told his niece years later in 1924, with the "most heavenly smile." These much-loved treasures appear in paintings such as "Musical Theme (Oriental Symphony)" of 1912-13 or in his abstractions inspired



Labrador Ducks
Private Collection

Marsden Hartley, 1936
Courtesy Berta Walker Gallery, Provincetown

by African textiles of the early 1920s. Throughout his life Hartley undertook arduous hikes to commune with nature and to paint his impressions. In "Lewiston" he recalls the central role that nature played in his adult life: "and myself walking with my father along the/ edges of a cool clear stream, gathering water cresses,/ trilliums, dogtooth violets." He wanted to erase any distance which separated him from nature and what nature revealed. When he was happily painting in the Bavarian Alps in 1933 he wrote to his friend Adelaide Kuntz exclaiming: "I am seeing nature all over again—and what I am doing here now is the work of the rest of my life." In "Lewiston" Hartley recalls the log drives of the lumber industry and the jackstraw patterns of the logs created in the flowing river. The tall trees that figure in his early Maine paintings recur later, and lumbering itself seems the theme of other late works such as "West Brookville, Maine" or "Log Jam, Penobscot Bay." In the poem, Hartley observes that the

cut wood suffers a kind of death, too, as it undergoes transformation into paper or synthetic stockings:

*I myself having seen the moment when wood
becomes syrup,
then silk.*

In the poem he also recalls attending church services with "Miss Jane at the organ, pumped by a boy at the/ back, out of sight." Watching over him while he sang magnificats and epiphanies was the Ascension of Christ "in not too good stained glass," a phrase that anticipates his powerful late work with its unorthodox Christian imagery, "Christ Held by Half-Naked Men" from 1940-41 and "Prayer on Park Avenue" from 1942.

The Maine folk described in the poem, Dr. Gasselton, spitting tobacco juice, and Skinny Jinny, terrifying the children who believe she carries a butcher's knife under her black shawl, may be the verbal equivalents of folk

characters in paintings such as "Canuck Yankee Lumberjack at Old Orchard Beach, Maine" from 1940-41 or "Madawaska—Acadian Light-Heavy" from 1940. Like the Canadians who settled in Lewiston, bringing new fervors, new charms, new vivacities, these ethnic stereotypes contribute to a "richer sense of plain living."

Hartley's poem is a kind of *ars poetica* about his own practice as a poet and as a painter. His language, like Horace's *Satires*, has an in-

formal, conversational immediacy, with dramatized anecdotes and occasional editorial irony. A long passage praises a Lewiston poet, Wallace Gould, whose work Hartley promoted to William Carlos Williams and Harriet Monroe, among other poets and editors. Some of his own aims and values may be revealed by the terms of his praise for Gould as a poet of "Greek outline, Horatian/ simplicity, with pagan notions of the/ livingness of the moment." ■

Gail Levin, Professor of Art History at Baruch College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, is working on a catalogue raisonne of Marsden Hartley.