

VISIONARY MOON PAINTINGS:
INNESS, RYDER, DOVE AND AVERY

Susan Canary

December 19, 1983

VISIONARY MOON PAINTINGS:
INNESS, RYDER, DOVE AND AVERY

It is a curiosity of our culture, and thus our language, that any sense of unity with a larger universe than is comprehensible to our rational minds is referred to as "visionary". It is as though lost cosmic connections or experience of the interrelatedness of all things can only be regained (or attained) in visions, not in routine processes. The moon or moonlight as symbol has an aura of mystery, a hint of things unfathomable and indefinite. Conversely, the phrase "in the light of day" indicates clearsightedness, and implies pragmatic resourcefulness and solvable problems. In addition, the moon seems somehow to suggest the possibility of fusion with an incomprehensible universe rather than alienation from it or direct frontal attack via scientific method. George Inness (1825-1894), Albert P. Ryder (1847-1917), Arthur Dove (1880-1946), and Milton Avery (1885-1965) have each dealt with the moon motif in numerous paintings and share a respect for the pictorially indefinite and suggestive as well as an abiding awareness that life is not limited to material reality.

The catalogue raisonne of the work of George Inness lists over twenty paintings of moonlight scenes.¹ Looking at his paintings I am reminded of Inness's own words: "The true purpose of the painter is simply to reproduce in other minds

the impression which a scene has made upon him. A work of art is not to instruct, not to edify, but to awaken an emotion. Its real greatness consists in the quality and the force of this emotion."²

Christmas Eve, 1866, also known as Winter Moonlight, is a plausible and straightforward rural scene of an earlier era. A figure is depicted, back to the viewer and warmly bundled against the night, walking a country lane toward a house which is barely distinguishable from the woods around it. The full moon shines through a break in the clouds. To the late twentieth century viewer this painting is both romantic and nostalgic; these qualities are enhanced by the softness in Inness's manner of applying paint. One feels the sense of a real place and the peculiar condition of a moonlit winter night, but there is also an elusive human mood. The possible story line is less significant than the contradictory colors: icy night clouds are edged with pink and the dried grasses have a coppery glow amidst the fields of snow. Perhaps the emotion is heightened by this unexpected warmth, and perhaps also the power of the painting is related to the lack of stereotypical Christmas communal hearthside effusions.

Many human emotions are not easily put into words; they are not simple and schematic and their complexity can be merely alluded to. They become faintly discernible with peripheral vision, but altogether obscure when directly confronted. This parallels Inness's recognition that precise detail in painting was counterproductive, a notion that Ryder,

Dove and Avery also exemplified in their work.

In Moonlight, 1893, the mood is more intimate and inviting, and although actual moonlight is quite cool this, as Christmas Eve, is surprisingly warm. The non-naturalistic greens, golds and browns combined with Inness's characteristic soft-edged ambiguousness evoke feelings of peacefulness and security, though something more is triggered than is allowable under daylight conditions. Inness consistently suggests a larger mystery, a sense of the remarkable in life on earth.

Although working within the format of landscape, Albert Pinkham Ryder leaves literal naturalism behind and dwells in highly emotional and mystical realms. Many of his pictures are either moonlit or of an indefinite time of day. James Flexner states: "Ryder invented his own light, crepuscular, linked to moonlight (he loved to embed a moon in his painted skies), but permitting iridescent glows of color that the physical eye would never perceive even under the brightest moon."³ For Ryder, as for Inness, inner reality was paramount and natural forms were the means to an end. That painting was a way to objectify the subjective was indicated by Ryder's famous response, when once asked about The Race Track (Death on a Pale Horse), that he never gave any thought as to whether he was painting night or day.⁴ His nighttime walks were legendary, and he referred to himself as "soaked in the moonlight".⁵ Ryder painted numerous similar moonlit seascapes, among them Moonlit Cove, ca. 1890-1900, Moonlight, ca. 1885, Under a Cloud, n.a., Moonlight Marine, ca. 1870-1890, and

Marine, n.d. These are quite small and highly simplified, composed essentially of sea, sky, clouds, boat and moon.

Unlike Inness, whose emotion revolves around earthly phenomena, Ryder exudes a definite otherworldly quality. The seascapes are icons merely, heraldic symbols of a mystical vision. Sea, moon and boat are reality tokens, of value primarily as points of departure.

Moonlit Cove has a monumental and timeless quality similar to the paintings of Rothko. An empty boat is nestled in a protective cove, suggesting a brief respite from a cosmic journey. There is something highly satisfying in the way the landform meets the sea, almost embracing the little boat. This embrace is echoed by the animated moonlit sky and its reflection which evoke the spiritual or the supernatural by seeming themselves alive. Moonlit Cove is strikingly similar to Dove's collage Clouds, 1927; in both the soft rolling forms of land, clouds and water, depicted with the utmost simplicity, seem to contain something elemental and powerful.

In both Moonlight and Under a Cloud the boat appears to be far out at sea, and there is a strong sense of motion, of windiness; also in both there is a curious affinity between the sails and the clouds. In Moonlight the dark sail is nearly disconnected from the boat and aims toward the moon; except for being rather pointed, it seems more a cloud than a sail. In addition, it seems actually to be playing with the two small clouds, which, for their part, have more resemblance to flying saucers than to clouds. In Under a Cloud

the sail is tilted so that it is nearly aligned with the axis of the cloud. Cloud, sail and boat with undifferentiated figures are uniformly dark, suggesting, as in Moonlight, a mysterious affinity of boat and cloud.

A strong sense of abstract form and of the painting existing in and of itself is exemplified in Moonlight Marine. There is a stasis and a centered, iconic quality which reflect an attained harmony. Marine likewise has this strongly reductive iconic quality. Abstract patterning is even more highly developed than in Moonlight Marine, and the near-symmetry in both seems to indicate a fixed goal or direction. Ryder wrote of himself as an inchworm who would "crawl up a leaf or a twig, and then clinging to the very end, revolve in the air, feeling for something to reach something? That's like me, I am trying to find something out there beyond the place on which I have a footing."⁶ Marine conveys this thought directly; it definitely probes at an area of reality which is beyond the painter's sure footing by its simultaneous acknowledgement of visual facts and abstraction of those facts to a degree that they become symbolic beacons aiming toward another reality.

Ryder's work anticipates that of Arthur Dove, whose many moon, sun and weather paintings are visual equivalents for feeling states. Dove's moon paintings have a bit of the romantic tenderness of those by Inness, and something as well of the turbulent mystery of Ryder, but unlike either Inness or Ryder, Dove's work has a peculiarly sensuous animal quality

which reflects his belief in retrieval of natural and uncorrupted sensuality as well as his rural existence. Dove was strongly influenced by the cross-currents of ideas circulating through the Stieglitz gallery-laboratory, among which were Bergsonian esteem of intuition, nineteenth century transcendentalism with a symbolist update, and Romantic valuation of fantasy and independence.⁷ Along with these were emphasis on sloughing off the restrictive shackles of civilization and liberation from literal representation and corresponding freedom to search for new forms equivalent to intrinsic qualities of objects and emotions.

Moon, 1935, simultaneously resembles a moon, a tree, a Redonesque eye, and a phallic ejaculation. It is earthy, sexual and mysterious; however it does not have the pastoral mysteriousness of Inness nor the spacey evocations of Ryder. Dove's sunrise paintings are similarly suggestive at once of seascape, penetration and fertilization. Moon, by its primitive and suggestive ambiguousness, embodies the ideas of predominance of intuition, emphasis on instinctive and sexual life, and rejection of visual literalness for evocative forms. Moon bears a curious resemblance to the left middle-ground tree in Ryder's The Forest of Arden, as though Dove took this strange haunting form, simplified and stylized it still more until it became the magnetic but ever so slightly grotesque form of Moon. Although there is an indication of three-dimensional space, it is less pronounced than in Ryder or Inness. The point of the painting might be the visual manifestation

of his comment to Stieglitz that "the bursting of a phallic symbol into white light may be all that we need."⁸

Through a Frosty Moon, 1941, has nearly as much animal sensibility as Cows in Pasture, 1935, as if a vital human-animal spirit might be awakened by a walk on a cold moonlight night. While Inness's painting of the lone figure walking is a bit nostalgic and relatively little of the imagination is brought into play, Dove's painting might allude to what he imagines he would feel on such a walk as Inness represents. The colors are startlingly similar: whites and grays, greens and coppery tones. In Inness, mystery is pastoral and sentimental; in Ryder, mystery is visionary and otherworldly; in Dove mystery is abstract and animated and vaguely sensuous.

In Rise of the Full Moon, 1937, the flattened, abstract shapes give rise to an eerie, whimsical landscape. One of ten finds this playfulness in Dove, as well as in Avery, but it does not exist at all in Inness or Ryder, though the ethereal, otherworldly quality recalls Ryder's Moonlit Cove. Rise of the Full Moon has more distinct animism than Through a Frosty Moon, though shapes in both suggest earthforms, atmosphere and a non-rational musical quality.

City Moon, 1938, is the most alienated of Dove's moon paintings. Indeed Dove did not like city life, and a feeling of oppression and separation is apparent in the mocking moon behind a wire fence, as though an impression of imprisonment in the city.

While Ryder's paintings often evoke a sense of searching,

or grasping for something evasive, Dove's work gives a sense of at-one-ness with nature, a quality that will also be seen in Avery's contemplative paintings. O'Keeffe commented that Dove was the only painter who was part of the earth, and indeed, his paintings do not reveal an ego-distinction, but fuse human presence and cycles of nature.⁹ The human figure is not depicted even summarily as in Inness or Ryder, yet human sentiment is everywhere a diffuse presence enmeshed with the landscape, pulsing with a quality like anticipation of the moonrise. One might say there is a sense of nature's own ecstatic emotionalism.

Dove believed he had to seek his basic forms in nature, and Milton Avery likewise declined to invent imagery. Also like Dove, Avery dealt with highly simplified shapes and at times had a light, whimsical touch, though Avery's colors become arbitrary, rooted in inward fantasy more than derived from any occurrence in nature. It seems to be imperative for Avery to put down the very minimum of information and still allude to subject matter. His paintings are like haiku, terse and eloquent, and also like koans in that they force one into a deeper, intuitive appreciation of life. It is this contemplative, non-rational quality which places Avery's work under the rubric of "visionary".

In Tangerine Moon and Wine Dark Sea, 1959, a yellow-orange crescent hovers in a salmon sky above a narrow, white, horizontal stripe dotted with yellow and violet like confectionery candies. The sea below is broad brush-strokes of

maroon and blue. The painting is less of the sea and moon than a poetic vision of Avery's own making. (Avery might actually dwell in that realm for which Ryder was groping.) Tangerine Moon delights the eye and the soul; it is a serene reminder that all is well in the universe. It alludes to a cosmic security not unlike the domestic security promised in the dwellings in Inness's Moonlight.

Sea, Moon and Stars, 1960, is another variation on the theme of seascape, a decorative, musical pictograph of dancing celestial bodies and their reflections. It is nearly monochromatic and the paint is applied thinly and brushily; the coarse and brusque handling contrasts oddly with the delicacy of subject matter.

My favorite among Avery's moon paintings is Moon Path, 1958. It is a fantasy of lilac and violet rescued from prettiness by austerity of composition. The white on white irregular moon nestles in a sky of several shades of lavender. The bottom two-fifths is an equally brushy sea of darker violet broken by the vertical white on white reflection-shape of the moon. This is such lovely abstract poetry; it also has the contemplative serenity that one finds in Inness, the monumental simplicity of Ryder, and the playful, lyrical quality of Dove.

"Avery's genius lay in his ability to portray moods that stimulate each viewer's consciousness on an almost archetypal level."¹⁰ What Haskell says of Avery is equally true for Inness, Ryder and Dove. Their paintings invoke an awareness

of a multiverse beyond rational consciousness. Inness capitalizes on the shadowy, mysterious quality moonlight gives to the most mundane scenes. Ryder uses the moon as a beacon toward and symbol of another order of existence. Dove plays in the emotional and sensuous realms evoked by the moon. Avery's serene and harmonious moon scenes indicate the sheer poetry of what is seen. Each uses landscape and the suggestive qualities of the moon as a springboard toward cosmic sensibility.

FOOTNOTES

¹LeRoy Ireland, The Works of George Inness an Illustrated Catalogue Raisonne.

²Alfred Werner, Inness Landscapes, p. 16.

³Janes T. Flexner, Nineteenth Century American Painting, p. 209.

⁴Jules D. Prown, American Painting From its Beginnings to the Armory Show, p.99.

⁵James Thrall Soby, Romantic Painting in America, p. 36.

⁶Barbara Novak, American Painting of the Nineteenth Century, p. 213.

⁷Sasha M. Newman, Arthur Dove and Duncan Phillips: Artist and Patron, p. 14.

⁸Ibid., p.34.

⁹Ibid., pp. 24-25.

¹⁰Barbara Haskell, Milton Avery, p. 161.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cikovsky, Nicolai, Jr., George Inness, New York, Praeger, 1971.
- Davidson, Abraham A., The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1978.
- Flexner, James T., Nineteenth Century American Painting, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970.
- Goodrich, Lloyd, Albert P. Ryder, New York, George Braziller, Inc., 1959.
- Haskell, Barbara, Arthur Dove, Boston, New York Graphic Society, 1974.
- Haskell, Barbara, Milton Avery, New York, Harper and Row, 1982.
- Inness, George, Jr., Life, Art, and Letters of George Inness, New York, The Century Co., 1917.
- Ireland, LeRoy, The Works of George Inness an Illustrated Catalogue Raisonne, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1965.
- McCausland, Elizabeth, George Inness an American Landscape Painter, New York, American Artists Group, Inc., 1946.
- Newman, Sasha M., Arthur Dove and Duncan Phillips: Artist and Patron, New York, George Braziller, Inc., 1981.
- Novak, Barbara, American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience, New York, Praeger, 1969.
- Prown, Jules David, American Painting From its Beginnings to the Armory Show, Cleveland, The World Publishing Co., (Skira), 1970.
- Rosenblum, Robert, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko, New York, Harper and Row, 1975.

Soby, James Thrall, Romantic Painting in America, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1943.

Werner, Alfred, Inness Landscapes, New York, Watson-Guption Publications, 1973.

Wight, Frederick S., Arthur G. Dove, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1958.