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Therapeutic Beauty

Abbott Thayer, Antimodernism, and the Fear of Disease

Elizabeth Lee

The subject of female purity constituted a dominant theme for artists in the late nineteenth century. As suggested by Abbott Handerson Thayer's *Angel* (frontispiece), women in this genre were almost always clothed, often in classicizing dress, in a manner that clearly distinguished them from the sexually charged nudes of the Académie Julian and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris (fig. 1), where American painters of Thayer's generation received their artistic training. Whether portrayed in outdoor settings (fig. 2), domestic interiors (fig. 3), or in a more indeterminate space, as with *Angel*, these women were represented as wholesome, refined, and chaste. What I find most interesting about these depictions of pure white women, painted by Thayer, Thomas Dewing, Edmund Tarbell, George de Forest Brush, Kenyon Cox, and a host of other artists of this period, is that they were created within a context so utterly at odds with the theme they represent. Indeed, late-nineteenth-century America, often referred to as the Gilded Age for its display of corporate wealth and cultural patronage, was also characterized by massive immigration, working-class violence, overcrowded housing for the poor, garbage-filled streets, industrial pollution, and the spread of epidemic disease—all of which played a role in remaking the nation as a specifically modern entity.

For the most part, scholars have assumed that this process of modernization unfolded independently of artists' depictions of idealized women. As early as 1929 Suzanne La Follette noted in her survey of American art that the "Ideal Beauty" pursued near the turn of the century was "conceived as something tenuous and ethereal" with "as little relation as possible to the vulgar realities of the world." More than sixty years later, the same assumption holds sway. In her recent study of this genre, art historian Bailey Van Hook commented that with these works artists "ignored the rapid scientific and industrial changes of the era; the conflicts between capital, monopoly, new wealth and the nascent labor movement; the tensions between the American self-image of a mixed yet largely homogeneous society and the acceleration of immigration from different, seemingly alien countries."¹ I argue here, however, that they may not have been as disengaged as their subjects suggest. In Thayer's case, persistent references in his letters and other writings to disease, prostitution, garbage, excrement, and germs indicate that the chaste, angelic surfaces of his figures cloak profound concerns. Far from being detached from late-nineteenth-century experience, Thayer was overwrought with anxiety in response to the

times in which he lived. In his depictions of female purity and raw nature, he used paint to work through his fears, which only increased with the illness and subsequent death of his first wife, Kate. Thayer sought to protect himself and his family from bodily disintegration by adopting a therapeutic, outdoors-oriented life in the shadow of New Hampshire's Mount Monadnock (fig. 4), his shrine to the pursuit of good health. I hope to show in this essay that Thayer's art was motivated by similar concerns: disease, in fact, becomes an organizing topos through which his paintings take shape.

Germ and the City

From an early age, disease played a defining role in Thayer's life. He was born in Boston in 1849—the “cholera year”—to Ellen Handerson Thayer and William Henry Thayer, a graduate of Harvard Medical School who specialized in epidemic disease. Dr. Thayer began his medical practice at Boston's Temporary Home for Destitute Children shortly after Abbott's birth but left the institution following an outbreak of cholera. This episode, coupled with his mother's illness from dysentery, sent the young doctor off to Europe to restore his health. On returning to America, Dr. Thayer insisted on moving his wife and four young children to a safer environment away from the city. They lived in Woodstock, Vermont, and then in Ellen Thayer's hometown of Keene, New Hampshire, before settling many years later in New York City. As a sanitary inspector for the city's Metropolitan Board of Health in the late 1860s, Dr. Thayer worked to promote what was then an arguable link between poor urban sanitation and disease.

While his profession demanded a high level of awareness about disease, Dr. Thayer's concerns about his family's health in relation to the urban environment

were shared by many at the time. The phenomenal growth of American cities in the decades following the Civil War created a demand for resources beyond what any major metropolis could provide. Crowded housing, a limited supply of clean water, and the lack of indoor plumbing and organized garbage removal

all contributed to making city life horrifically dirty. To complicate matters, this period saw the emergence of germ theory. In contrast to an earlier notion of contagion, based on odiferous miasmas, the new view proposed that invisible microorganisms were the carriers of disease. The fact that germs were ubiquitous and

In response to this environment of uncontrollable filth, those with the means to do so—like Dr. Thayer’s family—escaped to less toxic settings.

Abbott Thayer studied painting in Paris in the late 1870s and then taught and worked in New York City. In the late 1880s, following in his father’s footsteps, he and his family began summering in rural Dublin, New Hampshire (fig. 5), near his childhood home in Keene.³ The area around Dublin had attracted artists and writers since the early nineteenth century. In particular, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had viewed Dublin’s Mount Monadnock as a kind of spiritual retreat. In a poem named after the mountain, Emerson wrote:

*Man in these crags a fastness find
To fight pollution of the mind;
In the wide thaw and ooze of wrong,
Adhere like this fountain strong,
The insanity of towns to stem
With simpleness for stratagem.*

impossible to detect generated intense anxiety among the middle and upper classes, who felt defenseless before their threat. As Harriette Plunkett noted in her work on household sanitation, “A man may live on the splendid ‘avenue,’ in a mansion plumbed in the latest and costliest style, but if, half a mile away, in range with his open window, there is a ‘slum,’ or even a neglected tenement house, the zephyrs will come along and pick up the disease germs and bear them onward, distributing them to whomsoever it meets, whether he be a millionaire or a shillingaire.” Beyond unavoidable contact with disease-causing germs, the degraded quality of urban life proved a further insidious threat. In *The Health of the City*, Hollis Godfrey described the lungs of urban residents, polluted by coal-burning factories, as “streaked and spotted with black lines which chart the blocked-up roads where breath of life once entered, where burned-out wastes once passed.”²

A devoted follower of Emerson, Thayer was a profoundly spiritual man. In his pantheistic reverence for nature, he found little of worth in the technological ethos of the modern-day world. Thayer believed that industrialization had “drugged” the nation’s soul, creating a people “whose whole conscious existence has been absorbed by the sudden burst into existence of the ‘modern conveniences,’ one miracle succeeding another at breath-stopping speed—steam and then electricity, with all its revolutionings.” Given its seeming numbness to any deeper truth, American culture, in Thayer’s mind, was destined to become one “glorious electric-lighted pavement, with no beauty anywhere except such as may be able to consist with ‘modern enterprise.’”⁴

Dublin offered a setting far from the “insanity of towns” that could fight the “pollution of the mind,” as Emerson observed. The very word “Monadnock” means “resistant rock,” a sense that comes

through in Thayer's paintings of the mountain. Immutably stationed, Monadnock's monumental form quietly asserts its presence in time and space, absent of any concern with the current mechanical age. As if to signal its remove, Thayer generally depicted Monadnock

surrounded by a thicket of trees, which create a physical barrier between mountain and viewer, protecting it from unwanted company. *Monadnock in Winter* (fig. 6) and *Monadnock No. 2* (see fig. 4) are typical of the way he represented the mountain on canvas. Monadnock's

sunlit, snowcapped peak rises visibly above the trees, appearing at a considerable distance from the mountain's base, with no apparent link between them. Thayer's loosely rendered bank of trees limits human access; by preventing entry beyond the painting's open foreground, the mountain takes on a dark, foreboding quality.

As a relic of uncultivated nature, Monadnock functions in a manner akin to the untamed wilderness which, as historian Roderick Nash explains, acted in the nineteenth century as an "antipode of civilization, of cities, and of machines" by embodying "the virtues these entities lacked." According to Nash, in such settings "Americans detected the qualities of innocence, purity, cleanliness, and morality which seemed on the verge of succumbing to utilitarianism and the surge of progress"—the very qualities that attracted Thayer to Monadnock, both as a painter and an activist.⁵

Insisting that the mountain's "virginity" belonged to individuals like himself, "accustomed to feed[ing] their souls by gazing at Monadnock," Thayer angrily protested efforts by seasonal residents of Dublin to use the mountain as a setting for private summer homes. Quoting Emerson, the artist wrote local property owners that "what the world *needs* is . . . some proof that man can *see* without *taking*." His painted depictions of Monadnock's snowcapped peak further underscore Thayer's interests, since winter was a time of year when summer residents were guaranteed to be absent. Snow also functions as a purifying agent, cleansing the mountain of any threats to its "primeval, wild nature-purity," so valued by Thayer.⁶

Thayer was particularly concerned to keep the area around Monadnock clean and pleaded with his Dublin neighbors on the subject of trash removal. Given that "no town dump has yet been established here," he explained in a letter to fellow residents, it was critical that "any kind of rubbish" be carried away to avoid

littering the roadways and surrounding land. We know from Thayer's daughter Gladys that the artist had been concerned about trash since his youth: "I have heard him say," she once wrote, "that when he was [a] small boy, if, on some pleasant ramble through woods or along the brooks, he chanced upon an ugly dump of rubbish, all the rest of his day would seem clouded or depressed." During the family's regular treks up Monadnock, Thayer "never failed to pick up bits of paper or any disfiguring rubbish left about." In fact, Gladys recalled, "we enjoyed many rainy road walks with this special mission of gathering up and burning stray papers." From Thayer's perspective, any sign of a man-made presence threatened to destroy Monadnock's pristine beauty.⁷

Angels and Madonnas

Thayer's shift to angels and Madonnas might seem a natural outgrowth of his Dublin experience, given that both women and the mountain functioned for the artist as signifiers of purity. In truth, however, the two subjects stem from another common source: the disease and death of Thayer's wife (fig. 7). Over the years scholars have tended to treat Kate's death cursorily, as the result of melancholia and a "pulmonary complication," but recent recognition that she died from tuberculosis offers a new avenue of understanding. Diagnosed with severe melancholia in 1888 following the death of her father and her daughter's sickness from scarlet fever, Kate was initially hospitalized, then admitted to a Massachusetts asylum. Her already fragile condition was soon complicated by tuberculosis, a discovery that prompted doctors to move her to a healthier environment. Within a month of her arrival at a Baldwinsville, Massachusetts, sanatorium, however, Kate Thayer's condition rapidly declined. She died on May 3, 1891.⁸

Tuberculosis was considered a disease of refinement in the early nineteenth century, the era of John Keats and Frédéric Chopin. But by 1882, in the wake of Robert Koch's discovery of the tubercle bacillus, a fear of contagion and germs had replaced the discourse of romantic genius. No longer believed to be passed

through family bloodlines, tuberculosis was reconfigured as a disease of the masses—a by-product of modernization or, as recent historians have called it, society's "price" for industrialization—and thus linked to the city and to Thayer's broader antimodernist concerns. Since the nature of modern life in the city made contact

with the tubercle bacillus impossible to avoid, medical advice instead emphasized strengthening individual immunity. The best way to increase resistance was to limit one's exposure to the city, given its density of contagion. While doctors debated what kind of setting—wooded, high altitude, desert, or seaside—proved the most beneficial, all agreed that the goal was to find an environment “uncontaminated by civilization.”⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, such therapeutic settings had been institutionalized through the sanatorium movement. In the words of the renowned physician Edward Livingston Trudeau, the sanatorium was designed to “improve the patient's nutrition and increase his resistance to the disease, by placing him under the most favorable environment obtainable.” As Trudeau went on to explain, the “main elements of such an environment are an invigorating climate, an open-air life, rest, coupled with the careful regulation of the daily habits and an abundant supply of nutritious food.” Built far from polluted cities, sanatorium facilities featured structures like the lean-to pictured here at Loomis Sanatorium in the Adirondacks (fig. 8), which provided round-the-clock access to cleansing,

therapeutic air. Combined with other aspects of the experience, as described by Trudeau, it was hoped that the sanatorium stay would sufficiently fortify a patient's immunities to allow for a safe and healthy reintegration into modern metropolitan life.¹⁰

In theory, the principles of “climate therapy,” as it was often called, were beneficial even in the absence of manifest symptoms. Doctors such as Edward Otis, author of *The Great White Plague: Tuberculosis*, hoped that patients could return home following a sanatorium stay as “apostles of the fresh air life and wholesome living in the communities in which they reside,” instructing those around them in its tenets. For the family and friends of a recovering patient such guidance was particularly important, since intimate contact with the disease inhibited a person's ability to fight it.¹¹

Although Kate Thayer's sanatorium stay allowed for limited family contact, her husband and children nevertheless adopted what appears to have been their own version of a therapeutic regime. According to Dr. Thayer's diary, Abbott and his family retreated to Dublin on May 15, 1891, less than two weeks after Kate's death. While there, his father wrote, the artist intended “to paint no more portraits this summer, and to take no pupils—but to rest in landscapes,” painting only on rainy days. Throughout his career, Abbott Thayer had struggled with his health. In a letter to patron Charles Freer, he acknowledged as much, admitting that his life had “always been different from that of most of the other men. St. Gaudens and Dewing and Tryon for instance know no particular limit to their bodily strength. . . . Whereas I have always been too tired to work over four hours a day and my life has been one steady fight to be fresh enough for continued labor.” In addition to his health concerns, Thayer, who had already lost two sons as infants a decade earlier, was now charged with the care of his three

remaining children—Mary, Gerald, and Gladys. In 1890, during Kate’s illness, Dr. Thayer wrote in his diary, “Abbott’s children have been well and hearty these two years—thanks to his judicious management and their free outdoor life.” After Kate’s death, Dublin continued to appeal to the artist as a setting well suited to the continued “management” of his family’s health.¹²

Indeed, visitors to the Thayer homestead in Dublin often remarked on the family’s unusual routine. The painter Rockwell Kent, who worked as a copyist for Thayer, once described the family as a bunch of “nature worshippers.”¹³ More specifically, according to Barry Faulkner, the artist’s nephew and student, Thayer “shaped his life and the life of his family on Emerson, Audubon and Monadnock.” If nature served as the family’s religion, Mount Monadnock functioned as its shrine. In Faulkner’s words, the Thayers viewed the mountain as “their totem, their fetish, the object of their adoration. They surrendered themselves to the sorcery of its primitive being.” On a typical day, Faulkner recalls, Thayer spent his morning painting, then “climbed the mountain” or took long trail walks with his family. With Gerald especially, he

“prowled [Monadnock’s] peaks and precipices, its naked spine, and knew well the mysteries of the mountain brook and its groves of spruce and hemlock.”¹⁴

These vigorous explorations encouraged the kind of deep breathing then believed to free toxins from contaminated lungs. According to nineteenth-century health writer Ella Adelia Fletcher, “breath *is* life, and . . . the more air you breathe in the highest state of purity, the deeper your hold upon life will be and the more radiant your health.” Mountain air was widely considered the best type of air, since a higher elevation all but guaranteed its purity. Many also felt that high-altitude air was particularly effective for tubercular patients. Physician Alfred Loomis attributed his recovery from the disease to the air of the Adirondacks, citing its “specially vitalized and purified atmosphere, free from germs and impurities of any kind, and laden with the resinous exhalations of myriads of evergreens.” This sense of a purified atmosphere comes through in Thayer’s paintings of Monadnock in winter, which highlight a time of year when freezing temperatures had killed disease-bearing mosquitoes and other sources of contagion. Thayer’s emphasis on the trees surrounding the mountain further point to Dublin’s therapeutic qualities in light of Loomis’s comment about the salutary effects of the evergreen’s “resinous exhalations.”¹⁵

In keeping with the sanatorium’s fresh-air routine, the Thayers also slept outdoors year-round. According to Faulkner, they read aloud around a fire inside the house at night before bundling up and heading out to their individualized lean-tos (fig. 9), where they were then lulled to sleep by a classical violinist hired by the artist. Among the many structures designed to increase exposure to fresh air during sleep, the three-sided lean-to was deemed a particularly good choice: as one sanatorium physician attested, it “met the requirements for open-air cure more completely and

fresh air,” windows in the family home were kept open throughout the year, “except during blizzards and thunderstorms,” Faulkner said, making the cottage frigid in winter.¹⁶

In addition to being raised in this open-air setting, Thayer’s children were privately tutored at home on account of their father’s “morbid fear of germs,” Faulkner recalled in his memoir. Keeping his children within his immediate environment served the artist’s emotional and psychological needs as well: as scholar Ross Anderson writes, Thayer relied on his family for “his sense of self-worth”; he “required the unconditional adulation that only members of his own household could provide.” Given the role of his children following Kate’s death, it is perhaps not surprising that they inspired Thayer’s earliest ideal figures. *Angel* (see frontispiece), for instance, represents Mary, the artist’s first daughter and eldest child. Since the timing of the painting roughly coincides with the onset of Kate’s illness, Mary as angel symbolically marks the absence of the woman Thayer once wrote that he “utterly worshipped” and considered “more God-like than anybody else.” The painting may also reference the “angel of death,” a phrase commonly used in the nineteenth century to describe tuberculosis. Mary’s pale, chalky skin, emphasized by the whiteness of her wings and robe, conveys a fragile appearance resembling the effects of consumption when considered alongside her delicate stature and disembodied gaze. Mary/Kate thus binds the contradictory tensions in Thayer’s art, vacillating between healthy daughter and sickly mother in a liminal space that collapses the promise of wholesome youth with the horror of bodily disintegration.¹⁷

A few years later all three children appear in *Virgin Enthroned* (fig. 10), which was completed in 1891, the year of Kate’s death. Using a format adopted from Italian Renaissance art, Thayer portrayed Mary as the seated central figure, assuming the role of her Christian

satisfactorily than most others.” Thayer further enhanced its benefits by inventing a breath catcher, a device worn around the nose and mouth, which was intended to prevent the body’s noxious exhalations from freezing onto bedding at night. (He also wore year round a special kind of wool underwear marketed for its protective qualities against disease.) Guests were apparently spared from taking part in this nighttime outdoor ritual. But owing to Thayer’s belief in “all-out exposure to

namesake while at the same time stepping in as a substitute for her mother. Thayer had previously pictured his wife as a Madonna in *Mother and Child* (see fig. 7), in which she holds Gerald, the couple's only surviving son, in a position traditionally assumed by the Christ Child. By the time Thayer painted *Virgin Enthroned*, Gerald and Gladys accompany Mary in a manner reminiscent of

Renaissance Madonna groupings, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*, in which Christ and St. John the Baptist appear with the Virgin Mary. In *Virgin Enthroned*, Thayer's children provide their father with his own sacred trinity, while serving as reminders of Kate, the continued silent reference in all these works.¹⁸

In *A Virgin* (fig. 11) of 1892–93, Thayer repeated his earlier format, albeit

transferred to an outdoor setting and with all three figures standing. The clouds emerging from Mary's shoulders as wings allude to Thayer's earlier depiction of her in *Angel*, and thus again to her role as a stand-in for Kate. Given the way in which Kate's illness focused her family's attention on nature and health, it seems significant, too, that Gerald, Mary, and Gladys, shown barefoot and windswept, are depicted on a vigorous walk. The representation of nature, as seen in the rough, haphazard patches of grass, flowers, and foliage on the ground, may illustrate the "primeval, wild nature-purity" Thayer admired in Dublin and Monadnock. Immersed in this therapeutic environment while perhaps on one of their daily mountain walks, Thayer's children embody the life their father embraced and, like their mother, are transformed into sacred figures.

Although he remarried four months after Kate's death, Thayer's second wife, Emma Beach, a longtime family friend, never appears in paint as one of these ideal women (fig. 12). Instead, in addition to his children, Dublin neighbors with a similar investment in the area's therapeutic promise served as Thayer's models. Clara May, the model for *Winged Figure* (1889) was one such neighbor. Clara, the daughter of a Brooklyn businessman, graduated from Radcliffe College and married an Episcopalian minister. Responding to her plans to leave the area, Thayer wrote to her that she was "the very symbol of all the joys and healths Dublin had given us." And he asked, "Why, why, why are the Mays breaking up the dear Dublin life for all of us?" Another neighbor, Elise Pumpelly, who appears in *Caritas* (1894–95) and *Woman in Grecian Gown* (fig. 13), was the daughter of Harvard geologist Raphael Pumpelly, one of Dublin's first summer residents. Pumpelly significantly contributed to the area's sanitary health by establishing a bacteriological and clinical laboratory to safeguard local milk supplies. He also worked to drain farmland in the area of stagnant pools of water in an effort to minimize the presence of mosquitoes. Appropriately enough, his daughter appears in Thayer's painting wearing loose clothing that was prized as a model of hygiene and health.¹⁹

Like other artists of the day who painted idealized young women—for example, Francis Millet's portrayal in *An Autumn Idyll* (fig. 14)—Thayer draped his figures in classicizing dress. A late-nineteenth-century classical revival, including the staging of civic pageants and a nostalgia for colonial America, helps to account for the widespread use of Greek gowns in painting from this period. The fact that Thayer's generation learned to paint the figure through the study of classical sculpture offers another partial explanation for its repeated appearance in art.

Yet in Thayer's case, as for other artists at the time, this reference to the Greeks was largely driven, once again, by an interest in health.

Throughout the nineteenth century, medical professionals, women's rights supporters, and physical culture advocates were among those who challenged conventional wisdom on the subject of women's dress. According to health enthusiast Bernarr MacFadden in *The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood*,

the contorted, "caged-in" look of modern-day fashion could be blamed for the "physical ugliness, weakness and sickness" that plagued American women. More than any other garment, the corset "crushed, maltreated and distorted" the female form from an early age, leaving women physically "retarded" as adults, MacFadden said. In the words of one reformer, the tight-laced corset "hugs like a bear—crushing in the ribs, injuring the lungs and heart, the stomach, and many other internal organs." "Before" and "after" drawings in books on women's health (fig. 15) dramatized the difference over time between the body's natural contours and a tightly corseted waist.²⁰

As a corrective, women were advised to rethink modern notions of beauty through the study of ancient Greek art. As described by Frances Steele and Elizabeth Adams in *Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture*, ancient Greece represented

“the period of the highest physical cultivation of the race known to history.” In the words of another beauty writer, “the study of beautiful dress for women necessarily involves the admiration of classical standards; not an acquiescence in their fitness for sculpture, not a tolerance of them in famous pictures, but a love for them, a conviction in their rightness, a persuasion of their sweetness and majesty.” Among ancient works recommended for aesthetic contemplation, none received more praise than the *Venus de Milo*, celebrated as the embodiment of beauty defined by health. Born of a culture with respect for the body and an interest in physical fitness, the sculpture represented an aesthetic for modern-day women to embrace. For reformers like MacFadden, the *Venus de Milo* was the perfect model to promote a life of “good food with plenty of exercise, less art with more nature, less toilet artificialities with more robustness, less study with more play, less paint with more oxygen, and less fashionableness with more womanliness.”²¹

This vision of beauty directly informs Thayer’s idealized figures. The artist knew the *Venus de Milo* well from his student days in Paris, when it was a recent addition to the collections of the Louvre. He painted an oil study of the Venus (fig. 16) and spoke with pride of owning a reproduced fragment of the sculpture. In a letter to fellow artist Everton Sainsbury written at an early stage of his career, Thayer stated that he “owned nothing, except a cooking stove, the head of the Venus de Milo, Michaelangelo’s ‘Prisoner’s Head,’ a great many [of his own paintings] and a few clothes and warm hearts.” Moreover, photographs of Thayer’s models (fig. 17) suggest an uncanny correspondence between his practice as an artist and the advice of contemporary beauty writers. Just as writers Frances Steele and Elizabeth Adams encouraged women “to make pictures of themselves” by studying ancient statues and experimenting with classical dress (fig. 18), Thayer used paintbrush

and canvas to turn his models into visions that were inspired by ancient example. In both cases, the Greek chiton enjoyed a privileged status. Though perhaps impractical as a form of modern dress, women were nonetheless encouraged to study its design, which “in no way contradicted the natural form, and probably interfered with healthful activity less than any other apparel ever worn.” For Thayer, like Steele and Adams, the chiton appealed as a refreshingly healthy alternative to the highly controlled and contorted look promoted by current fashion.²²

While these distinctions might seem insignificant, they were crucial for Thayer. As scholar Alexander Nemerov has shown, the artist was exceedingly sensitive to the subject of women and representation. Having lived through a period of unparalleled growth in celebrity culture and mass-media entertainment, Thayer was attuned to the ways in which women in American culture were on display as never before. More often than not, such public exhibition violated his sense of propriety. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, he protested the newspaper’s practice of publishing photographs of society

women. Perceiving a breach in the rules of decorum that once separated public from private, Thayer said the *Times* was doing its “full share to make prostitutes of your nation’s women” by picturing the city’s socialites.²³

Another letter to the short-lived arts periodical *Bruno’s Weekly* offered an even more revealing instance of what Thayer considered transgressive. In response to two of the journal’s issues featuring cover illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley (fig. 19), Thayer asked how a publication with a “big-sterned, grown-up female cherub” and a “clawed hideosity” on the front could possibly include anything “sweet and wholesome” inside. Beardsley’s notoriously flamboyant sexuality made his work an easy target for Thayer. Yet given the painter’s obsession with purity, the language he used to express his contempt for these drawings was striking in its vulgarity. Describing these issues of the journal as “systematically daubed outside with stinking shit,” Thayer warned that future volumes would be taken “between thumb and finger as I would my hat if I had to fish it out of a country privy-vault” and burned. Thayer ended his letter by stating that he “prayed” the journal’s editor, as well as Beardsley himself, might find “help to climb out of the cesspool you are in.”²⁴

Thayer’s concern with the depiction of women as wholesome and pure comes through, too, in his attacks on the academic art celebrated at the time in Paris

art schools. In a comment referring to the alabaster nudes painted by his former teacher, Jean-Léon Gérôme—a favorite French master among Gilded Age collectors—Thayer insisted that Gérôme belonged to “that raft of whore-painters” who specialized in pictures of the Parisian “demi-monde” and could scarcely be considered artists. Continuing in a letter to collector John Gellatly, a patron of Thayer’s work, he noted that in the end it made no difference if artists like Gérôme “can’t tell a flower from a wax-flower” since “their sleek tin truck ultimately reaches our museums.” Passionate in his warning, Thayer implored Gellatly to see that these so-called works of art were nothing more than pictures of “whores” painted by men who possess “mediocre, useless skills” and who are “stone blind to any attribute except fuckableness.”²⁵

By contrast, Thayer saw himself as “one of God’s own tools.” In a letter to Charles Freer, he explained that his paintings were “not made to sell” but instead served a “pure prophetic quality”

with “an inestimable value to the nation.” Indeed, through paintings of snowy mountain landscapes and healthy natural women, Thayer worked to stem the tide of modernity’s wholesale destruction. Toward the end of his career, these two key subjects literally merge in *Monadnock Angel* (fig. 20), in which one of Thayer’s characteristically white-robed angels appears atop the mountain, where she addresses the viewer with open arms and a pleading gesture. Thayer once explained that he believed in a “winged part of a people” who are like “great birds” standing as “the prophetic souls who strive against a national decadence.” *Monadnock Angel* appears as one such guide. Completed just before the artist’s death in 1921, the painting not only revisits his favorite themes but does so again with a haunting reminder of Kate, from whose death Thayer never fully recovered. One wonders if this angel, modeled on Thayer’s daughter Gladys, is intended as a resurrected Kate, returning to retrieve her aging husband. Following his death, Thayer’s ashes were spread across Monadnock, an act that would seem to support this suggestion. In any event, with *Monadnock Angel* Thayer gives his viewer another chance—perhaps the last—to hear him out. Unlike the socially prominent “prostitutes” pictured in the *New York Times*, Beard’sley’s “clawed hideosity,” and Gérôme’s erotic nudes, the women in Thayer’s paintings, like the angel pictured here, remain untainted by a contaminating urban milieu. Yet Thayer’s angel, so easily interpreted as purity and innocence, is a complex, multilayered figure. While her outstretched arms suggest redemption through a figure conceived in defiance against a toxic modern world, the ominous mountain on which she stands, combined with her mask of purity disguising disease and death, leave Thayer’s viewer with less promise than the “prophetic souls” he imagined.²⁶

Notes

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- 1 Suzanne La Follette, *Art in America* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1929), 209; Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in Society, 1876–1914* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1996), 136.
- 2 Harriette Merrick Plunkett, *Women, Plumbers and Doctors, or Household Sanitation* (New York: D. Appleton, 1897), 203; Hollis Godfrey, *The Health of the City* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 5.
- 3 Thayer depended on New York for a network of colleagues and resources such as art schools, museums, galleries, and studio space, yet in the early 1880s he and his family were able to live outside the city in various sites along the Hudson River. In 1887 he spent a summer in Keene, New Hampshire, where a wealthy Bostonian, Mary Armory Greene, persuaded Thayer to return the following summer to a cottage on her Dublin property. The Thayer family first summered there in 1888, returning in subsequent years before finally making the cottage their permanent, year-round home in 1901. Other artists were drawn to the area shortly after Thayer's arrival, including a number of his students as well as painters George de Forest Brush and Frank Benson. For a history, see Barbara Ball Buff, "The Dublin Colony," *A Circle of Friends: Art Colonies of Cornish and Dublin* (Keene: Univ. of New Hampshire with Keene State College, 1985), 9–31.
- 4 For Emerson's poem, see *The Grand Monadnock: A Literary, Artistic, and Social History* (Keene, N.H.: Keene State College, 1974), 11; Abbott Thayer to the *Republican*, February 22, [1907?], Thomas Brumbaugh Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter AAA).
- 5 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), 157.
- 6 Undated letter to Mrs. William Amory and the Reverend George F. Weld, Dublin Historical Society, Dublin, N.H., original at AAA.
- 7 Abbott Thayer, undated letter, Nelson White Papers, AAA, reel 201, frames 760–62; for quotes by Gladys Thayer, see her typed manuscript, "Family Life," 7, Nelson White Papers. On a related note, see Thayer's "A protest against lighting the Dublin roads with electricity," May 25, 1904, Thomas Brumbaugh Papers.
- 8 For earlier treatments of Kate's death, see Nelson White, *Abbott H. Thayer: Painter and Naturalist* (Hartford: Connecticut Printers, 1951), 57, and Ross Anderson, *Abbott Handerson Thayer* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Everson Museum, 1982), 20. Richard Murray explicitly acknowledged that she died from tuberculosis, the effects of which were made difficult by her profound melancholia. My analysis here builds on Murray's finding that Thayer painted his children during Kate's illness and following her death as a means of consoling his grief. See Murray, "Abbott Thayer's Stevenson Memorial," *American Art* 13 no. 2 (Summer 1999): 3–22.
- 9 On the history of tuberculosis, see Katherine Ott, *Fevered Lives: Tuberculosis in American Culture Since 1870* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996); Sheila M. Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994); and Rene Dubos and Jean Dubos, *The White Plague: Tuberculosis, Man and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1952).
- 10 The quote by Trudeau is from Sheila M. Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death*, 203.
- 11 Edward Otis, *The Great White Plague: Tuberculosis* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 1909), 113.
- 12 Dr. Thayer's Family Record, Abbott Handerson Thayer and Thayer Family Papers, AAA, reel 48, frames 105 and 91; Abbott Thayer to Charles Freer, May 20, 1893, Thomas Brumbaugh Papers. Fatigue and nervous exhaustion, two ailments Thayer complained of, were common responses to industrial life, as discussed in George Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1881).
- 13 Rockwell Kent, *It's Me, O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1955), 102. See also Cecilia Beaux, *Background with Figures: Autobiography of Cecilia Beaux* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930). Thayer's interest in nature was also expressed through his study of animal camouflage, a passion that competed with his devotion to art. He traveled through North America, Europe, and parts of the Caribbean in pursuit of rare species, some of which were described in his 1909 study *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*, co-authored with his son Gerald. See Alexander Nemerov, "Vanishing Americans: Abbott Thayer, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Attraction of Camouflage," *American Art* (Summer 1997): 51–81; Anderson, *Abbott Handerson Thayer*; and Roy Behrens, "The Theories of Abbott H. Thayer: Father of Camouflage," *Leonardo* 21, no. 3 (1988): 291–96.
- 14 The quotations are from Barry Faulkner, *Barry Faulkner: Sketches from an Artist's Life* (Dublin, N.H.: William L. Bauhan, 1973), 23–24, 28.
- 15 Ella Adelia Fletcher, *The Woman Beautiful. A Practical Treatise on the Development and Preservation of Woman's Health and Beauty* (New York: Brentano's, 1901), 109. The Loomis quote is from Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death*, 159.
- 16 On the lean-tos, see John Bessner Huber, *Consumption: Its Relation to Man and His Civilization* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1906), 222. On the breath catcher, see White, *Abbott H. Thayer*, 104. Faulkner writes in *Barry Faulkner: Sketches from an Artist's Life*, 20, that Thayer maintained these conditions out of the fear that his children "were subject to tuberculosis." Thayer wore Jaeger underwear year-round (Faulkner, 19). Physician Gustav Jaeger was famous in the Victorian era for his "100% pure, undyed wool underwear." He claimed that it "prevented the retention of 'noxious exhalations' of the body, retained the salutary emanations of the body which induce a sense of vigor and sound health

- and ensured warmth and ventilation.” Jaeger sold his underwear based on the belief that wool protected against diseases such as cholera, typhus, dysentery, and tuberculosis. See Gary M. Griffin, *The History of Men’s Underwear* (Los Angeles: Added Dimensions Publishing, 1991), 50.
- 17 Faulkner, *Barry Faulkner*, 24. Anderson, *Abbott Handerson Thayer*, 70. Rene and Jean Dubos have discussed how the physical effects of tuberculosis influenced aesthetics in nineteenth-century art; see *The White Plague*, 56–57. See also Sharon Hirsh, “Codes of Consumption: Tuberculosis and Body Image at the Fin-de-Siècle,” in *In Sickness and in Health: Disease as Metaphor in Art and Popular Wisdom*, ed. Laurinda S. Dixon (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2004).
 - 18 According to Richard Murray, Thayer’s *Virgin Enthroned* was interpreted by a critic of the day as a painting of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child and St. John the Baptist; see Murray, “Abbott Thayer’s *Stevenson Memorial*,” 13.
 - 19 Thayer to May quoted in Thomas B. Brumbaugh, “An Artist and His Model: Abbott Thayer and Clara May,” *American Art Journal*, May 1978, 32. Thayer’s practice of using models from elite Northeastern families did not necessarily differ from that of other contemporary artists. American artists’ models in the late nineteenth century were increasingly educated and refined. One exception would be Thayer’s use of his Irish servant Bessie Price for a number of important works, yet because she lived with the Thayers it could be argued that she, too, was linked in the artist’s mind to Dublin’s healthy climate. On artists’ models, see Charlotte Adams, “Artists’ Models in New York,” *Century*, February 1883; “Evolution of the New York Artist’s Model,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1905; George Holme, “Artists’ Models,” *Munsey’s Magazine*, February 1894; and Gustav Kobbé, “The Artist and His Model,” *Cosmopolitan*, June 1901. A sharper contrast exists between Thayer and artists at the nearby Cornish colony, where Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Thomas Dewing, and Kenyon Cox were also depicting ideal white women in art. According to Cox’s son, Allyn, “professional models [from New York], girls who posed in the nude, used to come to Cornish for the Summer, to work in the various studios.” Allyn Cox to James Farley, April 8, 1957, in Kenyon Cox vertical file, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, N.H.
 - 20 Bernarr MacFadden, *The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood* (New York: Physical Culture Publishing, 1901), 32–33; Mary Eliza (Joy) Haweis, *The Art of Beauty and The Art of Dress* (1878 and 1879; repr., New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 48–49.
 - 21 Frances Mary Steele and Elizabeth Livingston Adams, *Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1892), 57; “Symposium on Women’s Dress,” *Arena* 6 (September 1892): 504; MacFadden, *The Power and Beauty of Superb Womanhood*, 45. For a more recent discussion of the “natural woman,” see Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), chaps. 6 and 10, in which she discusses this type of female beauty as a challenge to the earlier “steel engraving lady.” As applied to art, see Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), 72–121, and Sarah Burns, “Winslow Homer and the Natural Woman,” in *American Victorians and Virgin Nature*, ed. T. J. Jackson Lears (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2002), 16–38.
 - 22 Abbott Thayer to Everton Sainsbury, January 27, 1884, Nelson White Papers, reel 201, frame 298; Steele and Adams, *Beauty of Form*, 203.
 - 23 See Nemerov, “Vanishing Americans.” Abbott Thayer to the *New York Times*, January 31, 1916, Thomas Brumbaugh Papers.
 - 24 Abbott Thayer to *Bruno’s Weekly*, March 11, 1916, Nelson White Papers.
 - 25 Abbott Thayer to John Gellatly, undated, Thomas Brumbaugh Papers.
 - 26 Abbott Thayer to Charles Freer, May 20, 1893, Thomas Brumbaugh Papers. While Thayer might have wanted to think that his art was “not made to sell,” he was often preoccupied with financial instability, which left him writing to patrons like Freer asking for loans and advances. For quote on “great birds,” see Thayer to the *Republican*, February 22 [1907?], Thomas Brumbaugh Papers.