

Eventide along the Grand: Homer Watson's Mystical
Landscape

by

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Abstract

Homer Watson believed that the greatest message a painting could convey was the mystical relationship between man, nature and the spirit world. Imbued with a strong missionary drive, the artist spent his life attempting to express this connection through his landscapes of rural southern Ontario. Building on numerous letters that indicate the artist's spiritual artistic intention, this thesis takes a socio-historical approach by examining the North American and European social and artistic contexts that led Watson to embrace the spiritist doctrine and envision his art as an exploration of mystical concerns. It will also analyze his paintings in order to identify how those concerns manifested themselves visually through his choice of subject matter, manipulation of nature's elements, choice of paint colours, and use of impasto.

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Introduction

During a visit to Homer Watson's studio on June 18th, 1933, former prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King found himself drawn to a small painting of a moonlit scene. Rendered in a thick impasto of mulberry tones, the picture evoked the tranquil effect of the full moon over the Grand River in southern Ontario. King, like Watson, had grown up within close vicinity to this body of water, but the affection he felt towards the painting was more than a familiarity with the geographical landscape. Instead, it was the artist's ability to portray the ineffable presence of a 'spiritual beauty'¹ that resonated strongly with the politician. This association would undoubtedly have pleased the artist, who had spent his life attempting to capture the mystical side of humanity that he found inherent in the natural world. For him, the greatest value that a painting could express was the mystical relationship between man and nature, a sentiment that is best described in his own words:

...to me nature speaks of a mighty region outside man, a great spirituality that vaguely flashes through space; and the wish to grasp this unfathomable mystery more firmly and have it repose on canvas became my greatest endeavor.²

Watson and King's meeting on this particular evening was not the first time the two figures had been introduced. They had last met nearly a half century earlier,

¹ William Lyon Mackenzie King, *The Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King*, June 1933. Transcript of manuscript #MG26-J4, Library and Archives Canada.

² Homer Watson quoted in Carol Moore & Ede Myers, *Lives and Works of Canadian Artists* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1970), 13.

when King was a young boy and Watson was a young artist who had just transcended his small-town status into that of a distinguished and internationally recognized landscape painter. It had been the sale of his painting *The Pioneer Mill* [Figure 1] to the Marquis of Lorne for Queen Victoria in 1880 that established his reputation as a leading Canadian landscapist. This feat was made all the more impressive considering Watson was only twenty-five at the time and was entirely self-taught. As King later recollected in his diary, it had been his father, John King, who originally brought him to visit the artist's studio in the small village of Doon (now a suburb of Kitchener), Ontario. At that time, he impressed on his son how important it was to the citizens of the county to have Watson living amongst them, but also what it meant to the young country to have an artist to call its own.³

The young, vivacious and successful painter that King had first met must have seemed a stark contrast to the artist who stood before him fifty years later. At the advanced age of 78, Watson was in a frail condition both physically and financially after suffering several heart attacks and losing his investments during the 1929 stock market crash. Despite these less than favourable circumstances, Watson's character made a lasting impression on King, who would later describe the event as "one of the most memorable and delightful evenings of my life."⁴

As the evening progressed the two men's conversation moved beyond familiarities and gravitated towards spiritualism. As King described it, "Watson

³ Mackenzie King, *Diaries*, June 1933.

⁴ William Lyon Mackenzie King. Letter to Homer Watson, July 1933. Transcript of manuscript #MG26-J1, William Lyon Mackenzie King fonds, Library and Archives Canada Collection.

remarked to me that he was a spiritualist as if someone was urging him to do so.”⁵ At the end of their conversation, King told Watson that he wanted to select a painting as a memento of their evening. Despite his proclaimed preference for the artist’s earlier style, which was often intricately detailed and romantic in sentiment, it was his more recent work that stood out. The small moonlit scene that King chose became the perfect memento because it spoke to him “of [Watson]...of that spiritual beauty and with its association to the Grand River.”⁶ King left that night with a newfound confidant and a promise to purchase the painting upon its completion.

That Watson was preoccupied with portraying mysticism through his painting, and that King was receptive to its presence, was a direct result of their lifelong commitments to spiritualism. In Canada at the time, spiritualists were a marginal group and their supporters were often quiet about their belief. Fear of public backlash for their explorations into the occult silenced many public figures, but their personal convictions remained steadfast and they sought validation in private settings through communication with the deceased. Though there was a divergence of spiritualist doctrines that emerged, at the base of their philosophical underpinnings was a belief in the continuation of life after death and in the ability to harness that truth through ‘scientific’ endeavors.

Watson became acutely aware of these ideas and embraced spiritualism early on. The development of his personal exploration began with a trip in his youth to the spiritualist community of Lily Dale in New York and later manifested itself

⁵ Mackenzie King, *Diaries*, June 1933.

⁶ *Ibid.*

through organized séances within the confines of his home (several of which were attended by William Lyon Mackenzie King). As Watson matured his interest became concentrated on a specific spiritualist doctrine known as spiritism, which placed itself within the discourse of other sciences and pseudo-sciences such as astrology and chemistry, believing it to be a natural progression out of those disciplines. According to spiritism the existence of the spirit world could be proved by way of scientific research, a concept that allied itself with the artist's practical perception of the "order of nature."⁷ For this reason, Watson did not regard his efforts as simple landscapes, but rather as scientific explorations into spiritual 'truth'. In a letter to King on the subject, Watson stated that through his life's work, "knowledge guides the reasoning faculties," and "one must see there is more just order of creation...only in the order of nature."⁸ His paintings, and in particular the ones he felt best reflected the mystical side of humanity, became the knowledge that guided "the reasoning faculties" and his personal confirmation of a spirit world.

Building on numerous letters that indicate the artist's spiritual artistic intention, this thesis will take a socio-historical approach by examining the North American social and artistic contexts that led Homer Watson to embrace the spiritist doctrine and envision his art as an exploration of mystical concerns. It will also analyze his paintings in order to identify how those concerns manifested themselves

⁷ Homer Watson quoted in Gerald Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada: Homer Watson's Spiritual Landscape* (Waterloo: mlr editions Canada, 1997), 11.

⁸ Homer Watson. Letter to William Lyon Mackenzie King, August 20th, 1933. William Lyon Mackenzie King fonds. Library and Archives Canada. Also transcribed in *Ibid.*, 221.

visually through his choice of subject matter, manipulation of nature's elements, choice of paint colours, and use of impasto.

Criticism during Watson's day and since has largely dismissed this aspect of the artist's career. Instead, through the discourse of Canadian art history, we come to know Watson as the 'Canadian Constable'⁹ and the first artist to see Canada as Canada rather than as "blurred pastiches of European painting."¹⁰ His legacy within Canadian art is largely connected to his formative years when he captured nature's various moods and infused his paintings with nostalgia for the Ontario woodland during the era of its earliest settlers.

This conception of Watson's legacy was largely precipitated by a major retrospective exhibition. Organized by the National Gallery of Canada twenty-eight years after the artist's death, in 1963, the exhibition included sixty paintings and twenty-nine sketches. Although the work that was selected spanned the entirety of the artist's career, there were far more exemplar of his early style. A survey of the accompanying exhibition catalogue reveals that only nine of the eighty-nine works showcased were completed during the last two decades of his life, during the 1920s and 1930s. In the catalogue, the organizer of the exhibition, J. Russell Harper, offers an explanation for this imbalance:

Various Watson exhibitions were held in the 1930s but these were made up primarily of later works. Today, perceptive and enquiring young Canadians to whom Watson is merely a name have expressed curiosity as to his role in

⁹ This nickname was coined by Oscar Wilde upon seeing Watson's painting *Flitting Shadows* in 1882 at the OSA exhibition in Toronto. *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁰ J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: a History* (Canada: University of Toronto Press and Les Presses de l'universite Laval, 1966), 212.

the Canadian art tradition; such queries suggest a need for re-appraisal of his artistic stature, particularly in regard to earlier lesser-known works.¹¹

What is clear from this excerpt is that within what he calls the Canadian art tradition, Harper associated Watson's legacy with his earlier work. This sentiment also reverberated through his catalogue essay, "Homer Watson, a Painter of Rural Ontario," in which he offers a biographical account and aesthetic assessment of the artist's career. Like the exhibition, the essay highlights Watson's early paintings and compares those works both to the Barbizon School and John Constable while acknowledging that the artist had not seen their work until later in his life (when the artist travelled abroad during the late 1880s and 1890s). Ultimately Harper recognized Watson for his settler sentiment and nationalistic leanings by describing his legacy as "bringing into sharp focus the moods of nature, the surface patterns" and "the nostalgia of the Ontario woodland."¹²

What is absent from Harper's discussion is a fruitful consideration of the artist's late period. Instead, he simply asserts, "the modern world passed him by, but he bent his efforts to formulate a new and more highly impressionistic landscape technique."¹³ From this purely aesthetic analysis, we come to understand Watson's later career as a failed attempt at Impressionism—and rightly so. If we are to judge these paintings based solely upon the principles of Impressionism, his efforts simply do not stand up to examples by figures within the movement. This is particularly evident in his handling of the paint, which appears muddled and overworked in

¹¹ J. Russell Harper, *Homer Watson, R.C.A: Paintings and Drawings/Peintures et Dessins* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1963), [3].

¹² *Ibid.*, [19].

¹³ *Ibid.*, [17].

comparison to the distinct dabs of pure colour that the impressionists had perfected. Such an analysis is problematic, however, because it fails to account for Watson's mystical intentions.

Ann Davis expresses this sentiment in her book *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting* (1992), in which she explains that painting created for mystical rather than aesthetic purposes must be analyzed accordingly.¹⁴ What she proposes is a conceptual approach, one that examines the connections between art and mystical belief systems. *The Logic of Ecstasy* is her attempt to build this new context within art historical methodology by applying it to five of Watson's contemporaries: Emily Carr, Lawren Harris, Bertram Brooker, J.W.G Macdonald and Frederick Varley. Though the mystical interest of each artist is different, she believes that there are fundamental similarities that unite their practices. Nature, space and movement become the touchstones for her theory on Canadian mystical art.¹⁵

Conducting a mystical analysis has its challenges, however, as Davis admits at the beginning of her first chapter.¹⁶ The problem arises with the term itself. As she accurately notes, "mysticism is a slippery concept. We all have a general idea what it means, but are hard put to define it precisely."¹⁷ In an attempt to reconcile this issue and articulate the concept for the purpose of her argument, she relies heavily on Evelyn Underhill's book, *Practical Mysticism*, which offers an understanding of

¹⁴ Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

mystical ideology. First published in 1914, *Practical Mysticism* concentrates its focus to a large extent on the role of the artist as mystic. According to Underhill, mysticism is “the art of union with Reality,” and “the mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims to and believes in such attainments.”¹⁸ The artist, then, has a highly developed intuition that enables him or her to connect with ‘Reality’ and transmit that knowledge through his or her work. Whether or not Watson was familiar with Underhill’s writing is not known, but spiritism—the spiritualist doctrine that he embraced later in his life—follows a similar philosophy.

Adding to Underhill’s explanation of mysticism, Davis attempts to articulate the term more clearly by making explicit what it does not entail.

In her opinion, mysticism:

is not astrology, fortune-telling, clairvoyance, or spiritualism. It is not mental telepathy or anything that commonly goes by the name of extrasensory perception. It is not visions, auditions, locutions, or raptures. In short, it is not something superstitious or supernatural in the sense of the occult.¹⁹

Although the artists she discusses embraced many of these practices, Davis believes that the occult should be kept separate from a mystical interpretation of their art. For the purposes of this thesis, I will also rely on Underhill’s notion of mysticism, but will broaden my analysis of Watson’s work to include those practices associated with the occult. Although I agree with Davis that the term mysticism should not be used synonymously with spiritualist practice, it was Watson’s mystical perspective that led him to the spiritualist movement, and thus, the occult practices associated with it. Since séances were an integral component of the artist’s spiritual beliefs, it is

¹⁸ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1915), 9.

¹⁹ Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy*, 3.

my contention that any separation between an analysis of the 'mystical' and 'occult' influences on his paintings would be artificial.

For reasons of clarity, the words mysticism, spiritualism and spiritism will be used cautiously. They should not be considered interchangeable. 'Mysticism' will be used to explain the artist's state of mind, and his personal connection to what he believed to be ultimate 'Reality'. 'Spiritualism' will be used exclusively to describe the movement that began in the mid-nineteenth century, and finally, 'spiritism' will reference the specific doctrine within the spiritualist movement, with which the artist identified.

Despite the concentration of scholarly attention upon the formative years of Watson's career, the artist's spiritual interests and occult practices did not go entirely unnoticed or undocumented. In fact, a few biographers briefly touched on the topic. They included Muriel Miller, in *Homer Watson: The Man of Doon* (1938) and Jane VanEvery in *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight: Homer Watson* (1967). In both of these biographies, the writers benefitted from first-hand interaction with the artist, and yet decidedly downplayed the connection between his spiritual interests and artistic practice to a large extent. When spiritualism is mentioned, it is often treated as a small anecdote rather than an integral component of the narrative.

For example, in the first edition of Miller's biography (published under her married name: Muriel Miller Miner) she briefly describes Watson's spiritual conversion as being precipitated by the death of his wife Roxa in 1918. She also describes a conversation that took place between Watson and the preeminent

Canadian sculptor Walter Allward, in which Watson claimed to see an apparition of his deceased wife. Miller describes this spiritual conversion as being ‘an unfortunate circumstance’²⁰ and besides the brief anecdote does not entertain the topic any further. In the second edition of her book (published in 1988), however, Miller made significant revisions by placing more precedence on Watson’s spiritual interests. An entire chapter titled “Spiritual Conversion” is added to the text, which elaborates on the information provided in the first edition and includes an explanation of how Watson would justify his beliefs to skeptical friends. According to Miller, “his conversion to spiritualism, or ‘spiritism’ as he called it, was unfortunate but his probing into the occult—whether authentic or not—brought him the peace he sought.”²¹

In addition to these revisions, Miller also included a new chapter to account for the relationship between the artist and William Lyon Mackenzie King. Titled “The Known & Unknown,” the section discusses the two paintings King acquired from Watson as well as the séances in which they participated together at the artist’s home. In reasoning why she omitted this information from her first publication, Miller explains in the epilogue that:

Mr. King’s excursions with Watson into the spirit world [were not] to be revealed unless such information was approved by the Prime Minister. Since I did not get the required approvals in 1938 that Mr. Watson had wanted, those true life stories were held in abeyance until after the deaths of all parties concerned.²²

²⁰ Muriel Miller Miner, *The Man of Doon* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1938), 91.

²¹ Muriel Miller, *The Man of Doon* (Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1988), 94.

²² *Ibid.*, 130.

From this excerpt we are able to discern two things. First, that it had been important to Watson to have his spiritual interests included in his biography, and second, that Miller was not able to obtain the permission that she needed. Watson was aware of the negative implications such revelations could have on the politician and instructed Miller to write about their relationship only with permission from King himself.²³ A meeting between Miller and King took place after the artist's death in 1935 and she was able to read through their correspondence but was later told to avoid any information that would implicate the politician's explorations into the occult. In a diary entry from August 18th, 1937, King wrote about receiving an unpublished version of Miller's biography. His response was that it "was not well done" and "will need revising."²⁴ Since King was one of Watson's primary confidants on the topic during the final years of his life, Miller was forced to exclude much of the information revealed through their correspondence.

William Lyon Mackenzie King's reluctance to have his occult practices become public knowledge was a reflection of the broader population's perception of spiritualism at the time. Although there had been a strong spiritualist community in Canada, there were far more skeptics who were vocal in their opposition. Because of this hostility, many contemporary writers and critics shied away from the subject altogether. As Maurice Tuchman indicates in the opening essay of *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, to associate spiritualism with a particular artist

²³ Ibid. See also the letters between Muriel Miller and William Lyon Mackenzie King between December 14th, 1936 and November 20th, 1940. Transcript of manuscript #MG26-J1, William Lyon Mackenzie King fonds, Library and Archives Canada.

²⁴ Mackenzie King, *Diaries*, August 1937.

during the 1920s and 1930s would have been damaging to his/her career. This reality “made critics and historians...reluctant to confront the spiritual association of art.”²⁵

Even as late as the 1960s, the hesitation to write about the occult was evident through Jane VanEvery's *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*. As a niece of Watson, VanEvery put together a biographical account of the artist by drawing from his correspondence and her own anecdotal memories. Like Miller, VanEvery mentions Watson's conversion to spiritualism but does not indicate the profound influence it had on his painting. VanEvery's account of the artist's life steers away from any discussion of the occult practices in which her uncle participated, but she does acknowledge that Watson's mystical turn occurred much earlier than the death of his wife and was present throughout his life. Her analysis of Watson's paintings suggests the artist's mystical intent but uses a Christian rather than spiritualist rhetoric to describe it. For example, in describing the artist's relationship with nature she explains that nature was his “church” and that Watson was its “pupil.”²⁶ Similarly in describing the spiritual presence that Watson strove to capture, she uses the word “Godliness” and describes the full moon in his canvases as a symbol for “the eye of God.”²⁷

²⁵ Maurice Tuchman, “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. Edward Weisberger. (New York and Los Angeles: Abbeville Press Publishers & Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), 18.

²⁶ Jane VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight* (Aylesbury: Homer Watson Trust, 1967), 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

Like VanEvery, another early biographer on Watson, Frank E. Page, also masks the artist's mystical philosophies in a Christian rhetoric. For example, in his book *Homer Watson: Artist and Man* (1938), Page describes the artist's connection to 'Reality' by stating "he was religious in that he had a deep sense of the smallness of man and the greatness of God. He was deeply conscious of the Divine in nature—in every pulse of life."²⁸ Although the introduction to this text (written by Ross Hamilton) states that Page's account of the artist's life is more personal than Miller's, at no point does the author make it explicitly clear that the artist was a spiritualist. Instead, his biography is composed of his own remembered conversations with the artist, several poems and a series of letters between Watson's wife, Roxa, and his sister, Phoebe, while Homer and Roxa were living abroad.²⁹

The most recent biography on Watson, by Gerald Noonan, titled *Refining the Real Canada: Homer Watson's Spiritual Landscape*, offers the most significant discussion to date of the artist's interest in spiritualism. Published in 1997, Noonan's work presents a detailed biography of the artist by incorporating many primary documents. An entire chapter, "Spirit: Earthbound," is dedicated to Watson's involvement with spiritualism. Despite what the book's title suggests, however, Noonan fails to draw the connection between the artist's involvement with the movement and the effects it had on his painting. Beyond stating that Watson's

²⁸ Frank E. Page, *Homer Watson: Artist and Man* (Kitchener: Commercial Printing Co., 1939), 38.

²⁹ They lived off and on in England and Scotland during the late 1880s and 1890s.

landscapes are spiritual in intent, the author does not offer a mystical analysis of the work in the manner for which Davis has called.

The difficulty that Watson's biographers had in analyzing the mystical qualities of his art is what underlies the trouble audiences have today in grasping a more complete understanding of the artist's career. For the most part we are still trained to look at modern art through the veil of formalist criticism and it is perhaps for this reason, along with the subject's contemporary taboo, that writers both during Watson's period and since have neglected to appropriately analyze the paintings he produced towards the end of his life. This should not take away, however, from the socio-historical significance of the paintings and how they would have appealed to a spiritually intuitive audience.

Serious scholarly attention towards mysticism in art did not emerge until the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Scholars such as Sixten Ringbom and Robert P. Welsh were major contributors to the field through their research into the origins of abstraction and its connection with mystical belief systems. Ringbom argued in his seminal study "The Sounding Cosmos" (1966) that the painter Wassily Kandinsky had turned towards abstraction in an attempt "to express ideas about the ineffable."³⁰ Similarly Welsh drew into question the impact Madame Blavatsky's theosophical doctrine had on the evolution of Piet Mondrian's painting.³¹ Both

³⁰ Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," 35. See also Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (Abo Akademi, 1970).

³¹ Ibid., 18. See also Robert P. Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy" in *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944: Centennial Exhibition* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971), 35-51.

scholars came to the conclusion that these artists ultimately turned towards non-representational art because they could no longer express metaphysical ideas through traditional pictorial imagery.

Ringbom and Welsh's arguments were built upon, and over the subsequent few decades there was an increased recognition of mysticism's role in the development of abstract art. This recognition culminated in a landmark exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1987: *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Organized by Maurice Tuchman, the exhibition showcased a wide range of mystically inspired artworks and was presented outside the context of formalist criticism. To accompany the show, Tuchman also organized an extensive publication that included seventeen scholarly articles dedicated to the subject.

Today, the majority of mystical research remains focused primarily on abstraction. For example, this prevalence is evident in looking to Davis' research in *The Logic of Ecstasy*; of the five artists whose work she considers, four ultimately turned towards abstract art, at some point in their career, to express mystical concerns. This concentrated focus is problematic because it excludes a number of figurative artists who shared similar concerns. A strong model for analyzing figurative mystical work has been much more difficult to come by, but the recent publication by Charles Colbert, *Haunted Visions: Spiritualism in American Art* (2012), provides some insight.

In his research, Colbert focuses on the spiritualist movement's influence on American sculptors, painters and critics during the nineteenth century. Particularly

insightful is his explanation of ether and phrenology to explain the philosophy behind spiritualist painting. These quasi-scientific theories that seem naïve or irrational today were fundamental to the artists' and audiences' perceptions of paintings as a loci of psychic energy. He also argues that the rituals that governed a successful séance were not dissimilar to those that were enacted by a spiritually intuitive audience approaching a spiritualist painting. Quiet, deep concentration was believed to be necessary to elicit a transcendent experience.³²

Beyond his explanation of the psychology behind spiritualist painting, Colbert focuses on four contemporaries of Watson who also expressed metaphysical concepts through the use of figurative subjects: James Abbott McNeil Whistler, George Inness, Albert Pinkham Ryder and George Fuller. His chapter on Ryder—a tonalist artist—is particularly relevant in relation to Watson. Colbert describes Ryder's concentration on twilight scenes and the thick build-up of his paint as realizations of mystical philosophies. Of the four painters that the author discusses, Ryder produced work that is closest to Watson's late paintings, in terms of his subject matter and application of paint.

Although Watson's late works reveal the strongest connection between nature, art and mysticism, the pervasiveness of the spiritualist movement was present throughout his career. As the artist's mystical concerns evolved over time, so too did his artistic practice in terms of technique and subject matter. It is for this reason the organization of this thesis unfolds in chronological order from the artist's

³² Charles Colbert, *Haunted Visions: Spiritualism and American Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 149.

early mystical development into his final canvases from the 1920s and 1930s, the latter showing a particular affinity for twilight scenes.

The first chapter concentrates on the formative years of Watson's career and contextualizes the development of his mysticism within the broader spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century. It will be argued that the Waterloo region in particular was receptive to early spiritualist philosophies and became a crucial factor in nurturing Watson's conversion away from conventional religion. Paintings during this period, from the 1870s to the early 1880s, reveal Watson's quest to delineate the subtle presence of divinity in nature, sometimes leading him to include elements of ethereal mysticism in his canvases. It also explores his focus on decrepit mills within the context of Victorian romanticist sentiments and argues that Watson likely regarded the mill as a symbolic vehicle capable of articulating his mystical questions surrounding death.

This method was largely abandoned during the late 1880s and into the 1890s as the artist came to believe that highly detailed and romanticized compositions could no longer hold the vitality of the natural world around him. For Watson, what was of value in rendering his landscapes was no longer an idealized, grandiose portrayal of the natural world, but a direct, more intimate approach that spoke of the mystical relationship that connects man with nature. In the second chapter I examine this shift in Watson's ideology, a development that corresponded with his experience living abroad. An analysis of Watson's paintings from this period will reveal how his technique and artistic consciousness were greatly influenced by direct exposure to the work of European masters and contemporary artists,

including Constable and the French Barbizon School. Furthermore, an analysis of the spiritist doctrine through the writings of one of its chief promoters, Camille Flammarion, will reveal certain philosophies that were embraced by the artist and that influenced his practice. This is evident by the manner in which the two main principles of the spiritist doctrine—to observe and to educate—manifested themselves visually in his landscapes and promoted a missionary spirit that inspired him to teach others about the spirit world through his painting.

The connectedness that Watson felt between painter and nature was present throughout his career, but came together in the end with a greater vitality. The final chapter of this thesis looks at the paintings Watson completed during the 1920s and 1930s. It was during this era that many common motifs began to visually dominate the subject matter of his small canvases, often focusing on the centrality of water, masses of land and the presence of a full moon presiding over the entire scene. Evidently the transitory effects at eventide interested the artist, who saw the ephemeral moment as a catalyst for spiritualist thought. Watson, however, was not the first artist to make this connection. Several American tonalists, including Whistler and Ryder, made use of nocturne scenes to evoke similar ideas. Although Watson's style from this period has been most commonly associated with a misunderstanding of Impressionism, it will be argued that his process was more in line with that of the tonalist artists.

Finally, the last chapter will further analyze the small painting that William Lyon Mackenzie King agreed to purchase after his visit to Doon in the summer of 1933 as well as a second painting that the artist gifted to the politician. In his diary,

King wrote extensively about the paintings and his account provides a unique insight into the reception of Watson's art by a contemporary and spiritually intuitive audience. Subsequently titled *Evening Moonrise* [Figure 2] and *Moonlit Stream* [Figure 3], the paintings are similar in both subject matter and tone and were given pride of place over King's bed in Laurier House, Ottawa. Placed side by side, they act as companions and stand as a testament not only to the artist and politician's friendship but also to the broader spiritualist movement as it existed during the first half of the twentieth century.

Today, visitors to Laurier House still have the benefit of seeing the two paintings in situ, but they may be less inclined to find evidence of the "spiritual beauty"³³ that King commented upon during his trip to Watson's studio all those years ago. Contemporary audiences are more inclined to look at these works as experiments in modernist aesthetics, or as failed attempts at Impressionism. Going forward, it is the objective of this thesis to break away from a purely formalist critique of Watson's landscapes and to embrace a mystical analysis to better understand his artistic intention. If we are to build from the model that scholars such as Davis and Colbert have put in place, we may begin to see Homer Watson's steadfast focus on the Doon countryside, the twilight colours of his palette and the physicality of his impasto paint application as attempts at mystical realization.

³³ Mackenzie King, *Diaries*, June 1933.

Chapter One: In Accord with Nature

As an artist who grew up in a country village, Watson's path to international recognition was not an easy one and he faced much adversity along the way. For one thing, living in a community predominantly of farmers and labourers, Watson did not find much support for his artistic ambition. People could not understand why he would spend his days painting scenes from the countryside while his mother and sister worked in order to make a scant living for the entire family. According to Watson's niece, Jane VanEvery, one neighbour in particular was vocal in his opposition and endeavored almost daily to dissuade Watson from pursuing painting.¹ As Watson later described it, "he advised me to quit the nonsense of going in for art in a country like Canada. 'Quit it,' he said, 'and come into the office and become a businessman'."²

This advice was likely in recognition of the significant challenges posed to aspiring Canadian artists during the 1860s and 1870s. At the time, there were very few institutions to help facilitate an artistic community and few professional artists who could offer apprenticeships. For Watson, the most accessible collection of art was located in the Provincial Normal School (in Toronto) and was comprised exclusively of copies based on Old Master works. The sum of these circumstances would have been enough to dissuade many aspiring artists, but for Watson,

¹ Jane VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight* (Aylesbury: Homer Watson Trust, 1967), 14.

² Homer Watson quoted in *Ibid.*

becoming a painter became his ultimate goal and he remained steadfast in his ambition.

The artist's isolation in Doon during these formative years was certainly a hindrance but it also provided an advantage. It was because of his seclusion that he was able to develop an independent artistic perspective. Rather than submitting to the pressures of a colonial society and creating "blurred pastiches of European painting,"³ many of Watson's early canvases express his personal connection with the Doon countryside.

Fortunately for Watson, the prospect of developing a Canadian artistic community was greatly enhanced in 1880 through the efforts of the governor general, the Marquis of Lorne, in establishing the Canadian Academy of Arts.⁴ Unlike the critics in Doon, the Marquis of Lorne recognized the potential for artistic development in the dominion and became one of its chief promoters. In a speech that preceded the first academy exhibition, he acknowledged the popular opinion by stating that "it may be said that in a country whose population is yet incommensurate with its extent...people are too busy to toy with art." However, his vision, like Watson's, was optimistic, and he further explained: "I doubt not...our artists" nor "the Nature you see living and moving around you."⁵ These words validated Watson's ambition in some respects, but the ultimate confirmation came

³ J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: a History* (Canada: University of Toronto Press and Les Presses de l'universite Laval, 1966), 212.

⁴ The Canadian Academy of Arts would be renamed the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 1881.

⁵ Marquis of Lorne quoted in Gerald Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada: Homer Watson's Spiritual Landscape* (Waterloo: mlr editions Canada, 1997), 4.

when Lorne decided to purchase his submission, *The Pioneer Mill*, for Queen Victoria. The success of this painting was likely attributed, in part, to its focus on homegrown emotion, an effort that fit the governor general's vision of an art that was unique to the dominion.

Watson may not have realized the impact of his localized perspective initially, but after spending several years in Europe during the late 1880s and 1890s he became acutely aware of its significance. In retrospect Watson came to the realization that in order to seek the 'truth' in nature, as he desired, he must be immersed in the landscape that was most familiar. In his mind there existed a powerful relationship between artist and nationhood, which he reflected upon after returning to his Canadian roots:

In consideration it may be said that the attributes of greatness in each landscape painter is a possession of an ideal of truth as in any other walks of life in which greatness is reached. And there is at the bottom of each artistic conscience a love for the land of their birth. It is said art knows no country but belongs to the world. This may be true of pictures but great artists are no more cosmopolitan than great patriots, and no immortal work had been done which had not had as one its promptings for its creation a feeling its creator had of having roots in his native land and being a product of its soil.⁶

For this reason, Watson always returned to Doon as his primary source of inspiration. It was here that his love of nature was first formed as a young boy. He truly became a product of the region's soil, but its influence went far beyond these nationalist sentiments. It was also within the social context of the Waterloo region that Watson became an early adopter of mystical thought. The harsh realities of

⁶ Homer Watson, "Methods of Some Great Landscape Painters," lecture at the University of Toronto, 1900. Queen's University Archives. Transcribed in J. Russell Harper, *Homer Watson, R.C.A: Paintings and Drawings/Peintures et Dessins* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1963), [19].

frontier living and his deep resentment for his mother's Christadelphian faith⁷ comingled during these early years and forged the way for early spiritualist exploration.

Spiritualism had its origins in North America, in 1848, seven years before Watson was born. The movement was largely precipitated by an incident reported by the Fox sisters in upstate New York. The sisters heard rappings in their family home one evening and proceeded to communicate with the mysterious presence. The youngest of the sisters, Kate Fox, commanded it to "do as I do," clapping her hands several times, to which the spirit responded with an equal number of raps.⁸ The event was printed in the penny press and soon millions of people were aware of the proceedings.⁹

Although the phenomena reported by the Fox sisters proved to be a significant event in the history of spiritualism, Charles Colbert explains that the sisters were largely "indifferent to the implications of the movement they inaugurated."¹⁰ Although they profited from their personal 'experiences' as mediums, they were less concerned with institutionalizing or explaining spiritualism. Instead, the theoretical framework that would sustain spiritualist belief came from an individual by the name of Andrew Jackson Davis. Nicknamed "the Poughkeepsie seer," Davis wrote, in a series of volumes, the principles that governed

⁷ VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 39.

⁸ These events were proven to be fraudulent in 1888. See Stanley Edward McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance: a History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 22-25.

⁹ Charles Colbert, *Haunted Visions: Spiritualism and American Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

the movement. These principles were allegedly dictated to him while in a trance-like state by the spirits of the Greek physician Galen (c. 130-200), and Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Protestant mystic whose beliefs became a precursor to spiritualism. As Colbert notes, “it was Swedenborg who provided the essentials for a faith premised on communications with the deceased. His contentions that heaven resembles earth (with houses, streets, parks, and the like) and was populated exclusively by the souls of deceased mortals proved especially influential.”¹¹

In reasoning how human beings were capable of communicating with the deceased, Davis integrated Swedenborg’s philosophy into Franz Anton Mesmer’s theory of mesmerism. Mesmerism postulated that communication with the deceased was made possible by means of an ‘imponderable fluid’ referred to as the ether. Mesmer equated the ether with other imponderable fluids such as light, electricity and magnetism, which “pervaded both interstellar space and the human body.”¹² Through his investigation, Mesmer encountered behavior that was similar to what we would describe today as a hypnotic trance—a state of being that he referred to it as the “superior condition.” It was believed that through this condition, people could converse with spirits “as their souls swam in currents of cosmic ether.”¹³

Although Andrew Jackson Davis’ proclamations and the Fox sisters’ rappings proved to be catalysts for the spiritualist movement, it would not have had

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Ibid. See also Margaret L. Goldsmith, *Franz Anton Mesmer: a History of Mesmerism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1934).

widespread appeal had there not been a social climate receptive to its proclamations. Spiritualism's emergence during this period coincided with an increasing disillusionment with formal organized religion. During an era of Darwinian revelations, the focus on materialism and scientific proof challenged many people's religious faith. Spiritualism fit the niche that religion left void and validated itself through the concept of natural advancement. This theory suggested that all religions and sciences evolve over time to form new beliefs and that spiritualism was a natural progression in this discourse. By this reasoning, it was able to position itself as a faith suitable to the modernity of the times.¹⁴

By placing itself within the discourse of both religion and science, spiritualism sought to accommodate itself to both institutions. For some spiritualists they believed that "through their faith, the constructive aspects of the 'scientific method' might be harnessed to the search for philosophical or religious meaning in human existence, thereby mitigating the destructive impact of science."¹⁵ Through personal experience and the quasi-scientific theories (such as mesmerism) that were being suggested, it was believed that the validity of the spiritual phenomenon could be proven, and thus science could become the defender rather than the challenger of faith. For the majority of believers, the ability to communicate with the spirit world through a medium was enough to affirm their convictions. Still, others sought further validation and would form small societies to investigate psychic phenomena.

¹⁴ Allan Kardec, *Genesis: the Miracles and the Predictions According to Spiritism* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1883), 29.

¹⁵ McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance*, 4.

While these spiritualist devotees believed in the continuation of life based on the 'proof' garnered through their conception of the scientific method, others were not concerned with pseudo-scientific explanations and were satisfied by faith alone. For these individuals, the development of their spiritual interest was brought on by recognition of the limitations of Enlightenment thought. This realization was largely prompted by very personal events, such as the death of a loved one and the resulting unanswered questions they had. It became evident to many that enlightened and rational thought could not adequately provide answers for all of life's questions. It was out of this unknowable mystery that a sense of desperation developed and people began to adopt a belief in an afterlife and the ability to communicate with spirits. For them, spiritualism transcended reason and offered reassurance.

Watson's own journey into spiritualism was fundamentally shaped by a number of these factors. The premature death of his father, Ransford Watson (1861) from typhoid fever, along with the tragic death of his brother Jude in a workplace accident (1867) and the subsequent passing of his grandfather, James Watson (1870) had a profound effect on the budding artist. Full of questions about what happens when an individual passes from the physical world, Watson strove to reconcile these thoughts by exploring the possibility of life after death. So in 1879, at the age of twenty-four, the artist took a canoe trip down the Grand River and Lake Erie to the largest spiritualist center in the United States, located in Lily Dale, New York, to seek answers for himself.

Watson set out with three other companions from the Waterloo region, including David Forsythe and Adolphe Mueller, who both taught at Berlin Collegiate. Also on the trip was James Mowat, who would later found *Canadian Magazine*. Lily Dale, which had been established just that year, was a place where people could gather to partake in communal exercises led by resident mediums. It was open seasonally during summer months and attracted thousands of people who were either committed spiritualists or just spiritually curious.

The meeting camp at Lily Dale was part of a larger social movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: a movement that led to the establishment of other similar institutions. According to art historian, William Moore, these camps were essential to the development of spiritualism because “they also served as communication centers for [the] movement.”¹⁶ Geographically, the majority of the camps were concentrated in the eastern United States, but also emerged across the country in places such as Florida, California and Arizona.¹⁷ The camp meetings reached the height of their popularity between the American Civil War and World War I, and according to the 1906 American federal census there were forty-three documented camps, Lily Dale being the largest community of them all.¹⁸

Along with exploring spiritualist experiments, one of the primary purposes of these retreats was to help people seek spiritual insight while engaging with the

¹⁶ William Moore, “To Hold Communion with Nature and the Spirit World: New England’s Spiritualist Camp Meetings, 1865-1910,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 7 (1997): 239.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 233.

natural environment. Lily Dale's location was selected for this purpose, and was described as "a tiny city under tall trees."¹⁹ The physical retreat to Lily Dale and other camps like it became popular among visitors who recognized the need to leave the artifice of increasingly industrialized cities and consciously immerse themselves in nature. The spiritualist meeting camps then became "a physical expression of the nineteenth-century concept of nature as being both healing and sacred."²⁰ The motivation to locate the camps within rural settings also emerged out of the spiritualist conception that the natural environment could contribute to a feeling of serenity that would enhance its mystique.²¹

Watson and his fellow travellers embraced this philosophy and it was reflected not only in their destination but in their mode of travel. All four made their way to Lily Dale by canoe. Their trip from beginning to end was an exploration of the natural environment, involving paddling down the Grand River to Lake Erie, setting up camp along the way and visiting the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford. Their voyage was less practical (travel to Lily Dale was available by train) than a means of connecting with the environment, which was fundamental to both Watson's artistic practice and the larger beliefs held within the Lily Dale community. It was also believed that communication with the spirit world became enhanced when one found oneself within close proximity to a body of water.

Thus, in many ways the construction of Lily Dale mirrored the natural environment to which Watson felt so intrinsically connected to in Doon. An excerpt

¹⁹ Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 205.

²⁰ Moore, "To Hold Communion," 239.

²¹ *Ibid.*

from the spiritualist magazine *The Banner of Lights* from 1869 best describes this connection, believing it to be a more authentic experience than that enjoyed by a religious worshipper within a church:

The groves were God's first temples and in no place can the soul of men approach so near to or come so perfectly en rapport with the soul of all things, as when surrounded only by the manifestations in nature which spontaneously clothe it in beauty and majesty... the nearer we get to Nature, the nearer we are to God ... the ground alone as pavement is a better 'conductor' of the soul reforming influences than mosaic marbles; and an open shed with an entrance all around, had witnessed many an outpouring of the spirit which painted windows and gilded organs would have failed to call down.²²

Although Watson felt the spiritual effects of nature close to him in Doon, the need for him and his counterparts to seek spiritual exploration south of the border is an indication of the cultural differences between Canada and the United States at the time. According to Stanley Edward McMullin's research on spirit communication, conservative Canada lagged behind its neighbour to the south as a result of America's egalitarian liberalism.²³ The concept of democratic individualism that is ingrained in the American constitution allowed for the development of spiritualist institutions.²⁴ Despite the efforts of early Canadian practitioners to build formal institutions in the latter part of the nineteenth century, their attempts were less successful. In Canada, spiritualists remained a marginal group and organizations of like-minded thinkers were largely conducted informally.

²² Unknown, "Places for Spiritual Meetings, and How to Build Them," *Banner of Lights* 25 (1869): 3. The quotation "The groves were God's first temples," is from William Cullen Bryant's poem "A Forest Hymn." See William Cullen Bryant, "A Forest Hymn," in *Poems* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1851), 130-34.

²³ McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance*, 221.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

McMullin postulates that despite the less receptive climate in Canada, Waterloo County in particular was receptive to the movement and became a strong centre for spiritualist activity in central Canada. Part of this anomaly is attributed to the region's geography, as the county is relative close to the United States. As McMullin indicates, "cross-border transfers of traditional and popular culture have been the norm between central Canada and the northern United States since the time of the American Revolution."²⁵ During the nineteenth century this was certainly true in the development of more traditional religious denominations (Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Baptists), which "sustained close links with [their] American counterparts."²⁶ For similar reasons, it would be reasonable to assume that a less mainstream movement, such as spiritualism, could also benefit from cross-border transfer. The simple fact that Watson was able to travel to Lily Dale by canoe and that railway service was available between Lily Dale and Southern Ontario attests to this notion.

While geographical proximity likely played a factor, it was the opening of a Swedenborgian church (the New Church) in 1833—twenty-two years before Watson's birth and fifteen years before the Fox sisters' mysterious rappings—that laid the groundwork for early receptiveness to the psychologies associated with spiritualism. The New Church was established by a German immigrant to Waterloo County named Christian Enslin and was based upon the theology of Emmanuel Swedenborg. As precursors to spiritualists, Swedenborgians were open to the idea

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

²⁶ Ibid., 13.

of an afterlife and the ability to communicate with spirits. Adherents to this philosophy could be found elsewhere throughout the country, but the strongest concentration was located in Waterloo County.²⁷ The church was the first of its kind in Canada and followed the development of similar congregations that had been formed as early as 1792 in Baltimore, Cincinnati, Boston and New York.²⁸ In 1857 the New Church in Berlin officially became affiliated with its American counterparts by joining the General Convention of the New Church of America.

By 1877 the New Church in Berlin had grown to be the largest congregation in the region; comprised of 208 adult members.²⁹ Its popularity was directly related to the demographics of the population. Ethnographically, both the church and the broader region during this time period were predominantly comprised of people of German origin. Some of these pioneers had come to Canada by way of the United States in search of less expensive land, while others had come directly from their homelands for a similar purpose. Many were German Mennonites, but there was also a population that had been brought up Lutheran.³⁰ In the absence of a Lutheran church nearby, the New Church was likely deemed a suitable alternative because of its strong German connections; both the founder of the church and its pastor, F.W. Tuerk, were German.

²⁷ Ibid., 14. For a full account on the history of the New Church in America see Marguerite Beck Block, *The New Church in the New World: a Study of Swedenborgianism in America* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Joseph Winfield Fretz, *The Waterloo Mennonites: A Community in Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), 127.

Another contributing factor in the development of spiritualism in central Canada had to do with the pioneering roots of its communities. McMullin describes how “the democratic effect of frontier living, often harsh in its physical and spiritual environments, allowed for a broad liberal range of thought as amateur theologians and scientists struggled to make sense out of Darwinian thought and Christian fundamentalism.”³¹ Although Watson did not share in the strong German connection that existed in Waterloo region (he was the descendent of Scottish immigrants), he had certainly witnessed first-hand the harsh realities of living on the frontier. The artist’s experience through the loss of his loved ones, coupled with the receptiveness of many of his neighbours who embraced Swedenborg’s theology, built an environment that likely contributed to Watson’s early interest in spiritualism.

The extent to which individuals embraced spiritualism varied. “Many in the traditional Protestant denominations wove the doctrine into their received beliefs; some adopted it temporarily in times of grief; other ventured out on their own while maintaining their faith in Christ; and still others abandoned Christianity entirely.”³² For Watson, his conversion coincided with a rejection of the Christadelphian Church. In 1867, after the death of his brother Jude, it had been his mother who became a strict adherent of the sect. Within it, members referred to one another as brother and sister, and interpreted the passages of the Bible as absolute guides for everyday life. As Watson’s niece, VanEvery, described it, “members were prone to have shouting matches in which passages of verse were lashed back and forth

³¹ McMullin, *Anatomy of a Séance*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*

leading young Watson to consider it quite fanatical.”³³ Unfortunately for Homer, Mrs. Watson vehemently believed that the only way to lead a moral life on Earth was to accept Christadelphianism and so she expected her son to adhere to the faith. However, the severe religious atmosphere that she created had a contrary effect as Watson began to question the validity of all religions.³⁴ Despite her best efforts, Watson did not embrace Christadelphianism, and when members of the congregation came to visit their home the artist would leave immediately.³⁵

Even apart from his mother’s adopted faith, Watson did not identify with any other formal organized religion. To him, Christianity was a thing of the past and was illogical because of its inability to connect and resonate in the present. In a letter to his neighbour, J.W. Green, on the subject, Watson explained how he “could not quite get why it was [that] God, angel, and spirit were all so busy 2000 years ago and expected to be very busy sometime in the future at a Judgment Day but at present were all off the job.”³⁶

Spiritualism for Watson thus fit the niche that conventional organized religion left void and offered some of the reassurance he had been looking for after the deaths of his father, brother and grandfather. Reflecting on this period of his life, Watson also wrote in a letter to Green that he had “doubt after doubt and it seemed we were just placed in a cannibalistic world for what purposes it was impossible to

³³ VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 32.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ He would return to elements of Christianity after the death of his wife, Roxa, in 1918, finding comfort in the Bible. See Muriel Miller, *The Man of Doon* (Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1988), 94-95. See also Chapter Three.

³⁶ Homer Watson. Letter to J.W. Green, February 9th, 1929. Transcribed in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 214.

define.”³⁷ But his time spent at Lily Dale, interacting with mediums and participating in séances, “corrected that notion,” and Watson began to see that “there are no dead ends in the invisible world; no vacuums; so...the spirit existence must be a fact. Just where and when they come back is keeping us guessing and probing.”³⁸

The development of Watson’s interest in spiritualism coincided with the first two decades of his artistic production. For that reason questions about death, the hereafter and their connection to the landscape manifest themselves visually in many of his early compositions, indicating the centrality of these mystical thoughts in his day-to-day psyche. For example, in his drawing *The Three Nymphs* (c. 1883) [Figure 4], the mystical connection that Watson felt between nature and the hereafter is revealed quite literally through the subject matter. The drawing depicts the three nymphs whose varied positions—one seated, one wavering towards the sky and the other floating away—illustrate the connective bond between earth and the heavens. Watson’s mother, who believed that drawings such as this went against the Christadelphian church, fiercely opposed Watson’s incorporation of mythical subjects.³⁹ Despite her opposition, or perhaps partially in spite of it, Watson continued to work on similar themes—several of which survive in his sketchbooks.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 170.

³⁹ Miller, *The Man of Doon*, 25.

⁴⁰ These include: *Aeneas and Achilles*, *Man in Chariot*, *Sailors Passing the Siren’s Rocks*, and *Man Pursuing a Woodland Nymph*, approximate dates unknown. Located at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

His painting *The Death of Elaine* [Figure 5] from 1877 also incorporates a mystical theme that is represented within an ethereal atmosphere. Its subject matter was inspired by Tennyson's poem *The Idylls of the King* and depicts the body of Elaine being transported by a barge. In the distance Camelot sits atop a cliff, partially visible through the fog and moonlit environment. Here, the subject of death is explicitly present and the atmospheric conditions coupled with the peculiar green colour that is present in the sky and reflected on the water, conveys a sense of sublimity that enhances the painting's mystique.

Both *The Death of Elaine* and *The Three Nymphs*, because of their focus on literary and mythical themes, are less representative of the artist's overall oeuvre. Instead, the majority of Watson's drawings and paintings from this period are much more personal and reflective of the pioneer roots of his community. J. Russell Harper accurately describes these more common works as "frankly and unashamedly wildly romantic, even to picturesque mills, rushing streams and menacing cliffs replete with Victorian sentiment."⁴¹ Evidence of these elements can certainly be found in his drawing *Life and Thought Hath Fled Away* (ca. late 1860s-1870s) [Figure 6], an illustration of an old mill, which has succumbed to the forces of time and neglect. The roof has collapsed and any indication of its function has been silenced by the tranquil stillness of the stream in the foreground.

The artist's inclusion of the mill, far from exclusive to this particular drawing, was a common motif in his work during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth. In addition to *Life and Thought Hath Fled*

⁴¹ Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 212.

Away the subject is ubiquitous in similar drawings including *Morn Amid the Mountains* and *Solitude* (unknown dates, National Gallery of Canada) as well as paintings such as *The Pioneer Mill* (1879), *The Grist Mill* (1879, Castle Kilbride, Baden Ontario), *The Old Mill* (1880, Art Gallery of Ontario), and *The Flood Gate* (1900, National Gallery of Canada), among others. Brian Foss, in his article “Homer Watson and *The Pioneer Mill*,” looks to the sentimental implication of this subject amongst Victorian romanticists in general and its significance to Watson in particular. According to Foss it was the artist’s personal connection to the subject that gives his work a strong feeling of nostalgia—a connection that was closely associated with those members of his family whom he had lost as well as the broader social-economic history of the region.⁴²

As Foss explains in his article, mills had been a fixture of the Waterloo County landscape since the era of its earliest settlers. Watson’s grandfather and father had been involved in the trade; James Watson (Homer’s grandfather) had built a sawmill after emigrating from the United States and Ransford Watson (Homer’s father) owned and operated a mill that produced woolen cloth and yarn. Under their watchful eyes the mills had flourished, but three years after Ransford’s death in 1864, his small family business failed—an event that was symptomatic of a broader industrial shift that was underway. By the 1870s and 1880s, many of the region’s mills were “falling into picturesque decay” as new technologies out-modeled the wheel-driven mill’s productivity. For many, the dormant structures became the

⁴² Brian Foss, “Homer Watson and The Pioneer Mill” *Journal of Canadian Art History* Vol. 33 (2012): 47-82.

subject of nostalgic reminiscence and Watson certainly became an active participant in the reverie. In his own words Watson later described how his “fondest recollections” of Doon “dwelt there [in the mill]...a history was connected with it and the place was now in ruin.”⁴³

Beyond the nostalgic association of the mill theme, which Foss accurately notes in his article, I would also argue that Watson was conscious of the mystical associations that such a subject could infer. This would make sense given the fact that references to mills in popular culture “were interpreted with striking frequency as symbols of abstract concepts,” including “the passing of time; irreversible change [and] death.”⁴⁴ Despite his relative isolation in Doon, the artist would not have been completely alienated from such references. In fact, *The Aldine*—a magazine that he supposedly turned to for examples of reproduced engravings—“published nostalgia-invoking representations of small, antiquated, wheel-powered mills in reassuringly pastoral settings.”⁴⁵ These illustrations likely assisted him in the development of his drawing skills (particularly in regard to dramatic, stormy skies),⁴⁶ but they may have also exposed him to the symbolic potential of the mill. For example, one issue from 1875 illustrated a poem “in which the deadness of the season, the decay of the mill and the end of human life are unambiguously conflated: ‘A wreck, beyond repair, the old mill seems, / A type alike of manhood and the time -

⁴³ Homer Watson quoted in *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* See also J. Russell Harper, *Homer Watson, R.C.A.: Paintings and Drawings/Peintures et Dessins* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1963), [3].

/ Decay o'ercreeeping all his busy schemes: / Himself low buried 'neath the winter rime"⁴⁷

Aware of the symbolic associations of the mill, an intuitive audience looking at *Life and Thought Hath Fled Away* might be prone to a mystical analysis—one that questions the significance of the title and wonders equally about the fate of the mill and the person who built it. By indicating that 'life' has fled away, Watson is very likely contemplating the death of his forbearers, including his father and grandfather. The structure's decay can be interpreted as a representation of the loss of a bygone era, but it also stands as a testament to the personal loss that the young artist had experienced.

A similar interpretation of the mill can also be applied to *The Pioneer Mill*. Comparable to *Life and Thought Hath Fled Away*, the structure is represented in a state of idleness and near ruin. Different, however, is the treatment of the stream. In *Life and Thought Hath Fled Away* it stands by in tranquil stillness but in *The Pioneer Mill* it evades the mill completely and surges through a broken sluice gate. The power centre is no longer the structure, but rather the natural environment that has flourished in the absence of its production and reclaimed the space. Watson is in effect representing an ecological cycle "wherein the sawmill by ending the life of trees brought about its own death."⁴⁸ The artist mentions this cycle in his essay *A Landscape Painter's Day*, where he describes the "ruinous waste" of forests that

⁴⁷ *The Aldine: The Art Journal of America*, December 1874, quoted in *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁸ Homer Watson, "A Landscape Painter's Day," Queen's University Archives. Transcribed in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 25.

“bore down every year with might, until at last they wrecked vengeance upon the old mill for being the agent that had [lost] them to turbulent life.”⁴⁹

This ecological cycle that Watson implicitly depicted also acts as a metaphor for mankind’s own life cycle. Later in the same essay, the artist reflected on “his grandfather’s experience as a mill-owner and how similarly contradictory forces ended the productive life of men and mill.”⁵⁰ The connection between the fate of the mill and mankind is highlighted in the painting through the placement of an elderly figure in the middle ground on the left, directly across from the mill. Slightly hunched over and relying on a cane for support, the old man walks along the path gazing over at the decrepit structure. The gaze further emphasizes their connectedness and they appear to share the same destiny. Both man and mill are nearing death—a fate that has already claimed a tree that hovers over the scene.

Watson’s use of the elderly figure in *The Pioneer Mill* was not uncommon, as he used human figures quite regularly in many of his early compositions. First and foremost, Watson focused his pictures on the rural environment rather than the people themselves, but they do appear quite frequently in his work. With the exception of a few paintings, including *The Death of Elaine*, in which Watson makes the figures the central focus, they are often significantly smaller than the surrounding elements. By doing so, Watson allows for a psychological component to the work by enhancing a sense of contemplation through the figure in the environment. Their small scale within the surrounding landscape is expressive of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Watson's opinion that "man is wholly belittled by the grandeur of mountain, river and trackless forest."⁵¹

Another painting completed in 1881, titled, *The Stone Road* [Figure 7], exemplifies this conception and offers a visual indication of the artist's relationship with nature. The landscape depicts the experience of a wagoner travelling along a curved road that disappears at the horizon into a great reservoir of nature. In actual size the wagon would be disproportionate; an uncanny feature that draws the audiences attention towards it. Its undersized proportions in comparison to its surroundings impact the painting by drawing attention to the humility of the man in its presence. It becomes the focal point of the composition and is perhaps an indication of how Watson perceived his own artistic positioning. In *A Landscape Painter's Day*, Watson wrote about how "in such an atmosphere where undisturbed by the clamour of man's contention, one could not help being in accord with nature's spirit." Being "in accord with nature's spirit" became Watson's guiding principle, and as his artistic practice evolved over time his desire to "understand and express the harmony he envisioned between the human and natural world"⁵² never ceased.

⁵¹ Ibid., 197.

⁵² Ibid.

Chapter Two: In the Dominion of Light and Air

On February 3rd, 1900, Homer Watson delivered a lecture titled “The Methods of Some Great Landscape Painters” at the University of Toronto.¹ The event presented the artist with an opportunity to reflect upon the long tradition of landscape painting and the artists whose work he most admired. Ranging from Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652) in the seventeenth century to John Constable (1776-1837), J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and the French Barbizon artists in the nineteenth century, Watson showed a depth of historical consciousness that was impressive for a self-trained artist who lacked a formal education. His insight into these European masters was instead based upon his experience living abroad intermittently between 1887 and 1900.² It was within this context that Watson was able to see paintings by the most preeminent historical artists in the art galleries of London, Paris and New York. He also found himself in the company of leading contemporary artists, including James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and George Clausen (1852-1944).³ This kind of exposure had a profound effect on his artistic approach, which transitioned out of his formative techniques into a mature style.

¹ A transcript of the lecture is held in the Queen’s University Archives and was published for the first time in the appendix of Gerald Noonan’s *Refining the Real Canada: Homer Watson’s Spiritual Landscape* (Waterloo: mlr editions Canada & Wilfrid Laurier University, 1997), 245-269.

² He would make several more trips to Europe after this lecture, in 1901, 1902 and 1912.

³ For an account of George Clausen’s influence on Watson’s etching techniques, see Rosemarie L. Tovell, “Homer Watson’s *The Pioneer Mill*: The Making and Marketing

Although Watson did not explicitly discuss his own work during the lecture, his interpretation of the European masters is reflective of his personal philosophies. The lecture gives as much insight into his aesthetic and mystical concerns from the period as it does of the artists whose work he describes. This is particularly evident in his interpretation of Constable and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875), in which he associates their portrayal of light and air with mystical concepts. According to Watson, “what Constable did was seize on those humble objects that become exalted great or poetic when shown in the mysterious evanescent light of drifting sunbeams,” and “the sawing in the wind of great trees.”⁴ Similarly, in discussing Corot’s work, he describes “impalpable shimmering forms that are bathed in the mystery of light and air.”⁵ In both of these excerpts, the mystery that he references is fundamentally connected to his mystical conception of ultimate ‘Reality’, a truth that he believed could be made visible through the artists’ ability to represent light and air. These two elements, more than any others, became synonymous with the spiritual presence that he found inherent in the material world.

Traces of this sentiment predate the 1900 lecture and can be found as early as 1890 in two of the artist’s autobiographical essays, “A Return to the Village” and “A Landscape Painter’s Day.” These bodies of writing were completed after his first

of a Print in the Canadian Etching Revival,” *Journal of Canadian Art History* 31 (2010): 12-39.

⁴ Homer Watson, “Methods of Some Great Landscape Painters,” lecture at the University of Toronto, 1900. Queen’s University Archives in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 261.

⁵ Ibid.

sojourn overseas (1887-1889) and reveal to a large extent the artist's heightened attentiveness towards atmospheric conditions. For example, in "A Landscape Painter's Day," Watson describes the connection between air and spirit when he writes that "the thickness of the air seemed to breath [sic] the two worlds together."⁶ Furthermore, in "A Return to the Village," he describes his desire to surrender "entirely to nature, to sway in unison with the power we find in the dominion of light and air."⁷

In addition to the prevalence of such statements in his writing, Watson's focus on atmospheric conditions was also a dominant motif in many of his compositions. Take for example, *A Hillside Gorge* (1889) [Figure 8], in which an approaching storm is implied through the inclusion of dark clouds, spreading from left to right in the sky. Here, Watson suggests both light and air as they interact with the physical elements below. The trees in the middle of the composition bend as if in response to the strong wind and subtle dabs of light pigment are applied convincingly to suggest movement in the tall grass and the reflection of light on the water. Similar atmospheric attentiveness can be found in numerous paintings from the period, including *Evening Scene* (1894, Homer Watson House & Gallery), *Summer Storm* (1890, HWH&G) and *The Flood Gate* (c. 1900-1901, National Gallery of Canada).

That Watson associated light and air with a spiritual presence is perhaps understandable given their immateriality and the nineteenth-century spiritualist

⁶ Homer Watson, "A Landscape Painter's Day," in *Ibid.*, 239.

⁷ Homer Watson, "A Return to the Village," in *Ibid.*, 149.

conception of an ether—an imponderable fluid that carried spirits between physical objects (see Chapter One). Similar to the principle of an ether, light and air are not comprised of tangible matter, but their presence can be felt and witnessed as they interact with material elements. Watson touches on the notion of imponderable elements and their connection with spirits in his essay “A Landscape Painter’s Day” when he explains, “all seemed connected together by invisible ties and the limits of earth seemed to mount in the air and be linked with spirits of other worlds.”⁸ For this reason, Watson likely equated the representation of light and air in his compositions with the world of unseen spirits, but equally important was the tangible environment that existed in congruence with it.

Of course, Watson was not the first artist who endeavored to make visible light and air. Nor was his impetus for representing them solely based upon mystical motivation. Evidence of the artist’s attention toward atmospheric conditions can be traced back to the pen and ink studies that he executed between the late 1870s and 1880s. Many of these drawings, including *Morning Amid the Mountains* (c. 1880s, the National Gallery of Canada), feature overpowering skies and dramatic cloud formations. J. Russell Harper postulates that these compositions were very likely inspired by the woodcuts that were reproduced in *The Aldine* (see Chapter 1). Watson’s interest in dramatic skies may have also been inspired by a trip he took to New York State between 1876 and 1877. There he was likely introduced to the Hudson River School aesthetic and to works of George Inness (1825-1894). Stylistically, the Hudson River School artists’ and Inness’ landscapes featured

⁸ Homer Watson, “A Landscape Painter’s Day,” in *Ibid.*, 330.

similar aesthetic tendencies to those reproduced in *The Aldine*—such as detailed grandiose depictions of the landscape and a focus on the peaceful coexistence between human beings and the natural world. Harper who claims that Watson and Inness met (although this hasn't actually been proven), notes that Watson's sketches along the Susquehanna and Hudson Rivers and in the Adirondacks echo "the Inness and Hudson River School approach." He believes that this is particularly evident in their tonal mannerisms, subject matter and their focus on the transient effects of weather conditions.⁹

The portrayal of light and air had also been a major motivational force in the impressionist landscapes during the 1870s and 1880s. Unlike Watson, though, the impressionists were not motivated by any spiritual or mystical concerns. Instead they used light for its optical potential as it altered the local colour of the environment. Furthermore, as transitory elements that changed from one moment to the next, light and air were well suited to the impressionist pursuit of capturing and transmitting a fleeting moment. Watson likely saw examples of painting by the artists associated with this movement during a brief trip to Paris in 1889, but was evidently unmoved by their efforts. He would later reflect that there were certain aspects of impressionism that were not right for his own environment. He felt that the impressionist interest in light and air led to an elimination of all other elements and questioned whether "the strength of [an] oak tree" could be expressed through

⁹ J. Russell Harper, *Homer Watson, R.C.A: Paintings and Drawings/Peintures et Dessins* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1963), [4].

“vibratory flashes of pigment which may suggest light and air only.”¹⁰ By emphasizing only these two elements, all other things just as essential would be sacrificed. Light and air were important for Watson, but not at the expense of the “stimulus given by strength in trees, structure of earth” and “dignity of mass and line.”¹¹

Although his focus on atmospheric conditions remained constant, the artist’s aesthetic transitioned towards the end of the 1880s. Instead of painting everything with clear, crisp precision, Watson allowed for a broader brushstroke. A comparison between his paintings *Last Day of the Drought* (1881) [Figure 9] and *A Ravine Farm* (1889) [Figure 10] visually indicates this shift. In his earlier effort, every element shows the artist’s tendency to carefully delineate form. The rocks in the middle ground, which have been exposed by the drought, are rendered meticulously with visible outlines. Even the clouds in the top left-hand corner have a light gray edge that appears rather hard and unnatural. This is a stark contrast to the clouds in *A Ravine Farm*, which the artist executes in a broad, spontaneous manner, allowing the colours that represent both sky and cloud to blend together directly on the surface. In the later painting there is also more contrast between light and dark. The cluster of trees along the left appears as a solid mass and is silhouetted against the drama of the moving storm clouds. In *Last Day of the Drought*, however, the gradation in tone is much more subtle. The entire scene appears to be suffused with

¹⁰ Jane VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight* (Aylesbury: Homer Watson Trust, 1967), 41.

¹¹ Homer Watson quoted in *Ibid.*

the same level of light, permitting the artist to articulate the trees with much more clarity and detail.

According to Watson, this sort of transition in aesthetic was inevitable for all artists. During the same lecture in 1900, he described how “great artists have what is called periods.” In the beginning, the artist is insistent “on drawing everything he knows...with hard uncompromising diligence,” which eventually gives way to a mature style. The artist then “arrives at a stage after having mastered the rudiments of form in which he loses the hard edge or line of objects and allows the nebulous quality of light to eat into it...so that the style broadens” and “loses the fixity of early years.” It is only then that “the spontaneous rendering of the artist’s thoughts,” can be effectively portrayed.¹² Although Watson was speaking in generalities, there is a reflective tone to his words that indicates his own experience. He goes on to describe this kind of transition as a move from the analytic to the synthetic:

A great artist is usually gifted with a mind which takes a comprehensive or synthetic view of nature; but however synthetically he may view nature for his synthetic purpose in the later years of his life we find in studying the works of great landscape painters that they invariably commenced their life work by an analytic study of nature. When analysis had given them a basis in the knowledge of forms they [built] upon that broad structure of great masses of light and shade. It is only in this way [that the component parts] can be used with the swift decided brush strokes.¹³

By ‘synthetic,’ Watson does not mean artificial, but rather, an artistic synthesis that speaks of the bond between man, nature and the spirit world. What is most interesting about Watson’s description of this shift is the manner in which his

¹² Homer Watson, “Methods of Some Great Landscape Painters,” lecture at the University of Toronto, 1900. Queen’s University Archives. Transcribed in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 258.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 249.

words echo Evelyn Underhill's conception of the development of individual mystic consciousness.¹⁴ In her book *Practical Mysticism* (1915), Underhill describes how "the education of the mystical sense begins in self-simplification. The feeling, willing, seeing self is to move from the various and the analytic to the simple and the synthetic."¹⁵ She goes on to describe this evolution as a four-stage progression that ultimately ends in mystical transcendence. In the beginning, the individual becomes "awakened to the divine," a process analogous to conversion and prompted by emotional circumstances.¹⁶ In the case of Watson, this stage can be interpreted as corresponding with the period discussed in the previous chapter, when the emotional circumstances of his father's, brother's and grandfather's deaths led him to mystical contemplation. Such a conversion would have also corresponded with his abandonment of the Christadelphian Church. The second stage in developing mystical consciousness is associated with purification. Significance is placed on self-simplification and the elimination of whatever "stands between the self and the divine."¹⁷ For that reason, it seems reasonable to conclude that Watson's aesthetic simplification during his mature period (1887-1918) was likely connected, in part, to his mystical consciousness.

Watson's ability to express his thoughts within the rhetoric of contemporary mystical philosophy indicates the level to which he was in tune with the movement. Along with his exposure to European masters, the artist's time abroad may have

¹⁴ It's impossible to say for certain whether or not Watson read Underhill's writing. His library has not survived.

¹⁵ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1915), 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

corresponded with his introduction to spiritism.¹⁸ This is plausible considering it was a European movement that began in France and was well established in England by the time Watson made his first trip overseas in 1887. Language would not have been a barrier, considering the majority of spiritist literature was available both in French and English. Although there is no concrete evidence to indicate when Watson was first introduced to the doctrine, we do know that he distinguished himself as a spiritist rather than a spiritualist upon returning to Canada.

By the turn of the century, the naïve young man who had travelled to Lily Dale with his friends in 1879 had grown into a mature, spiritually minded individual who was capable of articulating his personal and artistic beliefs within the language of contemporary mystical philosophy. Whether or not this development was a direct result of the spiritist doctrine is not known. Nevertheless, an analysis of his paintings in relation to the main tenets of spiritism will be helpful in understanding the evolution of his artistic approach for mystical purposes. This will become evident by the manner in which the two main principles of the spiritist doctrine—to observe and to educate—are reflected in the artist's 'scientific' approach to nature, his direct compositions, and finally, his missionary spirit.

Spiritism had its origins in France during the spring of 1853. People gathered in the salons that season to witness table turning, a practice that had its spectators

¹⁸ It is not likely that Watson would have been exposed to the spiritist doctrine (a European-based movement) at Lily Dale. The spiritualist psychologies at Lily Dale were based on of Andrew Jackson Davis' theories. See Albert Adato and Michel P. Richard, "The Medium and Her Message: A Study Spiritualism at Lily Dale, New York" *Review of Religious Research* 22 (1980): 186-197.

form a circle around the table and connect themselves by holding hands. If the process was conducted effectively, the table around which they were gathered would begin to oscillate.¹⁹ For many, it was merely a fun way to spend an evening, but the novelty of it soon wore off. As Louis Figuier, a popular science writer, later remarked, “everything exhausts itself in this world...[and] when it had been repeated a sufficient number of times, we grew tired of this occupation.”²⁰ Soon skepticism built, and people began to reason that the experience was merely “the work of clever con artists; that it was trickery and fraud.”²¹ It was within this context that a mathematics teacher from Lyon named Denizard-Hippolyte-Léon Rivail (whose pseudonym was Allan Kardec) sought to counteract these skeptics and evolve spiritualism in France out of ‘mere parlour tricks’ into a movement worthy of serious contemplation.

This effort culminated in the publication of *Le Livre des Esprits: les Principes de la Doctrine Spirite* (1857), which introduced the spiritist doctrine to the French public through transcribed messages that Kardec had supposedly received during séances.²² The doctrine was not to be considered a religion, but rather “a philosophy, spiritual in its concern but grounded in hard observable scientific and rational principles.”²³ In this regard, Kardec’s role in the spiritist movement in

¹⁹ Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853-1931* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Ibid., 8.

²² Ibid., 8. See also Allan Kardec, *Le Livres des Esprits: les Principes de la Doctrine Spirite* (E. Dentu, 1857).

²³ Ibid., 21.

France was similar to that of Andrew Jackson Davis' in North America. Both men provided the necessary philosophical framework to support spiritualist claims and to account for the occult phenomena that were being witnessed. *Le Livre des Esprits* was so widely distributed that it became the preeminent source of reference in the discussion of spiritism for both believers and non-believers in France.²⁴

According to Kardec, the spiritual world had a long history that pre-dated the nineteenth century. The Fox sisters (see Chapter 1) had only rediscovered it. The séance, however, was new and he believed that it could only have developed during an era in which "reason and progress were dominant trends."²⁵ This method of communication was important to Kardec, who thought that spirits could "reveal new teachings more in keeping with the times."²⁶ One revelation that was supposedly dictated to him during a séance had to do with the authenticity of reincarnation. Kardec adapted this concept into the spiritist doctrine by claiming that the goal for human beings was "realized in a series of reincarnations, each one allowing for the expiation of past faults and leading humans towards improvement."²⁷ This idea was significant in that it moralized the doctrine and gave a sense of purpose to the ordinary lives of spiritist believers.

As the doctrine progressed, Kardec increasingly presented it as a science, but what exactly he meant by this is uncertain. Sofie Lachapelle in her book *Investigating the Supernatural* (2011) attempts to clarify his position:

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Allan Kardec quoted in Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. See also Allan Kardec, *Genesis*.

When [Kardec] wrote that spiritism was both science and philosophy, he most likely meant that it was a fact in the scientific sense, but that it existed above science, and would eventually modify it through its inclusion... Kardec meant that spiritist knowledge in its most profound way could influence scientific knowledge, but not be influenced by it, that it was the highest form of knowledge available.²⁸

This form of reasoning is similar to Kardec's theory of natural progression. Like the human spirit, which continually evolves to a more perfect state, science would evolve in a progressive direction. Kardec thus positioned spiritism outside the scientific method, which focused on observable, material fact and experimentation. Instead, his 'new science' was based solely upon the revelations revealed by spirits during séances.²⁹

After his death in 1869, Kardec was replaced by a new generation of spiritists who were dissatisfied with his approach, which they felt lacked authenticity. Instead of placing emphasis on the revelations garnered from spirits, they wanted to shift the focus of the doctrine towards physical phenomena. They also wanted to distance themselves from "the religious and moral questions that dominated Kardec's work" and instead "presented themselves as adherents of a rational, even scientific, doctrine." Their ultimate goal was to resolve "what they perceived to be a central problem of their time: a crisis of factuality in religious life."³⁰ To resolve this issue they invented what John Warne Monroe describes as a new "science of God", an approach "to the beyond capable of turning faith into fact by providing empirical

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press), 3.

evidence for metaphysical propositions.”³¹ Camille Flammarion (1842-1925), a respected French astronomer, became the leader of this new generation and would carry the doctrine forward.

For these spiritists, the key to providing empirical evidence was an understanding of the *perisprit*—a fluid (similar to the ether) that acted mechanically, joining body and soul in life and escaping at death. This allowed for materializations as the fluid travelled and fixed itself to a new location. If this theory was accurate, then providing concrete, observable evidence of the fluid could, they believed, scientifically validate the existence of spirits. To facilitate this mission, Flammarion emphasized the importance of psychic research—a process that was rooted in observation of the natural world. In his own words, he described how “it is by the scientific method alone that we may make progress in the search for truth. Religious belief must not take the place of impartial analysis. We must be constantly on guard against illusions.”³²

Perceptively, Watson recognized that one of his closest companions in the exploration of spiritualism, William Lyon Mackenzie King, suffered from the ‘illusion’ Flammarion warned against. Although the two shared a great deal on the subject, Watson, who was particular in his beliefs, dissociated himself from King’s spiritual occultism, and from spiritual believers en masse. He interpreted King’s interest as a blind, illusionistic faith, and in a letter to the politician on the subject, Watson wrote that “truth in research that is far more comforting to me than mere

³¹ Ibid.

³² Flammarion quoted in G.M. Beard, *The Psychology of Spiritism* (University of Northern Iowa, 1879), 32.

faith. I do not disparage faith, but agree with the apostle when he writes, ‘add to your faith knowledge, hold fast to that which is good’.³³

The “truth in research” that comforted the artist was perhaps the mystical presence he felt in “the dominion of light and air.” By studying the fleeting effect of a breeze through ruffling willows, or the gleaming bounce of light reflected across a stream, and then transmitting that knowledge through his work, Watson likely felt that he was revealing life’s ultimate mystery. This approach was similar to the scientific mindset promoted by spiritism, which taught its followers to “observe, compare [and] analyze” physical phenomena as a means of revealing “the laws which govern them.”³⁴

Watson’s focus on an observable “truth in research” led to a significant shift in his artistic method—both in the way he approached the subject and in the perspective of his compositions. During his formative years, the artist had worked primarily in his studio, using his sketches and imagination to inform his compositions. A prime example of this process is *Waning Summer Days* (1882) [Figure 11], which depicts grandiose trees that surround a placid stream, leading the viewer’s gaze into the distance where an idyllic city skyline is visible at the base of a menacing cliff. This scene is not native to any location the artist had visited, either in Doon or the Hudson River area. Instead, the composition is the product of his inward vision, a vision that Noonan described as being as “harmonious and rosy-

³³ Homer Watson quoted in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 220.

³⁴ Kardec, *Genesis*, 24.

tipped a view of civilization-and-nature as he ever realized.”³⁵ Over time, however, this method was no longer conducive to his artistic intention. If he wanted to represent his own direct and synthetic experience within nature, then he had to immerse himself in his subject by working increasingly in situ. By doing so, he could become closer to the great ‘mystery’ that captivated him.

In an essay from 1892 titled “The Realist vs. The Idealist,” Watson wrote about two approaches to painting. The artist constructs his thoughts as a story narrated by two fictional figures. One, who prefers the method of Watson’s earlier style, is termed “the Idealist,” and the other, who favours an in situ approach, is termed “the Realist.”³⁶ As Watson explains, “we find one artist content with the facts of nature as they present themselves to his [outwardly vision]; the other is attentive to his vision from the eyes inwardly. One is termed a Realist the other one Idealist.”³⁷ The faults that Watson found in his earlier Idealist method are evident in the discourse between these two figures. The Realist speaking to the Idealist warns, “we must not put a veil before our eyes with such things as ideas of what we see; dreams and musings thereon are all bosh and nonsense.”³⁸ The finished canvas should appear “fresh and spontaneous” rather than “stuffy, brown, or

³⁵ Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 56.

³⁶ Watson’s use of the terms “the Realist” and “the Idealist” can be confusing. One might think that his earlier works are representative of a “Realist” perspective. It’s important to note that the artist was using the terms to distinguish between methods (working in situ vs. in studio, an accurate depiction of a given scene vs. one that was informed by imagination) and not the overall ‘look’ of the painting.

³⁷ Homer Watson, “The Realist vs. The Idealist.” Queen’s University Archives. Transcribed in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 295.

³⁸ Ibid.

conventional.”³⁹ Furthermore, in describing his experience of being immersed in nature, the Realist insists, “I could live here, paint here to get yonder truth. To that end I will work...no slipshod study; but as near the thing out and out as I can get pigment to realize it.”⁴⁰

Watson was certainly not the first artist to approach his subject with a keen interest in scientific observation as a method of obtaining certain truths. An empirical approach to landscape painting was embraced by many English artists during the late eighteenth century and was carried forward by nineteenth century artists as well. Indeed, with the exception of Turner, nineteenth-century art in Britain was dominated by a focus on naturalism and realism. Among these figures was Constable, who considered the role of artist and scientist as analogous. During a public lecture at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in 1836, Constable proclaimed, “painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments?”⁴¹

Although Watson would have agreed that painting was a suitable medium to uncover “the laws of nature,” a distinction must be made between the two artists’ scientific outlooks. Constable’s interest in science was primarily linked to empirical truths and his paintings became experiments in geology and meteorology. This was vastly different from Watson, whose interest in the close observation of atmospheric

³⁹ Ibid., 291.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 301.

⁴¹ Ronald Rees, “John Constable and the Art of Geography” *Geographical Review* 66 (1976): 59.

effects was connected to his mystical intention. While Constable stuck to an interest in empirical science, Watson sought to portray his truth in research by capturing the essence of the spirit world as it coincided with the physical. After 1887, his conception of a scientific approach to painting was not in the empirical sense of rendering everything that could be seen with optical accuracy. Instead, Watson wanted to convey his experiences, the moments when he felt connected with nature's 'truth'. It wasn't optical precision, but an expression of his personal synthetic experience within nature that Watson strove to represent.

Watson's methodological shift is also reflected in the compositions of his paintings. Rather than representing large vistas and great reservoirs at a distance, his mature work focuses on more intimate surroundings. During his 1900 lecture, he accounted for this shift when he described how "the greater the spirit or soul of the artist the more humble he is in the presence of nature, and nature dominates him too much where she is of stupendous aspect, so he paints where he can dominate a scene and not be dominated by it."⁴²

One gets a sense of the "stupendous aspect" that Watson mentioned when looking at his earlier compositions, including *Old Mill and Stream* (1879) [Figure 12]. Here, Watson painted the landscape at a tremendous distance. The wagon, the old mill and the rolling hills are all situated to suggest a vast depth between the foreground and background. Watson situates the audience above the scene. We interact with the scene at a distance, looking down at it rather than feeling as though

⁴² Homer Watson, "Methods of Some Great Landscape Painters," lecture at the University of Toronto, 1900. Queen's University Archives. Transcribed in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 249.

we're a part of it. This separation between subject and spectator is greatly reduced in his mature work. In his painting *Nut Gatherers in the Forest* (1900) [Figure 13], for example, the artist depicts an autumn scene with five figures nestled in the interior of the forest. They rest, seated on rocks and a fallen tree under a canopy of orange-red leaves that still cling to the branches of the oak trees overhead. Spatially, the composition is much more intimate and focused on its inhabitants. The only indication of outlying space is a scant patch of blue sky beyond a small hill. Similar paintings that focus on the interior of the forest are common subjects for the artist in his mature work. These include *Burnham Beeches* (1888, Private Collection), *Log-Cutting in the Woods* (1894, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal) and *The Wayfarer* (1894, the National Gallery of Canada).

By simplifying his compositions and bringing the horizon line much closer to the foreground, Watson affords viewers the feeling that they themselves are a part of the scene. Or, at the very least, they can imagine the artist's direct placement within the environment. This—in addition to his representation of light and air—strengthens the union between nature, the divine and mankind that the artist wanted to represent. It is also for this reason that Watson rarely excluded human subjects from his paintings. For him, human beings were “part and parcel to the soil, so that the great truth in landscape painting will not allow one to forget that in striving after it the human element comes in as one of the most important in the composition.”⁴³

⁴³ Homer Watson quoted in VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 54.

For Watson, it wasn't only enough to believe in the connection between humanity, nature and spirit. He had to convey that message to others. In keeping with the spiritist doctrine, the artist argued that spiritual phenomena were within nature for the advancement of man. He felt that it was his role as an artist to "lay hold of those spirits" and that in time "these facts will no doubt put man in better position to know religion as a fact as natural as the hills."⁴⁴ Recognizing the role his paintings could play to inspire his audience, Watson wrote:

For I thought if I could only persuade one human ... that beauty was consecrated to him up there on the slopes where it merges into sky, he would become more of a oneness with nature and bow his head at eventide with more thankfulness at possessing such hills. All nature would play through and expand his soul.⁴⁵

This desire "to persuade one human" and "expand his soul" is reflective of the second main principle of spiritism, which emphasized the role of teaching. In the book *Genesis According to Spiritism*, Kardec described this process as "the revelations of certain scientific or moral, physical or metaphysical truths given by men who know them to men who know them not."⁴⁶ He believed the capacity to teach was given to humanity through spirits commissioned by God with the purpose of enlightening them with truths of which they were ignorant.

Although the doctrine stressed the importance of teaching, it also recognized that only certain individuals had the capacity to do so. Only human beings that embodied transcendent abilities are capable of revealing ultimate truth. Kardec

⁴⁴ Homer Watson. Letter to J.W. Green, February 4th, 1929. Transcribed in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 213.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Kardec, *Genesis*, 18.

described these individuals as men of genius, who were born with “an innate knowledge that little labour suffices to develop.”⁴⁷ These privileged individuals possessed a spirit that had passed through multiple lives and thus accumulated more knowledge. Kardec noted that although they were set apart from the rest of humanity for their transcendental abilities, there was nothing divine about them because they are born, lived and died amongst everyone else.⁴⁸

In *Practical Mysticism* (1915), Underhill made a similar argument. Like Kardec’s notion of genius, she believed that only certain individuals had a heightened ability to apprehend the mystical side of humanity. These people were primarily artists, poets and musicians. Speaking directly to her audience, she explained that artists “have seized and woven into their pictures strands which never presented themselves to you; significant forms which elude you, tones and relations to which you are blind,” and “living facts for which your conventional world provides no place.”⁴⁹ She went on to explain artists’ inherent ability to grasp ultimate Reality and transmit that knowledge through their medium:

Artists, aware of a more vivid and more beautiful world than other men, are always driven by their love and enthusiasm to try and express, bring into direct manifestation, those deeper significances of form, sound, rhythm, which they have been able to apprehend, and, doing this, they taste deeper and deeper truths, make ever closer unions with the Real.⁵⁰

Watson’s desire to “bring into direct manifestation” the mystery he found in the “dominion of light and air” became his goal after 1887. To facilitate this mission,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁹ Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 73.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

he approached his subjects using the scientific mindset that spiritists like Flammarion promoted, with their emphasis on observation as a means of revealing certain truths. This led to a significant shift in both his method and his aesthetic. The “analytic” style of his formative painting, characterized by fastidious detail and wide panoramas, gave way to a “synthetic” approach that was more conducive to his artistic intention. The direct perspective that these later works convey intensifies the feeling of close observation, but it also speaks to the process of self-simplification that Evelyn Underhill emphasized—a necessary step towards mystical transcendence.

Chapter Three: Twilight

“...a few more strokes would be my last, for when all was not revealed I saw the most.”—Homer Watson¹

A sepia-toned photograph [Figure 14], taken sometime between 1925 and 1936, offers a unique portrait of the artist during his twilight years. Positioned in the center along the bottom half of the composition, Watson casts a sombre gaze over his left shoulder. He appears composed and completely unaware of the five ghostly figures in varying degrees of translucency that float in the negative space surrounding him. This uncanny feature is characteristic of spirit photography, a trend that began in the aftermath of the American Civil War and endured during the first half of the twentieth century.² It was a deceptive practice involving double exposures that was marketed to the public as an authentic means of portraying spirits. Ignorant of the actual process involved, those who were duped believed that the accelerated vibration of the camera lens could make visible what the eye failed to see.³ For today’s viewer these images appear as naïve—almost humorous—novelties, but for spiritualists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who had lived through the trauma of vicious wars and epidemics, the photographs provided considerable consolation.

¹ Homer Watson, “A Landscape Painter’s Day,” transcribed in Jane VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight* (Aylesbury: Homer Watson Trust, 1967), 58.

² Clément Chéroux, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 12.

³ Charles Colbert, *Haunted Visions: Spiritualism and American Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 12.

That Watson would seek such a photograph is understandable given his enduring interest in spiritualist phenomena. It would have also satisfied his spiritist yearning for ‘scientific’ truth, by providing what appeared to be empirical evidence of life beyond death. More than anything, though, the image was likely a great comfort after the passing of his wife Roxa in 1918. After all, the photograph revealed, quite literally, that although separated by death her spirit still lingered—visible directly above him.

According to Muriel Miller and Gerald Noonan, Roxa’s death had a devastating effect on the artist.⁴ For many years he had relied on her for constant companionship, advice on his painting and the management of their estate.⁵ In her absence he was filled with grief and suffered a creative impasse (between 1918 and 1920), resulting in the production of very few paintings. To cope with these circumstances, the artist turned to the Bible. Whereas previously he had “simply discarded the old Book or become indifferent to it,”⁶ he now took great comfort in its message. This new interest, however, did not mark a conversion back to Christianity. Instead, Watson looked to it as an affirmation of spiritist ideas. According to him, the “revelation of the resurrection” proved that “there is spiritism in the [B]ible.”⁷

It was also during this period of grief that he claimed to have visions of his wife’s spirit. A friend and fellow artist, Walter Allward, would later recall a

⁴ Muriel Miller, *The Man of Doon* (Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1988), 93.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 95.

conversation the two men shared in which Watson confided this experience. According to Allward, Watson was alone in his studio one evening when an apparition of Roxa appeared “in a curious amber glow,”⁸ but when he stood up to walk toward her, the vision disappeared. After he had retreated back to his chair, Roxa appeared once more. This time she said “do not despair. All is well, Homer.”⁹ VanEvery recalls a different anecdote of a similar experience:

One night, he had a dream in which [Roxa] appeared to him, coming down the stairs. The dream was so clear that he was not certain whether he was asleep or not. That day he had been searching for a missing paper, and in the dream when he asked her about it she told him where it was. In the morning he found it in that place.¹⁰

Miller describes these visions as being the catalyst that led to Watson’s spiritual conversion. This, of course, is a misleading statement because by that time his interest in spiritualism had been long established. Instead, these experiences, whether authentic or not, would have provided further evidence to support Watson’s beliefs. Like the deepening of mystical consciousness that occurred after the deaths of his father, grandfather and brother during his youth, Roxa’s passing and the supposed sightings of her spirit seem, according to Miller, to have intensified the artist’s devotion to mystical thought and spiritist practice from 1918 until his own death in 1936.

That Miller mistakenly attributed Watson’s spiritual conversion to the year of Roxa’s death is not surprising given the scarcity of references to such topics in his prior correspondence. This is particularly evident in a survey of his surviving

⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jane VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 35.

correspondence that is now held in the Homer Watson fonds at the National Gallery of Canada. It would seem that before the 1920s, very few people had been aware of his interest in spiritualism. His previous essays “A Landscape Painter’s Day” and “The Idealist versus the Realist” (which were laced with spiritualist concepts) were never published and during his 1900 public lecture at the University of Toronto he used subversive rather than explicit language to describe his mystical interpretation of the great masters (see Chapter 2). His reservation about making his opinions known may have been due to his position as a public figure. As an artist who also acted as the head of the Canadian Art Club (1907-1911) and president of the Royal Canadian Academy (1918-1922), Watson may have feared public backlash from his patrons and colleagues. Spiritualism after all was still a highly contentious topic in Canada and was met with fierce opposition.

Things would shift significantly throughout the 1920s. As Watson’s advanced age slowed down his mobility and his popularity waned in favour of a new generation of Canadian landscapists, he became less of a fixture in the Canadian art scene. It was only then that he began to speak openly on the topic of mysticism, spiritualism and occult practices, becoming an advocate on these matters within Waterloo Region and getting involved with The Ontario Society of Psychic Research, located at 40 King Street East in Kitchener.¹¹ The President was Watson’s longtime friend David Forsythe, who had accompanied the artist on the trip to Lily Dale in

¹¹ Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 210-211.

1879 (see Chapter 1).¹² The mission of the Society was to research the merits of occult practices, placing as much precedence on investigation and scientific proof as the second generation of spiritists had. To facilitate this mission, both Watson and Forsythe would arrange for mediums to come in from Lily Dale to conduct séances and other psychic sessions for its members. In keeping with proper séance etiquette, these events were conducted informally in private settings, most commonly in the Paradise Lake (3 km north of Waterloo region) home of Forsythe and Watson's home in Doon.¹³

In addition to these experiments, Watson also shared candid thoughts on the matter in his correspondence with friends and acquaintances. Whether it was offering insight to local residents who expressed curiosity,¹⁴ or responding to skeptical friends, his words reflect the level to which he was in tune with the movement and the contemporary events associated with it. For example, in one letter addressed to James Mavor, the artist writes about an ongoing debate in the mid-1920s between the editor of *Scientific American*, Malcolm Bird, and the famous magician Houdini over the authenticity of mediums: "My dear Mavor, I am sending

¹² After this initial trip, the two returned to Lily Dale several times. Gerald Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada: Homer Watson's Spiritual Landscape* (Waterloo: mlr editions Canada, 1997), 203.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁴ Refer to his correspondence with Gavin Hamilton Green, a Goderich man who writes to Watson after 'receiving' a message from the spirit world. Watson writes back a lengthy response, saying that "the messages seem to me to be entirely authentic to the forces with which you are in tune," 1926. Transcribed in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 211. Also see Watson's correspondence with Clara E. Humberston, 1925. Transcribed in *Ibid.*, 210.

you Malcolm Bird[']s book, mainly a record of the investigating committee of the Scientific American into psychic phenomena.”¹⁵

Beyond the matter of psychical research, Watson was also open to discussing his interest in spiritism in relation to his artistic practice. As was mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, he shared candid thoughts on the spiritual association of his art with William Lyon Mackenzie King after receiving the commission for *Evening Moonrise* in 1933. Furthermore, in a letter from 1923, he recommended that his dealer, F.R. Heaton of Scott’s Gallery in Montreal, read Camille Flammarion’s book, *Death and its Mystery*, published that same year—perhaps in an attempt to get those closest to his work to understand the mystical perspective from which it was derived. Heaton wrote back to inform Watson that “I’ve read Flammarion’s [sic] three [chapters], Before, At, and After Death...I think they are wonderful...he doesn’t mince matters, ...had no doubts whatever both as to the existence and all the possibility of communication. Coming from a man with such a very high reputation as a scientist, it’s more reassuring.”¹⁶

Watson also wrote to *The Globe* on the subject. In one of these letters the artist questions his ability to persuade nonbelievers to accept the merits of spiritism: “You have been generous in printing what I am afraid some may call my effusions, and I have settled into a doubt as to the good of continuing, for, after all, is it not the essence of futility to try to convince by argument any mind so fixed as to

¹⁵ Homer Watson. Letter to James Mavor. September 7th (undated), Transcript of James Mavor Papers, University of Toronto Archives.

¹⁶ F.R. Heaton. Letter to Homer Watson, June 5th 1923. Transcript of Homer Watson Fonds, the National Gallery of Canada. Also published in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 170.

believe in only the material forces of life and death?” Despite whatever doubts he had, Watson did go on, outlining particular verses in the Bible that he believed affirmed spiritist concepts.¹⁷ By showing the similarities between Christianity and spiritualism, the artist was likely trying to encourage support for further spiritist investigation. This was a line of defense that he had used before. In his letter to Colonel Frank Moss who disapproved of the artist’s involvement within séance circles, Watson wrote: “The key to harmony in religion is a belief in a future life; and, in as far as we believe this, we are all spiritualists. No one creed has all truth, but all creeds have a portion of it from the Talmud to the Scriptures.”¹⁸

What all of these examples reveal is the artist’s desire to publicly advocate for his deep-seated convictions. Whether it was responding to inquiring letters, referring people to the latest spiritist literature (as he had with Heaton) or debating the merits of the movement within twenty-first century conceptions of religion,¹⁹ the artist seems to have been upholding the ‘missionary spirit’ that the spiritist doctrine dictated. Instead of pursuing this mission solely through his painted landscapes, his desire to teach and reveal ultimate ‘truth’ now manifested itself in

¹⁷ This was likely written sometime during the late 1910s or 1920s. The debate over the merits of spiritualism was a common subject in editorials during this period (a search of spiritualism and spiritism in *The Globe and Mail* archives yields 0 results between 1910-1918, but 148 results between 1919 and 1930.) Articles were published anonymously, making it difficult to trace Watson’s contributions. For a transcript of one such letter, see VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 39. For an example of multiple editorials on the subject as they appeared in *The Globe* see “The Supreme Test of Spiritualism: Voice of the People,” *The Globe*, Monday March 15th, 1920, 5.

¹⁸ Homer Watson. Letter to Colonel Frank Moss, undated. Transcribed in Miller, *The Man of Doon*, 94-95.

¹⁹ Refer to his correspondence with J.W. Green, 1929. Privately owned, excerpts transcribed in *Ibid*.

his written words to a greater extent. Gerald Noonan perhaps said it best when he suggested that “increasingly, as Watson grows older, the forces of spirit, of nature, and of art come together in his correspondence as they did more and more in physical reality.”²⁰

The “physical reality” that Noonan is referring to was constituted of the numerous small canvases (approximately 45 x 60 cm) that are representative of Watson’s late career (1918-1936). Although his practice slowed down in the three years directly following Roxa’s death (1918), it wasn’t long before the deepening of his mystical consciousness was met with a renewed artistic vigour. It seems that the emotional circumstances that he was reconciling through his grief and recognition of his own advancing age mingled during this period and became factors in his painting. If titles are any indication of what the artist had been thinking, then *Advancing Winter* (1933, Private Collection), *Season of Frost and Thaw* (1927, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery) and *Bridge Into the Unknown* (1918, the National Gallery of Canada), should serve as indications. In all of these canvases, the overall mood takes on a sombre note—an observation that his sister Pheobe commented upon, describing how they “took on a little of the trouble he had been through[,] not in a gloomy manner but in somber tones...always seeking for more truth in [colour] and air[,] eliminating unnecessary detail.”²¹

A perfect exemplar of his work from this period is *Mountain River* (1932) [Figure 15], a painting that depicts a twilight scene along the banks of a river.

²⁰ Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 169.

²¹ Phoebe Watson. Letter to M.E. Becker, February 29th, 1932. Homer Watson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

Contrary to what the title suggests, however, there isn't a mountain in sight, only the steep incline of the escarpment surrounding the water. Far from the grandeur and detail of his formative years, the objects in *Mountain River* are represented in a direct, simplified manner—an elimination of the “unnecessary detail” as Phoebe suggested. What is most striking about the painting, however, is the colour of the sky. A peculiar mix of soft pink, purple and blue gives a sense of the atmosphere at a very particular moment of the day, either during the onset of evening or very early in the morning. Evidently, Watson attributed these colours with a spiritual presence and described his paint as having taken “on the radiance of the celestial sphere.”²² Also noticeable in the sky are the clouds, which appear far from placid. Watson achieves this through vigorous brushwork, drawing attention to the full moon that presides over the entire scene, casting its soft yellow light over the rapidly moving water below.

Similar motifs to those found in *Mountain River* are dominant in many of Watson's late paintings. The central bend of moving water, dark silhouetted trees and twilight colours can also be found in, for example, *Moonrise Near Galt* (late 1920s, private collection), *Rising Moon Over Winter Landscape* (c. 1930s, private collection), *High Water Pine Bend* (1935, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery) and *Village in a Moonlit Environment* (c. 1930s, private collection) among many others. It seems that this particular time of day appealed to the artist for the mood it evoked and the connection he felt it possessed with spiritist activity. Watson conveyed this mentality quite clearly when he described his experience sketching during the early

²² Homer Watson quoted in VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 39.

hours of morning, while the moon was still present in the sky: “The sight of that planet led the mind off into contemplation or a gloomy interruption. The sun was not yet felt in the sky and the abyss of infinitude at one moment walled one in[,] and in the next instant chasms were opened up in the immensities.”²³

Evidently thoughts in this manner were long standing in Watson’s mind—even before they became a dominant influence on his subjects and compositions. In 1900, during his lecture at the University of Toronto, the artist commented upon the power of evening subjects in his interpretation of Corot:

[Corot] felt as he doubtless expected you should feel when you are enwrapped with a sentiment or love of nature’s beauty at the close of day, that in the mystery of the light at that hour you are filled with a fine thought of the spirit of the scene, that you have implanted in you then an idea of the law of nature’s general harmony.

...So at morning and evening he was found painting away when the veil of mystery was drawn over all objects. He did not like the noon day light which searched out too many forms. He says he stopped painting when the sun came up; for everything became visible. There was no longer anything to paint.²⁴

Watson’s logic that Corot avoided the “noon day light” because it “searched out too many forms” was consistent with the thinking of a large number of spiritualists who believed that the sun could lure “spirits into a sublunary realm.”²⁵ It was only in “darkness that physical phenomena could be witnessed.”²⁶ Camille Flammarion, with his background in astronomy, became a trusted source in the matter, writing on the

²³ Homer Watson, “A Return to the Village,” in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 330.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁵ Charles Colbert, *Haunted Visions: Spiritualism and American Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 124.

²⁶ The same logic also dictated proper séance etiquette emphasizing how sessions should be conducted at night, or at the very least, with dim lighting. *Ibid.*

subject in several publications. In *The Wonders of the Heavens* (1885) for example, he postulated that: “the solitary hours of night have the faculty of placing ourselves in intimate communication with great and holy nature.”²⁷ Furthermore, he argued: “Night is, in truth, the hour...in which the contemplative soul is regenerated in the universal peace. We become ourselves; we are separated from the factitious life of the world, and placed in communion with nature and with truth.”²⁸

Beyond the scope of the spiritualist movement, evening scenes had also been a popular subject for audiences during Watson’s lifetime. References in novels and poetry were appealing for authors and poets because they could conjure feelings of gloom, fear, mystery, death and sorrow amongst their readers. Such was the case when William Lyon Mackenzie King read a passage written by Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855) transcribed in Catherine MacDonald MacLean’s novel *Dorothy and William Wordsworth* (1927). Writing in his diary, King associated the writer’s descriptions of moonlight scenes with the mysterious spiritual presence he found in Watson’s paintings.²⁹ Susan M. Levin in her book, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, comments upon the significance of the moon in the novelist’s writing. She believes that Wordsworth’s descriptions of this motif allow her stories to “take

²⁷ Camille Flammarion, *The Wonders of the Heavens* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1885), 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹ For example, King writes (a combination of direct quotations from Wordsworth and his own thoughts) “‘The sky toward the East was unveiled of a delicate orange colour’—another colour [in Watson’s paintings] I had commented upon to Joan—‘a stream, which ran among gloomy rocks’—like the stream between the dark banks of the painting.” in William Lyon Mackenzie King, *The Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King*, September 26th, 1933. Transcript of manuscript #MG26-J4, Library and Archives Canada.

on added depth” and that the moon is used as an object “that bears on the [character’s] emotional state.³⁰ In addition to Wordsworth, King also associates Watson’s work with the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834): “I ended [Wednesday] night re reference to Coleridge’s feeling re water singing in the twilight ... the rich mulberry of floating clouds, etc., ... opposite this I placed the mark of H.W.”³¹

The pervasiveness of such literary influences is apparent even in the writings of Flammarion. Although he presented *The Wonders of the Heavens* as a ‘scientific’ text, he interlaced his argument with poetry. For example, as a prelude to his first chapter, he included a verse by the French poet Louis-Marcelin de Fontanes (1757-1821) that describes the sublime experience of wandering and meditating under the moon’s sacred shadow: “O nuit! Que ton langage est sublime pour moi, / Lorsque, seul et pensif, aussi calme qui toi, / Contemplant les soleils dont ta robe est parée, / j’erre et medite en paix sous ton ombre sacrée!”³² Another poem, by Madame de Girardin, is included later in the chapter to affirm Flammarion’s conviction that it is in the evening hours that the veil between the human and spirit world is lifted:

Voici l’heure où tombe le voile
Qui, le jour, cache mes ennuis:
Mon Coeur à la première étoile
S’ouvre comme une fleur de nuit.

On nage, on plane dans l’espace,
Par l’esprit du soir emporté;
On n’est plus qu’une ombre qui passe,

³⁰ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 28.

³¹ Mackenzie King, *Diaries*, September 26th, 1933.

³² Flammarion, *The Wonders of the Heavens*, 3.

Une âme dans l'immensité.³³

The counterpart to this poetic sentimentalism in poetry can be found in the visual arts in the work of the tonalist artists who were active from the 1880s until the early years of the 1920s. Stylistically, their paintings marked a departure from the Hudson River School panoramas that for much of the nineteenth century had dominated American art, toward a style that the tonalists believed was more apt for expressing an intimate, poetic, even spiritual landscape. Much of their influence to this end came from the French Barbizon artists, but tonalists were unique in that their paintings had either one dominant colour or an overall atmospheric tonality that was comprised of a very limited palette.³⁴ They were not concerned with accurately representing a particular locality, but instead wanted to convey a poetic mood that could evoke feelings of “reverie and nostalgia” amongst spectators.³⁵ For that reason, they focused their subject matter on “dawn or early morning, and dusk, twilight or evening,”³⁶ which they felt to be conducive to this experience. They also preferred late autumn and winter scenes for a similar reason. These were seasons when the landscape appears empty and barren.³⁷

Although most tonalists were simply concerned with the poetic evocativeness of their landscapes, some were also motivated by spiritualist

³³ Ibid., 4.

³⁴ For more information on the Barbizon influence on tonalist artists see Peter Bermingham, *American Art in the Barbizon Mood* (Washington: National Collection of Fine Art, 1975).

³⁵ William H. Gerdtz, *Tonalism: an American Experience* (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries Art Education Association, 1982), 19.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

conceptions. Charles Colbert identifies James Abbott MacNeill Whistler, George Fuller and Albert Pinkham Ryder as artists associated with both the tonalist and spiritualist movements. Of these three figures, Watson's subject matter and aesthetic is most comparable to those of Ryder—an artist whose work he had seen and admired during a trip to New York City (sometime between the late 1880s and 1890s). Writing from Maidenhead, England, Watson described this experience to his friend James Mavor: "My Dear Mavor ... English art seems somewhat jaded[,] things look somewhat fresher in New York ie what I saw of Walker [and] Ryder."³⁸ For this reason, a discussion of Watson's late career in relation to Ryder's will be beneficial in examining the ways in which Watson's landscapes espoused various tonalist principles and set the stage for a spiritualist interpretation of his art.

Firstly, the most striking similarity between Watson and Ryder's work is their choice of subject matter. Both artists had a penchant for including an unobstructed full moon in many of their compositions. For Watson the moon was a stimulant that led the "mind into contemplation,"³⁹ but for Ryder it signified a spiritual healing power. At the time, Ryder had been suffering from rheumatism and would take nightly walks hoping that the positive rays that emanated from the moonlight would alleviate his ailments.⁴⁰ This philosophy also extended to his artistic practice, as he sought to capture those positive rays in his landscapes. According to Colbert, when the artist was unable to go on his nightly sojourn, he

³⁸ Homer Watson. Letter to James Mavor, 20th May (unknown year), Transcript of James Mavor Papers, University of Toronto.

³⁹ Homer Watson quoted in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 331.

⁴⁰ Colbert, *Haunted Visions*, 200.

would instead “soak in the moonlight” that shone in his paintings.⁴¹ It seems that Ryder not only regarded painting as a method of recording a subject that he associated with a positive spiritual force, but also as a vehicle capable of transmitting that force to a receptive audience. A contemporary critic, Duncan Phillips, was evidently in tune with Ryder’s artistic intention and commented upon the “spiritual loneliness” that he found present in Ryder’s work.⁴² Interestingly, he too—like King in regards to Watson—associated Ryder’s palette and moonlit subjects with the poetry of Coleridge, stating: “what Coleridge achieved in words, Ryder has crystalized in pigments.”⁴³

Although Ryder was certainly not alone in his regard for the healing power of the moon (it was a theory known to anyone familiar with the work of Frans Anton Mesmer) it would be a stretch to assume that Watson was motivated by the same holistic concern. Nevertheless, masses of silhouetted land, reflecting water, and of course, moonlight are as ubiquitous in Ryder’s work as they are in Watsons, and can be found in many of his paintings, including *Moonlit Cove* (c. 1880s) [Figure 16], *Toilers of the Sea* (1884, Metropolitan Museum of Art), *The Lorelei* (1896, Smithsonian American Art Museum) and *Moonlight* (1887, Smithsonian American Art Museum).

⁴¹ Ibid., 202.

⁴² Duncan Phillips, “Albert Ryder,” *The American Magazine of Art* 7 no. 10 (August, 1916): 388.

⁴³ Ibid., 389. Phillips also goes to describe Ryder’s work in association with Coleridge’s poem “The Ancient Mariner” stating that “the very colours described in the Ancient Mariner are the colours of Ryder’s palette ... also, there is in this greatest of all ballads the possible origin of Ryder’s gorgeous dream of the night sky.” See Ibid., 391.

The repetition of these motifs, for whatever purpose, can make Watson and Ryder's work appear formulaic. Their landscapes seem less suggestive of a specific place, then symbolic of a more universal representation of land, sky and earth. In the context of Ryder, this makes sense because his method did not involve prolonged studies in situ. Instead, he—like many tonalist artists—would work in studio, using sketches and memory to inform each composition.⁴⁴ Although this practice would not have appealed to Watson during his mature period, it seems likely that he returned to a similar method as his advanced age slowed down his mobility. The purchase of his first automobile in 1923 allowed him to venture out and record sketches, but the majority of his canvases were completed in his studio—partially informed by those sketches but also guided by a memory bank of past experiences. In his own words he explained the capacity to do just that, describing how a painter can “silently summon one of those phases of time, which in the past years implanted in him a note, the essence of which trembles all along the line of his life. It wafts gently through his impressions, the dream of a mood, and vibrates with the strings of his thought.”⁴⁵

Ryder's effort to present a more highly universal landscape led to a significant simplification of the figurative components in his work. Any indication of a specific tree or rock formation is masked by the atmosphere and is instead

⁴⁴ Gerdts, *Tonalism*, 16.

⁴⁵ Homer Watson, “A Landscape Painter's Day,” transcribed in VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 51.

presented as a generalized shape.⁴⁶ This was appealing to him, and to other tonalist artists, because they wanted the spectator to be immediately struck by the overall mood of the painting, rather than being concerned with individual components. Ryder—perhaps more than any other tonalist, pushed this idea, arriving at a style that borders on abstraction in its geometrical simplicity. As was mentioned previously, Watson’s work also became increasingly simplified, but not to the same extent. In a letter to one of his acquaintances, the architect John Lyle, on February 15th, 1933, Watson explained why his elimination of detail had a limit:

As you know my modernism does not lend itself to an elimination of the pictorial for I believe an easel picture must always be a picture. A thing of lines and patterns only or symbols trying to suggest some form or structure in nature will not do in the long run for the people; for art after all is for the people, and not for a few so-called mentalities, which I am afraid is just another name for decadence.⁴⁷

Even though he expressed displeasure with what he termed “the decadent modernists” who let their works be reduced to symbols, in actuality he was doing something quite similar. He was different in that he held on to representational form, but the repetition of the motifs in his evening scenes indicates that he was interested in the connotations his images could infer. Watson himself alluded to this fact, describing how “every true painter must use symbols of course to express the

⁴⁶ For a discussion of Ryder’s work in relation to sacred geometry, see Maurice Tuchman, “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art,” *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* ed. Edward Weisberger (New York and Los Angeles: Abbeville Press Publishers & Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), 18-19.

⁴⁷ Homer Watson. Letter to John Lyle, February 15th, 1933. Transcribed in Miller, *The Man of Doon*, 104.

complex and infinite in nature; but the false part is when one allows this to lead away from nature and not to it.”⁴⁸

Although Ryder and Watson were aware of the associative potential of their evening scenes, Colbert argues that the elements in such compositions should not be mistaken for allegory. Instead they should be perceived as examples of ‘authentic symbols’, which are not based upon universal mythical and literary traditions but arise “when the artist identifies completely with the object of [his or her] attention.”⁴⁹ This was vastly different from symbolist artists such as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) and Odilon Redon (1840-1916) who used allegory to reference entrenched mythological and literary traditions in their compositions. Their method did not appeal to many tonalists (and likely Watson), who saw it as artificial. It also took too long to decode and was thus considered tedious and unnecessary. Instead, the tonalists consciously opted for symbols “that possessed a ready accessibility and required no rehearsal of all the calculations that originally contributed to their creation.” They were “regarded as instantaneous and unmeditated.”⁵⁰

This approach made tonalism a mode that was particularly apt to express spiritualist concerns. The “reverie and nostalgia” that the artists evening scenes evoked appealed to a spiritualist audience and were thought to inspire a higher state of consciousness. These individuals believed that psychic energies lay beneath

⁴⁸ Homer Watson. Letter to Eric Brown, December 24th (approx.. 1928). Homer Watson fonds, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

⁴⁹ Colbert, *Haunted Visions*, 182.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the painted surface and had been transmitted there by an equally spiritually intuitive artist. Leigh Hunt, a critic and well-known poet and writer, in discussing tonalism in *The Art Collector* (1898), explains this process and how one might sense the spiritual through the “indefinite and mystical ‘tone’” of the painting:

Tone is the spirit of the picture—the technique, the letter, and that frame of mind is not always to be deplored which justifies the means to the end. If necessary, we can dispense with many a tour de force of drawing or daring colour-scheme if we can give the true, artistic inwardness which is half-veiled and half revealed by the indefinite and mystical ‘tone.’⁵¹

This process of sensing “the spirit of the picture” is what Colbert describes as an “aesthetic of anticipation.” The evening scene set the tone, but deeper concentration would reveal its mystic depth.⁵²

To oblige this process, a spiritually inclined audience would approach the painting with the same reverential demeanor that was needed for a successful séance. This was achieved by engaging in a period of contemplative silence. If the contemplation was conducted effectively, the observer might be “rewarded with emanations of the psychic phenomena the artist had witnessed and impressed” into his or her pigment.⁵³ An excerpt from Watson’s lecture at the University of Toronto would certainly suggest that the artist was aware of these ideas: “When these beauties which were dormant in the picture waken into life and its inner spirit reveals itself to the beholder... a new grace [is added] to his existence. As in nature

⁵¹ Leigh Hunt, “Tonality,” *The Art Collector* 9 (December 1, 1898). Also quoted in Gerds, *Tonalism*, 28.

⁵² Colbert, *Haunted Visions*, 152.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

he is the witness of a revelation gradually unfolding[,] something he did not know or see before.”⁵⁴

Key to the psychology that rationalized this process was an understanding of the ether (see Chapter One). Because it ran through all material objects and was thought to be capable of carrying spirits, the ether legitimized the paintings’ capability to be a locus for psychic energies. Before Einstein’s theory of relativity began to destabilize the ‘scientific’ validity of these claims in the popular understanding, ether had been the most widely accepted theory to explain spiritualist art. For that reason, many people would have approached a tonalist painting and other mystically motivated works from “a perspective that embraced a spiritualist interpretation.”⁵⁵

Since ether relied on material objects as things to which it affixed itself, artists sought to emphasize the physicality of their medium through a tactile, impasto technique. Both Ryder and Watson pursued this method, disregarding the more typical conventions of paint application in which the thickness of the material would vary across the picture plane (the thinnest areas being reserved for those objects furthest away). Instead they rendered their paintings in a uniform thickness. Ryder achieved this effect by squeezing “big chunks of pure, moist colour” from the tubes, applying them directly on the surface.⁵⁶ Afterward, he would use the brush to move the paint around, blending different colours in the process. This method was not exclusive to Ryder, and was in fact, consistent with the practice of many other

⁵⁴ Homer Watson quoted in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 251.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

tonalists. It was, however, vastly different from traditionalists who mixed their colours on a palette prior to application. In describing the tactile surface of Ryder's work, Colbert describes it as possessing a "vibrating quality" that goes beyond "purely aesthetic considerations."⁵⁷ By building up his paint and creating zigzag motions in his brushwork, Ryder was likely trying to emulate the mystic, healing rays of the moon. The effect was evidently successful. One critic praised his painting, *The Sheepfold* (1878) [Figure 17] for recreating "in a magical way the vibrating mystery of moonlight."⁵⁸ Furthermore, Duncan Phillips described the "carefully made texture" of Ryder's pigment as a stimulant that gives the artist's work "some magic of rhythmic arabesque, some strangely solid mystery."⁵⁹

Watson's method was quite similar. Working from a limited palette, he would create variations of colours by dragging them through one another on the surface using both palette knife and brush. In doing so, he allowed the paint to build up in a thick impasto using aggressive motion. In a letter from 1922, he described his motives for this process, explaining how he "considered smooth, meticulous painting an offense against the vital feeling one had when studying the beautiful and strong forces of nature as we have it in Canada ... the paint must come alive with vitality and not dead with inane prettiness."⁶⁰ Clearly conscious of the relationship between paint application and the subject of his works, Watson very likely wanted to elicit a tactile sensory response from the viewer—one that would bespeak the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁵⁹ Phillips, "Albert Ryder," 391.

⁶⁰ Homer Watson quoted in Miller, *The Man of Doon*, 104.

material world and consequently the spiritual elements that he felt were present within it.

Far removed from the spiritualist psychologies that contributed to an aesthetic of anticipation at the height of the spiritualist movement, it becomes difficult to comprehend how a contemporaneous audience would have been receptive to this process. Perhaps one of our best indications today can be found in the detailed notes that William Lyon Mackenzie King jotted down in his diary and correspondence before and after receiving *Evening Moonrise*—the small twilight scene that had made such an impression on him during his visit to the artist's studio in the summer of 1933. Shortly after his visit and several months before the painting arrived in Ottawa, King expressed his high regard for the painting in a letter to Watson:

The little painting I shall prize beyond all words. It will speak to me ways of you of all that you are, and of all that you have done in a long life of singular activity and high achievement. It will be a reminder, too, of my visits to your studio, and of the county in which I was born, and in which each of us have lived. Above all it will be a sort of presence, reminding me always of the life beyond the veil, and of art finding its perfection there.⁶¹

Even before the completion of the painting, and prior to its arrival, King was already anticipating the effects of its presence. Much to his surprise, when the painting did arrive of the 17th of September in 1933, it was accompanied by a companion. The second painting, *Moonlit Stream*, like the first, depicted a twilight scene over the water, but it also featured several cattle standing at the river's edge. Enclosed with the parcel was a note explaining that Watson could not decide between the two and

⁶¹ William Lyon Mackenzie King. Letter to Homer Watson, August 1933. William Lyon Mackenzie King correspondence, Library and Archives Canada.

would leave the final say to King. Unable to make an immediate decision himself, King took the paintings to his summer home, Kingsmere, and hung them over the piano.⁶² The spiritual beauty that had first attracted the politician was evidently still felt upon their arrival, as he sang his favourite hymns associated with the spirit world in their presence. There was one hymn in particular, *St. Michael and All Angels*, that King associated specifically with the moonlit scenes, explaining that “this hymn I associate with spiritual experiences, and the ‘silver stream’ in Watson’s painting is part of it all.”⁶³

Beyond the connection he felt between the paintings, the hymn and the spiritual world, King also believed they were somehow connected to mystic experiences that were “being shaped and molded by some unseen power.”⁶⁴ One of these experiences occurred in the evening on the second day after the paintings’ arrival, when he was seated near to them. As he opened the novel *Dorothy and William Wordsworth* to a random page he found a passage that seemed to describe the paintings.⁶⁵ Rather than seeing this event as coincidental, King felt that he was ‘guided’ in his selection of the book and that the experience was prompted by the unseen power that the paintings possessed.

Not only does King’s account affirm the contemporary psychologies that surrounded spiritualist art, but it also indicates a fulfillment of what had been Watson’s lifelong pursuit. The artist’s desire to “grasp [the] unfathomable mystery

⁶² He would later hang them over his bed at Laurier House.

⁶³ Mackenzie King, *Diaries*, September 1933.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ The same passage that was mentioned previously and that he commented upon in his diary. See Ibid.

more firmly and have it repose on canvas”⁶⁶ had been achieved in the eyes of the politician. This experience, evidently, was not reserved solely for a spiritually intuitive audience. In VanEvery’s account of her Uncle’s life, a brief anecdote of the two of them alone in his studio, summarizes the effect that his evening scenes could elicit:

With him I sat quietly, looking out the window, seeing the shadows deepening into purple, the leaves gently moving. The room darkened, a picture on the easel glimmered. Its masses of foliage gleamed, receding. Remained only a painted moon looking down a shimmering pathway. It made you think of God. It followed you...the thing was to sit in some corner where I could neither be seen nor heard, and where that pathway and that pale round eye did not exist. But they were everywhere.

I remembered that he told me that he didn’t want to go to heaven because there wouldn’t be anyone there but Christadelphians. He sat, thinking about this, his face long, his hands clasped, a twinkle in his eye, and I sat, seeing heaven all around me, hoping all this would never go. I looked and looked, and then I burst out with it: “How do you do it?” ... My eyes fell on the pathway coming toward me from the moon, but this time I did not want to avoid it for it was as though I had peeped once more into the millrace and seen again, deep down, a reflected moon.⁶⁷

Unfortunately for Watson during the last decade of his life, he became painfully aware that his lifelong ambition “became clearer as the power of [his] execution became hampered.”⁶⁸ The artist had fallen on hard times. In addition to poor health, including deafness and a series of heart attacks, he found himself in dire poverty. As a result, he became bedridden for months at a time and was physically unable to pick up a paintbrush. When he did find the strength to paint intermittently, however, he felt that the results were closest in expressing the

⁶⁶ Homer Watson quoted in Carol Moore & Ede Myers, *Lives and Works of Canadian Artists* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1970), 13.

⁶⁷ VanEvery, *With Faith, Ignorance and Delight*, 29 & 42.

⁶⁸ Miller, *The Man of Doon*, 108.

vitality of mystical phenomena. It was for this reason, along with his strong missionary spirit, that he continued to paint during those trying times. A comment that King made in the fall of 1933 would have provided considerable consolation to Watson: "You and I, fortunately, have been able to gain a truer perspective and to realize that, so far as real existence is concerned, we are but at the beginning of life, at its earliest formative stage. For the years that remain to you, as the world counts time, I hope there will be much of the beauty which you yourself see in the quiet glow of eventide."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ William Lyon Mackenzie King. Letter to Homer Watson, September 1933. Library and Archives Canada.

Conclusion

A focus on the landscape at eventide was a frequent motif in many of Watson's paintings towards the end of his life, but it was also present in compositions all throughout his career. In fact, a survey of his early sketchbooks (c. 1870s – early 1880s) at the National Gallery of Canada reveals quite a few pen and ink drawings that feature a dominant full moon. True to his formative tendencies, a few of these detailed drawings include references to literary sources (ex. *Homer's Conception of Hamlet's Ghost*), while others focus on subjects depicting pioneer life (ex. *Fishing by Moonlight on the Grand River*, *Moonrise*, *Landscape with Mill and Cows by Moonlight*, *Harvest Moon*, *Landscape with Escarpment* and *Crossing the Creek*). Even amongst his mature canvases (late 1880s to the early 1910s), the ones that transitioned away from depictions of grandiose landscapes and focused increasingly on more intimate compositions, representations of evening scenes are also existent. Take for example *Rushing Stream by Moonlight* (1905, National Gallery of Canada) where all of the figurative elements that comprised the moonlit landscapes of his late period are also present. Noticeably different, however, is the palette and application of paint. Whereas his late works show a particular affinity for twilight colours (mulberry purple, bright pink and blue) built up in a thick impasto, in *Rushing Stream by Moonlight* these two elements are absent. Instead the surface is relatively smooth and the sky is predominantly composed of grey clouds with a soft pink undertone.

Placed side by side, a comparison of Watson's evening scenes from all three periods of his artistic production would reveal a significant transition in aesthetic tendencies. These transitions were partially informed by influences within the broader North American and European artistic contexts, but also by the evolution of his mystical consciousness. What remained consistent all throughout his career, however, was his artistic intention. At the most basic level Watson's primary desire was to express ultimate 'Reality' by revealing the divine relationship that binds nature, mankind and the spirit world. During his formative years this desire manifested itself in several distinct ways; including the representation of death through ethereal images of literary and mythical subjects (such as *The Death of Elaine* and *The Three Nymphs*), the inclusion of decrepit mills as an allegory for the lifecycle of mankind and showing how human beings are wholly belittled by the divine forces of nature. During his mature period, Watson's mystical concerns became primarily connected to his interest in atmospheric effects and in particular the divine presence he felt "in the dominion of light and air."¹ Finally, during the last phase of his career, the divine symbioses between nature, mankind and the spirit world became concentrated on evening subjects, when, according to spiritist literature, the veil between the two worlds was at its thinnest and consequently most transparent.

As his paint thickened and subject matter transitioned from depictions of pioneer subjects to a focus on eventide, Watson learned to simplify his landscapes in

¹ Homer Watson, "A Return to the Village," Queen's University Archives, transcribed in Gerald Noonan's *Refining the Real Canada: Homer Watson's Spiritual Landscape* (Waterloo: mlr editions Canada & Wilfrid Laurier University, 1997), 149.

order to “grab the essential thing,” and what he considered to be “the greatest truth and greatest beauty.”² Although previous scholarship, to a large extent, has downplayed the artist’s mystical intention and categorized his late paintings as failed attempts at modernist aesthetics, it is my hope that this thesis will serve as a re-contextualization of Watson’s landscapes—not solely based upon the artistic influences that inspired him, but also the mystical concerns that motivated his life’s work.

² Homer Watson quoted in Noonan, *Refining the Real Canada*, 32.

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