

## Portraying the American Taboo: The Down and Out in Reginald Marsh's Oeuvre

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“What we have found in this country, and we’re more aware of it now, is one problem that we’ve had, even in the best of times, and this is the people who are sleeping on the grates, the homeless who are homeless, you might say, by choice.”

Ronald Reagan, 1986.

### INTRODUCTION

If only President Reagan's assessment of the down and out were true—that people purposely *choose* to become homeless—we could relieve ourselves of the burden, once and for all, of agonizing over this social problem, seen all over the world. But instead, the issue of homelessness continues to demand a more careful examination from sociologists, psychologists and historians of welfare, and although the complexities of its causes are gradually becoming evident, a panacea is yet to be found. American artists have also approached the problem of homelessness. In the mid-nineteenth century, painters such as John George Brown and William Winner depicted images of urban poverty. However, these artists tended to sentimentalize the theme of homelessness by concentrating on the depiction of children, who although dressed in rags, were shown having a good time, enjoying their freedom from the constraining rules of society. Even when an occasional artist, such as David Gilmore Blythe, aspired to depict more disturbing images of poverty, the

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attempt resulted in the portrayal of youth. By depicting homeless children (rather than forlorn adults), nineteenth-century painters were downplaying the gravity of this social problem. They avoided direct engagement with the disquieting gravity, suffering, and harshness of life on the streets. After all, images of youth could connote a future of bright potential and eventual success—a rags-to-riches metamorphosis in the vein of a Horatio Alger story. On the other hand, depictions of homeless adults would have connoted decisive failure, which could have alluded to anti-establishment sentiments that would have threatened the sense of propriety and security among Victorian viewers (Hills 646–48).

The “Ash Can” painters of the early twentieth century (George Bellows, William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan) are considered path-breaking because they actively went out into the streets as visual reporters to portray slum life. Also, unlike their contemporaries Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine (who captured images of homelessness through the medium of photography), the Ash Can painters were radical in that they depicted destitution without abandoning their status as academically trained artists working in the realm of “high art.” However, as one historian notes, despite the Ash Can painters’ claim that they captured the “truth” of urban life, they portrayed the less harmful aspects of poverty, and camouflaged the painful evidence of social injustice (Shi 254).

Possibly, the Ash Can artists failed to portray urban suffering with forcefulness and directness because of the unique aesthetic philosophy that they harbored. But it is also important to note that by aestheticizing the theme of poverty, the Ash Can artists were catering to the tastes of upper class cosmopolitans who held Victorian notions concerning the ideals of a harmonious and virtuous society. Subjects such as poverty and homelessness were simply too controversial, offensive, and discomfiting for the Ash Can artists’ genteel clientele. After all, the ideas of poverty and homelessness go against the grain of a classless society free from social injustices and undermine faith in the American Dream (Peters 44). By consequence, the Ash Can painters’ capacity to probe into the complexities of a taboo subject such as “homelessness” in their oeuvres was limited.

In striking contrast to the Ash Can works are the vivid Bowery images created by Reginald Marsh in the 1930s. Scholars have repeatedly noted the significance of the Bowery theme in Marsh’s oeuvre but rarely have they examined it within the social and historical context of the 1930s.

For example, Norman Sasowsky studies this problem from a biographical angle, declaring that it was Marsh's own "compassionate identification" with the Bowery men's failure which attracted him to the theme of homelessness (48). Lloyd Goodrich likewise focuses on Reginald Marsh's life by suggesting that his training as an illustrator (contributing to such magazines as *The New Yorker*) nurtured in him a life-long interest concerning the life of the poor (35). However, such discussions fail to acknowledge other possible forces which may have led Reginald Marsh to depict the down and out with extremely disturbing intensity. This essay will probe into the texture of the Depression era in which Marsh produced most of his Bowery images. Above all, the newly emerging "idea" of homelessness after the stock market crash will be examined with the view that Marsh's acute vision of the down and out developed not in a vacuum, but in close touch with the social concerns of the thirties. In the final analysis, this essay will argue that a shift in the idea of homelessness during the thirties enabled Marsh to directly engage with themes of human deprivation and suffering, and ultimately, break the American taboo on visualizing poverty in art.

#### I THE "DOWN AND OUT" IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION: SHIFTS IN PUBLIC PERCEPTION

It is interesting to note that in spite of the prevalence of poverty in urban areas during the 1920s, there was still an optimism in people's minds that the problem could somehow be abolished. Herbert Hoover, in accepting the Republican presidential nomination on 11 August 1928 could observe: "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. The poorhouse is vanishing from among us" (Lens 4). Hoover's optimism was not, however, totally unfounded. Many economists believed that under the ideal of rugged individualism, America was in the midst of an unprecedented era of prosperity. Even progressive theorists, such as Rexford G. Tugwell, who were hostile to Harding-Coolidge Republican policies, had to admit that the circumstances of the underclass—wherein four million people had climbed out of poverty in 1929—were improving (Lens 231). However, with the onset of the Great Depression, the greatest spasm of poverty in the history of America occurred from 1929 to 1933. In the spring of 1933, the nadir of the Depression, over twelve million workers (one-quarter of the workforce) were unemployed while millions of

others had to subsist on part-time work (Fantasia and Isserman 88). Not surprisingly, the Bowery absorbed many working-class and middle-class citizens.

Historically, the Bowery district of New York had not always been a place for derelicts and social outcasts. On the contrary, for almost two hundred years commerce had flourished in the Bowery, and the area had been residentially respectable. In 1808, John Lambert commented that "The Broadway and Bowery Road are the two finest avenues in the city, and nearly the same width as Oxford Street in London" (Jackson 69). However, the Bowery environment gradually deteriorated after the 1870s, and by 1929 it was replete with flophouses, saloons, pawnshops, cheap restaurants, used clothing stores and religious missions. Devoted to servicing homeless men, the Bowery virtually became a symbol for poverty and a synonym for slums where homeless derelicts congregated. In the public mind, these homeless people were overwhelmingly white, male, alcoholic and aging (Fantasia and Isserman 5). It was believed that they had no one to blame for their plight but themselves.

Such assessments connecting homelessness with individual morality, seeing it as self-inflicted, shifted as the once employed and respectable lower middle-class citizens joined the ranks of the down and out in great numbers during the Great Depression. As Robert McElvaine notes, the Depression was so much deeper, wider, and larger than previous slumps that a far larger segment of the middle class was directly affected and hence came to sympathize with the homeless (7). Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal administration responded to this new perception of homelessness by initiating social welfare programs providing jobs and emergency relief. The sense of urgency felt by the government toward this national crisis is reflected in the increasing amount of welfare expenditure during the decade. Although welfare expenditure in 1929 represented only 3.9 percent of the nation's GNP (3.9 billion), by 1940, the sum had rocketed up to 9.2 percent (8.8 billion) (Jennings 22).

The Great Depression signified a definite change in America's stance toward poverty and welfare. Homelessness was reevaluated during the 1930s as a social problem because of its increasing visibility everywhere. As Douglas Imig argues in a recent study, homelessness was previously conceived in local terms, and thus reformers sought solutions to the problem through community churches and charities (27). But with state and local governments facing bankruptcy nationwide, a more systematic and bureaucratically permanent form of state and federal involvement



in welfare provision was needed. In other words, with the coming of the Depression, a more national focus was given to homelessness, replacing the local one. In his study of poverty and public policy, sociologist William J. Wilson points out that Franklin Roosevelt designed programs such as Social Security and unemployment compensation to protect *all* citizens (ideally) against impoverishment, rather than concentrating on certain groups who were expected to pass a conventional means test to qualify for the benefit (119). Distinctions between the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor” became vague under the New Deal policy in which welfare was made available not only to children, but to groups previously considered ineligible for government support, such as the blind, the elderly poor, and widowed mothers (Imig 29).

The Depression also caused the divergence of class values to narrow temporarily. The working class had traditionally viewed such values as “cooperation,” “sharing,” and “justice” to be important, whereas the middle classes defended the market economy and its competitive nature. However, the economic collapse called for a readjustment in values among a wide-reaching segment of the population. The working classes and intellectual groups turned to an idealization of peasant societies and criticized the effects of capitalism (McElvaine 202). In other words, the immense social and economic forces of the Great Depression pushed the middle and working classes of society in similar directions in the search for a life of community and sharing, as opposed to the acquisitive individualism of modern industrial capitalism.

As will be argued below, this subtle shift in class values, coupled with the shift in public perception concerning poverty, played a significant part in altering the unspoken American “taboo” against furnishing realistic images of poverty in high art. For serious academic artists such as Reginald Marsh, the imaging of the down and out no longer signified a taboo that had to be euphemized in order to be accepted by a respectable audience. Rather, it became a subject that demanded the employment of an artist’s unique visual acuity to probe into the desperate plight of homeless victims, so that audiences could grasp and sympathize with the psyche of the down and out—something which government statistics, however startling, failed to convey.

II   REPRESENTING THE TABOO OF DESTITUTION: ARTISTIC  
      AVOIDANCE VS. ARTISTIC CONFRONTATION

In the fall of 1932, Reginald Marsh accepted a commission from *Fortune* magazine to provide illustrations for an article titled “Unemployment: No One Has Starved.” The anonymous article acknowledges that the Federal government has become involved with the problems of massive unemployment and homelessness (through the Emergency Relief Act), but it criticizes the government harshly for not doing enough. Throughout the article, vivid anecdotes of human suffering across the nation are presented, supported by convincing statistics. Reginald Marsh’s illustrations blend well with the text as he gives visual expression to the deep concern conveyed in the article. The most significant illustration (Figure 1) appears beside the article’s ironic title, “No One Has Starved.” It depicts a quiet mob of countless citizens staring out toward the viewer. The faces register a multitude of feelings, ranging from outright hostility to quiet despair. Confronting this quiet mass face to face, one senses the immense gravity of deprivation. Most notable is the *mélange* of classes here. Well-heeled middle-class professionals rub shoulders with worn-out day laborers. Reginald Marsh deftly portrays how class values often converged over the issue of poverty during the Depression. Moreover, the illustration also reflects the new conception of homelessness in which the homeless are no longer viewed as immoral, lazy and deserving of their plight, but rather as victims of unexpected circumstances, fighting life’s sorrows with dignity. The middle-class citizens in the foreground willingly join forces with the down and out in demanding justice from the government.

To highlight how different was this new vision of poverty as exemplified in Marsh’s work, it might be useful at this point to compare it with that of the Ash Can School. John Sloan’s painting *Coffee Line* (Figure 2, 1905) was a great success with turn-of-the-century audiences and initiated the artist into urban realism (Zurier, 102–114, 201). It depicts a line of cold and hungry men on a winter’s night waiting their turn for something to warm them temporarily. A romantic and highly aesthetic mood pervades the scene as streetlights in the distance sparkle sporadically like jewels and the white snow in the foreground contrasts strikingly with the mob of men forming a line. The scene is highly calculated, so that we do not experience an unpleasant and direct confrontation with the mob of homeless men. Detached from the coffee line by the expanse



Figure 1 Reginald Marsh, Untitled Drawing for “No One Has Starved.” *Fortune* 6 (September 1932).

of snow in the foreground, we are unable to study the men closely and are thus prevented from empathizing with the pain of homelessness. The homeless men function merely as a compositional component, an aesthetic element; their character, unique existence, and humanity remain unexamined.

This attitude is understandable when one studies the Ash Can philosophy towards art. Despite Robert Henri’s crusade to depict urban reality, his realism encouraged artists to concentrate on the personal sensations, impressions, and emotions that arise in any encounter with a particular environment or subject. Henri advocates this stance in *The Art Spirit* by stressing that the first question that students should ask themselves in viewing a subject is: “What is my highest pleasure in this”; and



Figure 2 John Sloan, *Coffee Line*, 1905. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

“Why?” (82). Moreover, he advises students that every element within a picture should be “constructive of an idea, expressive of an emotion. Every factor in the painting will have beauty because in its place in the organization it is doing its living part” (20–21). With this high degree of self-conscious concentration on the artist’s psyche, one could say that the subjects of Ash Can paintings become mere vessels through which these artists are able to express their egos. It is even possible to regard this concentration as a form of exploitation, because Henri displays no intentions of understanding the *subject’s* psyche or the nature of the environment an artist depicts. Such issues can claim only minor importance in Ash Can philosophy. In one passage of *The Art Spirit*, Henri comments that an artist may admire the beauty of a woman’s dress or a tree or a boat but does not need to understand the nature of the fabric, the kind of tree or type of boat; rather, it is “beauty” that one seeks to render (89).

In pursuing our focus here on the realities of poverty, we should note Henri’s description of the ways in which a city tramp could be instrumental as the subject of a painting: “The tramp sits on the edge of the curb . . . he is not beautiful, but he could well be the motive for a great and beautiful work of art”; “The beauty of a work of art is not in the sub-

ject, but in the work itself” (166). These quotations speak volumes about how the Ash Can conceived as an exciting challenge the task of portraying unpleasant aspects of city life beautifully. If Henri’s lack of sympathy towards the tramp’s predicament appears cold in retrospect, one must qualify this by acknowledging that beneath such observations lay a reserve of great optimism toward poverty, which was typical of the Progressive era in which Ash Can artists were working. Indeed, the turn-of-the-century’s optimism in dealing with social ills was just as important a factor as the Ash Can School’s aesthetic in discouraging the artists from imaging vividly an artistic taboo, that is, the “reality” of urban deprivation, in their paintings. For example, even William Dean Howells could at times invite writers to “concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life,” on the basis that such depictions were “more American” (Howells 128). This idea was shared by many contemporaries who did not doubt that slum-dwellers, vagrants, and vagabonds could climb out of poverty with thrift and diligence, and that social mobility was possible with perseverance and will-power (McElvaine 19). In other words, this optimism stemmed from the belief that the American Dream was still attainable. As a consequence, academic artists who depended upon upper-class patronage were limited in their capacity to portray destitution as a serious problem, especially in paintings which purported to be high art.

The conception of homelessness as “taboo,” and the optimism that people harbored towards this social phenomenon at first glance complicate the picture that this essay has been stressing up to now, concerning the pre-Depression era’s disdainful assumption that poverty was largely self-inflicted. But it is important to remember that the poverty portrayed in the Ash Can School’s and other urban realists’ works was that of relatively new immigrants who were only beginning their lives in America. The assumption was that these people would eventually move up in the world. Negative attitudes toward men who had supposedly squandered their chances unwisely persisted alongside this optimistic fascination with ethnic poverty in urban areas. Hence, artists such as Jerome Myers could marvel over afternoons in Italian ghettos of lower East-Side Manhattan, as he viewed the tenement dwellers flooding out onto the streets. Myers even believed that poverty-stricken people could have a good time if they could stand the dirt, for after all, they seemed to have more freedom than the harassed businessmen of their time (Brown 21).

With Reginald Marsh's etching *Bread Line—No One Has Starved* (Figure 3, 1932), we reach a turning point in the depiction of urban poverty as the artist takes up and reworks a theme evocative of John Sloan's *Coffee Line*. Whereas Sloan's focus in his depiction of hungry men was aesthetic—keeping the mob of suffering men at an obscure distance from the viewer—Marsh zooms in on the homeless so that they fill up his whole picture. It is almost a cinematic close-up shot that dares to penetrate surfaces in order to expose more complex human psyches. As viewers, we have no choice but to survey the grim countenances of these homeless men. Another formal device that Marsh employs to emphasize the homeless men's suffering is the repetition of vertical lines in the men's overcoats. From left to right, these wobbly, nervous lines vibrate visually, giving the impression that these men are shivering in the cold, hungry and miserable. But in contrast to such nervous motion is the static line of men huddled together. They are cramped uncomfortably in a narrow space, blocking our view into the distance—traditionally considered as the realm of possibility. Nevertheless, there seems to be no brotherhood among these forlorn men as they each recede mentally inward, pensively contemplating their own thoughts.

Only one figure standing in the center of the line fixes his gaze on us.



Figure 3 Reginald Marsh, *Bread Line—No One Has Starved*, 1932.

His glance is sharp and critical, and undoubtedly directed toward those who assume that men can live on morsels of bread alone. His glance may even be touched with irony and directed to President Hoover, who had made the comment "No one has starved." Previous studies concerning Reginald Marsh have never probed into the identity of this central figure, but it seems possible to hypothesize that it is Reginald Marsh himself. The figure's features resemble the artist's to a disturbing degree. If this is indeed a self-portrait, it is another indication that the artist's compassion and understanding towards the plight of homeless men was genuine. By locating himself in the breadline, Marsh, a secure member of the upper-middle class, gives visual evidence of how the middle classes sympathized with underclass suffering during the Depression.

Jesse Walter Dees, Jr., a sociologist of the Chicago school who actually did fieldwork disguised as a hobo during the Depression, writes about the breadline in negative terms. Although breadlines were charitable institutions provided for the homeless during the winter in downtown New York, they were approximately three hundred feet long with double lines of men: "The duration of waiting varies from thirty minutes to as long as two and one-half hours. It is a slow, tiresome, endless shuffle. The men's faces are expressionless. Some of the old timers sleep on newspapers near the doors, to be first in line" (109). Also, the anonymous writer for the *Fortune* article "No One Has Starved," who provides captions for the breadline photographs that appear in the essay, observes that the breadline is "the most unscientific and humiliating form of food relief. Few cities have organized to replace it with a balanced ration humanely distributed, economically purchased, and wisely planned." As for women, they apparently avoided the humiliation of the breadline altogether, and as the *Fortune* article points out, "consequently suffer more than men" ("No One" 26). Although *Fortune* magazine's breadline photograph (Figure 4) illustrates well the magnitude of urban starvation by portraying the never-ending breadline from a high and remote vantage point, it fails to capture the sense of individual shame and the indignity of being a part of such a crowd, which is so eloquently expressed in Reginald Marsh's *Breadline* (Figure 3). Thus, one can say that Marsh's depiction succeeds in reproducing not only the sociological truth, but the degrading psychological dimension inseparable from the breadline experience—the pain which is aroused when one ceases to be self-supporting, and becomes dependent on charity.

William Stott, in his study of documentary expression in the thirties,



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Figure 4 R. I. Nesmith, *The Breadline*, 1932.

describes documentary as confronting the “actual unimagined experience of individuals belonging to a group generally of low economic and social standing in the society (lower than the audience for whom the report is made) and treats this experience in such a way as to try to render it vivid, ‘human,’ and—most often—poignant to the audience” (62). Marsh’s vision adheres to Stott’s criteria for documentary very closely, and it is arguable that Marsh relied upon the documentary technique in his quest to visualize what was disturbing for most of his upper-class audience. Indeed, in paintings such as *Tattoo and Haircut* (Figure 5, 1932) Reginald Marsh manages to “document” the totality of the Bowery environment in a single image. He achieves this effect by cleverly juxtaposing character “types” found in the Bowery with billboard signs and building structures that symbolize prominent aspects of the environment.

The uncomely figure leaning on crutches in the foreground of *Tattoo and Haircut* is such a type. He is what the sociologist Jesse Walter Dees termed a “stump bum” after encountering many such men in his field-work of urban skid rows. Vagrant bums, according to Dees, are members of the lowest scale of the social order and “the dregs of humanity.” Somewhat unfeelingly, Dees describes them as old, decrepit, bearded,





Figure 5 Reginald Marsh, *Tattoo and Haircut*, 1932. Art Institute of Chicago.

dirty, stinking, alcoholic and “lazy as the devil”: A bum “waits for the living he feels the world owes him” (XX). If able-bodied bums could draw such disdainful descriptions from a social scientist, maimed “stump bums” were at an even greater disadvantage and especially vulnerable among their peers as they were routinely called “sticks,” “halfy” or “stumpy”—names alluding to amputated or wooden legs. Crippled Bowery vagrants constituted a significant part of the Bowery “residents” who became professional beggars. Historian Kenneth Kusmer surmises that between 20 and 35 percent of all homeless men were disqualified for manual labor due to the frequent industrial accidents and occupational diseases of the 1920s, before Federal work-place standards were established (24).

The pensive elderly man on the far right of Marsh's *Tattoo* may well be what Dees termed a "mission stiff"—a bum who attends sermons regularly at hobo missions or Salvation Army shelters to obtain a meal and overnight accommodation (XX). Marsh depicts him first in line at the "All Night Mission," which has not yet opened. Next to him stands the young preacher of the All Night Mission. Marsh's portrayal of the mission-goer and missionary, at first glance, appears to be a sympathetic one, considering that Bowery missions were criticized in the thirties for encouraging hypocrisy rather than religious feeling. Kenneth Jackson, a historian of urban planning, suggests that this was due to the fact that recipients of meals were required to stay for the sermon afterwards, and consequently, most men frequented the missions just for the food (76). Yet there were preachers in the Bowery missions who were totally devoted to their work and, for the historian today, provide acute and invaluable first-hand observations concerning the homeless. In 1930, "Bishop" Callahan, leader of the Hadley Mission on the corner of the Bowery, lamented that the nature of the bums was changing; in contrast to old-time tramps who could conjure up memories of pleasant and wholesome childhoods, clean cottages and hard-working parents, the homeless of the thirties were more severely uprooted and many possessed no such memories: "It is harder to make these men see the light than it is those who as boys knew what the name of God meant" (Jackson 76).

Unlike Callahan, Marsh gives no final judgment on the character of the mission-goer in his portrayal, which is vague and ambiguous. With his face reverently bowed, the mission-goer could very well be read as quietly contemplating wholesome childhood memories, thus belying Callahan's description of contemporary tramps. But on the other hand, he could also be seen as exemplifying the hypocritical tramp who frequents the mission to obtain food rather than spiritual fulfillment. Although his features are shadowy, his silhouette is sharp and his beak-like nose echoes the hawk's face on the placard behind him advertising the tattoo salon. The resemblance of his face to the hawk's could connote his closer affinity with such raucous and profane institutions as the tattoo salon than with holy missions. Moreover, his back is turned against the young missionary.

Marsh is equally vague in depicting the nature of missions in the Bowery. The preacher of the mission is young and possesses an air of sincerity as he looks out into space, taking in concernedly the bustling Bowery nightlife. However, the lighted sign of the "All Night Mission"

in the background is all but obscured by intruding elements such as the tattoo salon's gaudy placard and the barber's smock. Also, the mission's lighted sign competes with the Chinese restaurant's sign advertising "dry and wet egg noodles." Marsh could be suggesting here that holy missions in the Bowery are on a par with cheap restaurants in the eyes of the homeless, as places one goes to fill one's stomach, and that the good intentions of missionaries only drown in the sea of worldly vulgarity.

A characteristic that one notes among the down and out in Reginald Marsh's oeuvre is their age. In *Tattoo*, not only are the mission-goer and maimed pauper men of years, but so are the two grizzled men huddled together beneath the barber pole. Marsh was by no means exaggerating the pathos of the Bowery image by emphasizing the presence of worn-out elderly men. Since the end of World War I, the Bowery had lured many workers over forty who were unable to keep pace with automation and the new machines in the factories, to which the younger generation had little trouble in adapting. By 1930, these veterans of skid-row life had aged considerably and constituted a significant proportion of the Bowery homeless. A census taken in 1930 in the Bowery revealed that 10 percent of the men were over sixty, 18 percent between fifty and sixty, and 29 percent between forty and fifty (Kusmer 24). Another source which supports Marsh's documentary vision comes from a secretary working in the Bowery YMCA. In 1930, this secretary commented to the *New York Times* that the destitute men in the Bowery are ". . . a crushed and broken lot of human beings who have repeatedly failed in their struggle for existence and who lack sufficient will power to carry on their efforts for independence and self-dependence. They have not energy enough to be dangerous; they are not smart enough to be crooks" (Jackson 77).

Marsh accentuates the homeless men's depleted energy by contrasting them with the tattoo-salon establishment which radiates an aura of virility and gaudy machismo. The phallic barber pole advertising the hypermasculine rites of tattooing and shaving looms overbearingly and incongruously over the totally spent and burned-out bodies of old men. These exhausted men are unable to rise up to the challenge of such masculine manifestations, nor do they seem to care. They recede inward as the tattoo-establishment's bright lights and loud placard strike disturbing notes of dissonance in the quiet of the underground Bowery world.

The El (elevated railroad) is another element which appears frequently in Marsh's depictions of the down and out. In *Tattoo*, the steel gird-

ers of the El give the impression that the subterranean world of the Bowery is much like a jungle where one's bearings are easily lost, which results in entrapment—the way out not easily found. However, instead of becoming an oppressive element within the composition, here the El acquires a hearth-like ambience of peacefulness protecting these men from exploitation and exposure from the outer world. Through his excursions into the Bowery, Marsh must have perceived how necessary invisibility and anonymity were to homeless men. These traits are also acknowledged by social scientists of the era. For example, sociologist Jesse Walter Dees, Jr., after spending several weeks in skid row during the Depression, declared that he had learned only one man's name (124). Also, as public policy historians F. Stevens Redburn and Terry Buss note, remaining anonymous and invisible was a crucial strategy for the homeless that increased their prospects of survival; by maintaining inconspicuousness, vagrants living in abandoned buildings could avoid the police, while those in bus terminals could rest throughout the night hidden by people on the move; by remaining obscure, they could avoid becoming the target of malicious violence (16). The El in *Tattoo* can thus be read as symbolizing the psychological needs of the down and out for anonymity and invisibility, as it simultaneously connotes how such social detachment leads inevitably to permanent exile from the outer world.

If a life of detachment from social structures was what the homeless in the Bowery wanted, society was not going to give it to them unconditionally. The exotic and alien nature of the underworld where anti-social behavior had free reign was too much for citizens of the real world to resist. In his study of public responses to homelessness, anthropologist Kim Hopper notes that for the sum of a subway ride, one could practically enter a foreign country with a different set of standards. So alluring was the notoriety of the Bowery that it was regularly included in scheduled routes of New York sightseeing tours (Hopper 90). In Marsh's *Tattoo*, a solitary young woman strides purposefully through the hobo jungle. Although the young woman is most likely a prostitute (judging from her flamboyant red dress, and the late hour), she is just as much an intruder in this subterranean world as were contemporary Bowery tourists. She represents the "real" world of vigorous activity and motion, throwing into relief the depleted energy of the homeless. Notwithstanding the fact that the young woman is relegated to the background in the composition, her presence is striking, because she is

spotlighted much like the tattoo salon's barber pole and placard. Consequently, the woman joins the barber pole in challenging the masculinity of these worn-out men. Needless to say, the Bowery men remain unmoved, incapable of appreciating her presence.

The titles of Marsh's works are often direct quotations from the mélange of billboards, posters and placards which he includes in his images. In the case of *Tattoo and Haircut*, the painting's namesake is quite obvious. However, it seems that the words "NO WAITING" on the tattoo salon's placard is just as important here and could very well be a subtitle for this work. Indeed, the theme of "waiting" permeates the canvas. The African American men on the left temporarily "park" themselves under the "No Parking" sign stuck on the El's steel girder. They wait for their arrest by the police, after which they will be taken to prison—where food and shelter can be found. The crippled bum is the professional beggar sociologists regarded as waiting for "the living he feels the world owes him" (Dees xx). The elderly mission-goer on the right waits for the All Night Mission to open for the night, while the young missionary waits for the down and out to open their eyes to God's miracles. Amidst all this "waiting" for better times and circumstances, the "No Waiting" sign on the placard strikes the viewer as cruel in its irony.

## CONCLUSION

Visions of sorrow and suffering, deprivation and hardship, are uncomfortable to behold. Such visions transcend the boundaries of time and place, and seldom do they fail in disturbing the conscience of the viewer. It is the wish of most of us that, given the choice, we would rather not experience the pain of viewing such images, and if possible, not see them at all. The realistic depiction of poverty and homelessness in American art, however, was long considered taboo for more complex reasons. Most importantly, it went against the egalitarian ideal of a classless, democratic nation, wherein all members of society were equally entitled to pursue the American Dream. Also, images of deprivation were unfit for "high art" whose purpose was to uplift the audience both mentally and spiritually.

In this regard, the Ash Can artists and their portrayals of the exoticism of the "Other Half" were revolutionary. But the Ash Can paintings of poverty and homelessness were highly romanticized and euphemized;

they failed to capture the actual agony of urban destitution. Arguably, their vision of rendering more “realistic” images was circumscribed not only by the upper-class tastes of their patrons, but by the Ash Can painters’ aesthetic philosophy which emphasized the depiction of the artist’s sensations. Just as influential was the Progressive era’s dual conception of poverty, conceiving it as a moral vice on the one hand, and an easily remediable social phenomenon on the other (Ward 142).

Reginald Marsh, unlike the Ash Can artists, denied his viewers the privilege of surveying the world of homelessness from a comfortable distance. Viewers are virtually thrown into Marsh’s images, forced to enter the Bowery and experience firsthand the suffering and shame of the down and out. What enabled Marsh to reverse the “taboo” of visualizing poverty so vividly was the shift in public conception concerning homelessness during the Great Depression. With the unprecedented increase of the homeless population, which swallowed up segments of the middle class during the 1930s, a reevaluation of homelessness became necessary. No longer could destitution be regarded as totally self-inflicted, nor could it be viewed optimistically as a problem which would eventually dissolve of its own accord. It became increasingly clear that homelessness was a problem of great complexity which demanded active involvement on the part of the federal government and society. Yet, as recently as the Reagan era, Peter Rossi, a leading scholar of poverty, had to reclarify the definition of homelessness for the public. He lamented that homelessness had come to be understood all too often as a problem of merely being without shelter, when in fact it was the most aggravated state of “extreme poverty”—where one lacks association with safety, family, love, shelter, comfort, rest, sleep, warmth, affection, food, and sociability (8). Reginald Marsh’s representations of the down and out are remarkable testimony that such explanations of homelessness were unnecessary for him.

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