Jonathan F. Walz

The Act of Portrayal and the Art of Dying: Charles Demuth 'Faces' Mortality

Suffering from diabetic crises, the American painter in his final fifteen years of life produced a coherent body of visual meditations on 'last things', especially a cycle of conceptual portraits of friends

«[I]t's only at the very edge of life and death that we truly live».
(Dawn French)[1]

«It is *thanks* to death that friendship may be declared».
(Jacques Derrida)[2]

American modernist Charles Demuth (1883-1935) began to suffer a series of debilitating attacks in the summer of 1920, when he was in his late thirties. His subsequent diagnosis of adult onset diabetes in early 1921 equaled a virtual death sentence, for at the time «there was neither a cure nor a reliable long-term treatment» for the disease[3]. Entering his own 'dark wood' at mid-life, the artist, in spite – or because – of the seriousness of his condition, embarked upon his third and final visit to Europe late that summer. After the ocean crossing, a short sojourn in London, and a week in Paris, Demuth had worn himself down to the point of self-admittance to the American Hospital in Neuilly-sur-Seine, where he remained for a fortnight. Once back in the French capital proper, he grudgingly admitted his condition to friends in a letter on September 17: «I haven't gone about much here, as yet, being none too well, damn it»[4]. For Demuth, the trip would prove to be a tipping point, wherein he subsequently resolved to turn and to meet, rather than to attempt to avoid, his fate: to return to the United States, to «add to the American scene»[5], and to face physical hardship and even death. How he productively responded to the human condition – that is, all persons eventually perish and, as sentient beings, they are aware of this inevitability in advance of the fact – forms the subject of this essay.

1. Throughout his career Charles Demuth repeatedly treated the theme of *thanatos*, a tendency upon which the artist's contemporaries and subsequent art historians and cultural commentators have frequently remarked. The watercolor illustrations that Demuth produced between his second (1912-1914) and third trip (1921) to the Continent clearly evidence his familiarity with death – at least death in a literary sense. During a focused period of activity from 1915 to 1919, Demuth painted over two dozen uncommissioned pictures inspired by the pens of such authors as Honoré de Balzac, Henry James, Walter Pater, Frank We-

dekind, and Emile Zola. A significant number of these imaginative illustrations treat mortality directly, such as *The Death of Nana* (1915) and *The Death of Countess Geschwitz* (1918), or indirectly, such as *Marcher Receives His Revelation at May Bartram's Tomb* (1919). The early critical reception – as both perverse and decadent – of the artist's *Nana* cycle of eleven drawings precluded the public exhibition or reproduction of almost all of Demuth's illustrations during his career.

Overall, in terms of brilliance of conception and virtuosity of execution, Demuth's *The Masque of the Red Death* (fig. 1, pl. XIII), after Edgar Allan Poe's eponymous gothic tale, stands apart from the other compositions within this discrete subset of Demuth's oeuvre. Poe's short story – and its emphasis on sensual effect – moved Demuth to new heights of technical bravura. Rather than representing single scenes excerpted from a longer narrative, as he had done with the earlier *Nana* suite, here the artist telescopes several key moments of the plot into an individual image. Because of this pictorial compression, in *The Masque of the Red Death* Demuth eschewed the textual citations, word balloons, and other explanatory devices that frequently appear in his other illustrations. He also downplayed line, so tied to rational thought and sequential action, in order to convey fully the denotative and connotative colors of the original text. The 'bleeding' of the liquid medium – particularly pronounced beneath the two windowsills at upper center – mimics human blood, the implicit supporting actor of the image's prose source.

Poe's allegory, first published in 1842, recounts the hubristic attempt of Prince Prospero to sequester himself among a select group of nobles within an abbey until the plague ravishing the country-

1. Charles Demuth, *The Masque of the Red Death*, c. 1918, watercolor and graphite on wove paper, 20.3x28.3 cm, The Barnes Foundation BF2009 (image ©2014 The Barnes Foundation).

side no longer poses a threat. The text makes the self-centered attitude of the ruler explicit: «The external world could take care of itself»[6]. Yet, despite the revelers' best efforts to seal themselves off from rampant pestilence, to deny their responsibility to local inhabitants, and to alleviate their existential boredom, they remain subject to the ineluctable passage of time and the surreptitious arrival of death. The macabre narrative ends with the dramatic demise of the monarch and his courtiers: «And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all»[7].

Members of his art world network knew the young Demuth, not unlike Prince Prospero, as an intense epicurean, sociable but self-absorbed. Demuth generated his group of literary illustrations during a period after completing his undergraduate studies, when he was living in New York City. Barbara Haskell has described this time in the artist's life as «filled with heavy drinking and late-night forays into underground nightclubs», regardless of Prohibition[8]. Beatrice Wood documented the consequences of such partying in *Lit de Marcel* (fig. 2, pl. XIV), an intimate sketch contemporaneous to Demuth's *The Masque of the Red Death*; Wood lists the bed's five hung-over occupants – poet Mina Loy, Demuth, actress Arlene Dresser, artist Marcel Duchamp, and Wood – in the drawing's upper right quadrant[9]. The American modernist avant-garde's position, which intentionally subverted societal expectations and distanced itself from the uninitiated, encouraged its adherents, including Demuth, in their adoption of an art-for-art's-sake insouciance and their pursuit of a Rimbaudian degeneracy. Demuth's 1921 diagnosis – like the sounding of midnight upon Prince Prospero's ebony clock – served as the clarion call that the artist could no longer eat or carouse indiscriminately – that is, if he wished to survive. Faced with the absurdity of existence and the abjection of death, Demuth chose to shift the paradigm of his life; in so doing he drew upon, fused together, and transfigured – in a highly personal way – the psychological attitudes, ethical models, and artistic representations of death that had informed his childhood, adolescence, and young adult years.

2. Beatrice Wood, *Lit de Marcel*, 1917, watercolor on paper, 22.23x14.61 cm, collection Francis M. Naumann and Marie T. Keller, Yorktown Heights, New York.

2. The sole offspring of Ferdinand and Augusta Demuth, Charles Demuth grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, roughly seventy miles west of Philadelphia. Due, in part, to a hip condition that manifested when he was four and that caused permanent damage, Demuth bonded more closely with his mother than with his father. This pattern of interpersonal dynamics only grew more entrenched with the physical passing of the family patriarch in 1911 at age fifty-four. After completing studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Demuth moved back in with his mother in Lancaster for a year and a half. His father's death and Charles's early and lingering developmental challenges abetted the artist's construction of a highly complex inner life and his search for relief in the surrounding culture.

In his 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning study *The Denial of Death*, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker asserts that «[C]hildhood experience is crucial in developing a secure sense of one's body, firm identification with the father, strong ego control over oneself, and dependable interpersonal skills»[10]. Further, Becker argues that failure to meet these criteria (and note that Demuth fell demonstrably short of the first two) predisposes the individual to express the fear of dying through a persistent refusal of full participation in the physical aspects of life, especially procreative coi-

3. Henry Kepple Beck, *The Resurrection*, 1893, oil on plaster, 487.68x274.32 cm, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

tus[11]. This theory corresponds remarkably well to certain biographical details of Demuth's life, observed by others and recounted in personal testimonies. For example, one of the artist's elementary school classmates later recounted that «Demuth was so delicate that he was seated with the girls in his class to avoid injury from the boys' horseplay»[12]. As he matured, the artist continued to cultivate a persona that his biographer Emily Farnham described as «eccentric, aloof, and something of a snob»[13]. Demuth distilled this habitus (in the sociological sense of the word) into the character of the «lone man» in an undated autobiographical text entitled *The Voyage Was Almost Over* (probably c. 1921). The story recounts the painful inability of a lone steamship passenger to find any meaningful interpersonal connection to others in the world: «Why, why was everything wonderfully made, perfectly made, and I given the power, above many to appreciate this wonder and perfection? And yet denied the one thing which would perfect me, truly? [...] And hate against some unknown Thing filled his soul»[14]. At the end of the narrative, the main character is only able to assuage the «frustrations and [...] loneliness that a lack of emotional support engendered» by escaping into the immaterial realm of culture[15].

Scholars have made various attempts to explain Demuth's «unknown Thing», with theories ranging from his diabetes mellitus to his discreet (but not secret) homosexuality[16]. Given the artist's «unreal self-inflation in the refusal to admit creatureliness» and his resultant «intensified self-consciousness», I propose, following Becker's thought, to interpret the psychic wound of Demuth's «lone man» in the story – and, by extension, that of Demuth himself – as neither the artist's illness nor his sexual orientation – both constitutive and reinforcing circumstances – but as his «annihilation anxiety»[17]. In the 1920s this psychological dynamic, as I will explicate further below, provided the stimulus and framework for Demuth's systematic exploration of the conceptual problematics of portrayal.

In order to appreciate the artist's mature production most fully, Demuth's «annihilation anxiety» must be understood within a specific cultural framework, that is, his Lutheran upbringing. Historians have long acknowledged the Demuth family's active membership in Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, founded in 1730, whose historic building was within easy walking distance of their house on East King Street. Demuth was baptized on July 16, 1884, when he was still an infant, and he was confirmed on Palm Sunday 1901, when he was seventeen years old. He attended services and received communion at Holy Trinity fairly regularly for the next decade or so, with only sporadic participation by Easter 1915, when he began dividing his time between Lancaster and New York City[18]. While previous scholars have frequently utilized Demuth's strict religious upbringing as a stark foil – and motivating force – for his later dissolute periods in Montparnasse and Manhattan, few, if any, have taken the Lutheran worldview into account in their discussion of his character and output.

The question of mortality obsessed Martin Luther and historically this concern has preoccupied Lutherans. According to historian of religion Jon Pahl, the central imperative of late nineteenth-century American Lutheran clergy, such as Demuth's childhood pastors, would have been «to articulate a 'theology of the cross', in which the Passion of Christ is the central 'truth' about God's presence/action in the world – i.e., power is manifest not so much in miracle and triumph as in we-

akness and emptying (*kenosis*)»[19]. In other words, Lutheran theology does not imagine a direct, causal connection between material affluence and spiritual prosperity; it does, however, envision the embrace – rather than the avoidance or transcendence – of productive suffering as providing a significant moral purpose in the world. Period psychologist William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), describes this process as «the salvation through self-despair, the dying to be truly born, of Lutheran theology, the passage into NOTHING of which Jacob Behmen writes»[20]. In common language we might describe the result of this breakdown and reconstitution of the ego as conversion, enlightenment –, or resurrection.

Given the Lutheran stress on the process of suffering rather than the outcome of transformation, it may seem a bit strange that a late nineteenth-century congregation would commission a mural with life-sized figures *not* depicting the Crucifixion, but the Resurrection (fig. 3). But in 1893 Lancaster's Holy Trinity Lutheran Church paid the artist Henry Kepple Beck three hundred dollars for just such an addition in the apse behind the main pulpit[21]. Though the image foregrounds «miracle» and «triumph» (Pahl's words), nevertheless Beck alludes to the Roman instrument of torture and death in Christ's stance, upright with arms outstretched to form a cross; the exaggerated poses of the individual women at either side of Christ's feet also easily map onto the subordinate personages of Mary and John in typical scenes of the Crucifixion. The conspicuously gaping tomb at upper right subtly recalls the process of «emptying». Furthermore it reminds the viewer of the previous episode in the Gospel narrative as codified in the Apostles' Creed: that is, not only was Jesus crucified, dead, and buried, but also that He descended into Hell. Installed at Holy Trinity when Demuth was around ten years of age, Beck's large and dramatic wall painting could not but have commanded the attention of the budding artist.

Another archetypal image of revival made a strong and lasting impression on Demuth during his matriculation at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts between 1905 and 1911: Washington Allston's gargantuan *The Dead Man Restored to Life by Touching the Bones of the Prophet Elisha* (fig. 4). The painting entered the collection in 1816 and its neo-baroque theatricality of tenebrism and gesture, as well as its art historical references, would go on to influence generations of students[22]. It is highly probable, as Farnham surmised, that Allston's masterpiece was on view the entire time Demuth studied at the Academy[23].

The number of references to Allston in Demuth's correspondence, when compared to mentions of other nineteenth-century artists, implies the Lancaster native's high regard for the early American painter, but Demuth's prose also asserts the depth of his feeling. On August 15, 1927, the artist reported to Alfred Stieglitz from the road: «I find, at the Boston Museum, that they have rehung and cleaned my favorite, of that time, painters' canvases, I mean Washington Allston. I think that I've spoken to you about his canvases, five or six, which they have. Now that they have been cleaned they are more amazing than ever»[24]. Demuth then singled out Allston's self-portrait for additional comment: «When I first looked at it, it seemed good, very traditional –, and then slowly it starts to 'live'; slowly across its surface sweeps the entire 'twists' which [Nathaniel] Hawthorne and [Henry] James tried to capture»[25]. This communication establishes that Demuth, who had first encountered Allston's early masterpiece *The Dead Man Restored to Life* during his undergraduate studies in Philadelphia, continued to cultivate a long-term interest in the oeuvre of his favorite

4. Washington Allston, *The Dead Man Restored to Life by Touching the Bones of the Prophet Elisha*, 1811-1813, oil on canvas, 396.2x309.9 cm, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Pennsylvania Academy purchase, by subscription.

nineteenth-century artist. The letter to Stieglitz also makes explicit Demuth's admiration for Allston's ability to limn a physiognomy in such an ingenious manner as to seemingly transform the inert materials of pigment, medium, and support into a tableau vivant.

But Demuth did not only know about physical death and reanimation in an abstract manner, from biblical images and Symbolist texts: he suffered them himself in a phenomenological sense, with his body. Indeed, he hovered in the liminal space between these states for the last fifteen years of his existence: «Diabetes [...] drained the artist of his creative founts and strength [...], except when it assumed its most destructive role and threatened imminent death»[26]. Symptoms of this endocrinal disorder can consist of temporary loss of consciousness, experientially similar to the full loss of life, and sudden and severe loss of weight, corporeally evocative of the fragility of living. Before receiving hormonal – rather than solely dietary – treatment, the artist visited the Daniel Gallery in Manhattan in late 1922; his dealer later reported that «Demuth was always slim, but [now] he looked like a skeleton»[27]. Photographs from this period confirm Demuth's grave appearance (fig. 5).

By early 1923 the membrane between these two states of being had become thinner and thinner. In a late January note to Stieglitz Demuth wrote, «I'm still hanging onto this world, and don't want you to be in a sphere where I am not» but a month later the artist's health forced him to own up to collector Albert Eugene Gallatin: «I am not very well and can not easily get away from my province»[28]. Vision problems – also tantamount to death for an artist – finally convinced Demuth to begin insulin treatment under the auspices of Dr. Frederick Madison Allen of the Physiatric Institute in Morristown, New Jersey[29]. The resulting dramatic positive effects of this 'wonder drug' dumbfounded the artist: «The serum seems to be – well, it seems like a sort of trick. I feel I will wake; it is not possible. If it be true what it is doing – then, well then, I can hardly imagine»[30]. Demuth's reaction to the experimental medication was consistent with that of Dr. Allen's other patients. Perhaps it is no wonder then, as Betsy Fahlman has astutely remarked, that «medical historians refer to this transformation as 'The Resurrection'»[31].

5. Alfred Stieglitz, *Charles Demuth*, 1923, palladium print, image: 23.9x19.2 cm; sheet: 25.2x20.2 cm; mount: 56.5x46.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Alfred Stieglitz Collection 1949.3.541.

3. Charles Demuth's psychological realization in Paris – «that he [was] really ill, and that he must go home» – and his subsequent physical 'rebirth' in Morristown inspired a newfound focus and intentionality in the artist[32]. Demuth's precarious shape and depleted resources motivated him to direct his available energy into carefully selected creative pursuits. Despite the encouraging effects produced by the insulin, the drug's results could be inconsistent or unpredictable. While the experimental treatment truly kept the artist alive, an incorrect dose, missed injection, or unanticipated hypoglycemic attack could still result in sudden fatality. Demuth, I will argue, mindfully dealt with the very real possibility of his imminent death in two ways: art making (to reduce his annihilation anxiety and to make sense of his experience) and friendship (to foster modernist discourse and to ensure his personal and professional legacies).

Combining art making and friendship into a fully realized sublimation strategy, Demuth embarked upon a new endeavor of greater intellectual density and magnitude than he had ever before attempted: a series of conceptual portraits – which he called «poster-portraits» – begun in late 1923. Indeed, Demuth's newly focused activities yielded the harvest from seeds that Stieglitz had planted almost a decade prior, in his efforts to encourage modern artistic expressions. Though conceptual

portraiture has a long history within Western civilization, its re-emergence in the United States in the 1910s embodied the experimental zeitgeist of the early twentieth century – and it found an amenable reception among Stieglitz's colleagues and followers. Key practitioners, part of – or linked to – the Stieglitz circle, include Gertrude Stein in poetry; Katherine Dreier, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Francis Picabia, and Marius de Zayas, as well as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Stieglitz, in the visual arts; Virgil Thompson in music; and Henwar Rodakiewicz in film[33]. Notably, for the most part no one ever commissioned these portraits; that is, they were labors of love for their makers. Furthermore, each and every subject derived from the respective and overlapping social networks of their portraitists. Despite their unconventional, even subversive, aspects, these representations of and by members of the American avant-garde still fulfilled the evidentiary, biographical, commemorative, and political functions of portraiture. Demuth readily exploited and extended the resurgent discursive phenomenon of conceptual portrayal, investing it with his own set of meanings.

To use a mathematical metaphor, Demuth's posters fall along two axes, depth of connection to the sitter, usually a friend (x) and number of attributes (y), with death as the operational function (f) – and with a graph of melancholy representations as the result. Leon Battista Alberti, in his 1435 treatise *On Painting*, encapsulates the longstanding Western tradition that readily allies such depictions of others with the social dynamic of amity: «[P]ainting certainly has in itself a truly divine power, not only because, as they say of friendship, *a painting lets the absent be present*, but also because it shows [to] the living, after long centuries, the dead, so that [these] become recognized with the artist's great admiration and the viewers' pleasure»[34]. After learning his grim diagnosis Demuth elected to manifest his affections and to strengthen his social ties through portraiture. He also wanted, in what evolved into a purposeful record – and celebration – of early twentieth-century arts and letters, to establish not only his own standing within the context of his peers but also a firm place for them all in the modern pantheon. Chris Townsend illuminates this strategy in *Art & Death*: «The subject of the portrait may be an isolated individual, but through portraiture they are exposed as belonging to a network of relationship [...] part of a community of power». He continues: «That community is predicated upon a death that is to come. The portrait is always a kind of emblem of death, since the 'ontological transformation' that is the image and its power will circulate long after the demise of the [sitter's] body»[35].

Given Peter Schwenger's aphorism that «A melancholy imaginary engenders a melancholy representation»[36], perhaps it should come as no surprise then that, when faced with mortality, Demuth turned his attention to portraiture, the aesthetic mode that best combines the elements of friendship, sorrow, and death. But loss does not necessarily equate to silence; on the contrary, it can be productive. «Melancholy representation», Schwenger explains, «enables the individual to regard the universe from the vantage of 'last things' and so [to see] it for the first time, as a dying person might be born to new perceptions»[37].

The «new perceptions» that Demuth experienced engendered a psychological adjustment. Previously his 'governing principle' had been «[t]he myth of individual transcendence, of being able to grasp life for and by oneself, [which] is also a disavowal of responsibility for the other», to quote Townsend[38]. But as a result of his brush with death, the artist recognized that «the precondition for [true] friendship is the acknowledgment of mortality»[39]. Accordingly, Demuth abandoned his reckless merrymaking and egocentric outlook and exchanged it for a new sense of accountability, to the other and to the community. He no longer embodied the character of Prince Prospero, who had conducted himself as if «The external world could take care of itself»[40]. Instead, Demuth put into practice a demonstrable outer-directed generosity. «This [type of] hospitality», Townsend expounds, «hinges on the inevitability of the other's death [...] [and] is mediated into a kind of work *on behalf of the other*»[41].

Demuth chose the artist Georgia O'Keeffe, with whom he was quite close, as his first 'sitter'. Born only four years apart, the two artists sympathetically bonded over their position at the margins of Stieglitz's masculinist inner circle. Although Demuth's health had prevented him from visiting *Alfred Stieglitz Presents One-Hundred Pictures, Oils, Water-colors, Pastels, Drawings by Georgia O'Keeffe, American*, on view at The Anderson Galleries, January 29-February 10, 1917, O'Keeffe visited the Demuth household several times later that year[42]. As portraiture (the genre that makes the absent present) in the guise of still life (an allusion to their shared reinvestment in things close at hand), Demuth's *Poster Portrait: O'Keeffe* (fig. 6, pl. XV) functions as a tangible demonstration of affection, loyalty, and support of one artist for another.

In this image Demuth utilizes substitutes, or, better, 'attributes', as well as the name of the

subject, to create a 'likeness' of O'Keeffe; any mimetic physiognomic appearance remains 'off camera'. The composition prominently features a variegated sansevieria in a terra cotta flowerpot. Two halves of a Bosc pear crisscross against the upturned black plane at lower left; a green apple and yellow goose-necked gourd contrast against a truncated rectangular royal blue surface at lower right. The living houseplant – bounded but transportable – bridges these two planes, visually connecting the bland and repeated forms of a (conspicuously de-seeded) fruit from a cultivar of European origin to vibrant and attractive New World crops[43]. Indeed 'husbandry' was also certainly on Demuth's mind, given the romantic troubles between O'Keeffe and Stieglitz – and the latter's role in fostering those artists whom he represented through his gallery and his publications. Demuth's first poster portrait foregrounds not only O'Keeffe's synthesis of old traditions and new experiments in a uniquely 'American' upward surge of growth, but it also underscores the requirement of other-directed maintenance, nurture, and care, as necessary for the flourishing of plants as for the prospering of human relationships.

The «work on behalf of the other» that Demuth assumed began with the O'Keeffe poster portrait and grew to comprise an extended succession of conceptual portraits of not only personal friends but also major contributors to modern American culture: Arthur Dove, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Eugene O'Neill, and Wallace Stevens. In addition to these visual endorsements, Demuth devoted effort to crafting a written tribute, alternately known as *Our Lady Painters* or *Three*, which championed the endeavors of O'Keeffe, Peggy Bacon, and Florine Stettheimer[44]. Demuth worked on this text and his posters simultaneously; not only do they parallel each other in time, but they also spring from the same impulse.

Although Demuth commenced and realized the first three pictures in the cycle (O'Keeffe, Dove, Charles Duncan) under his own volition, Stieglitz unhesitatingly steered the Lancastrian's means towards a particular end by hanging De-

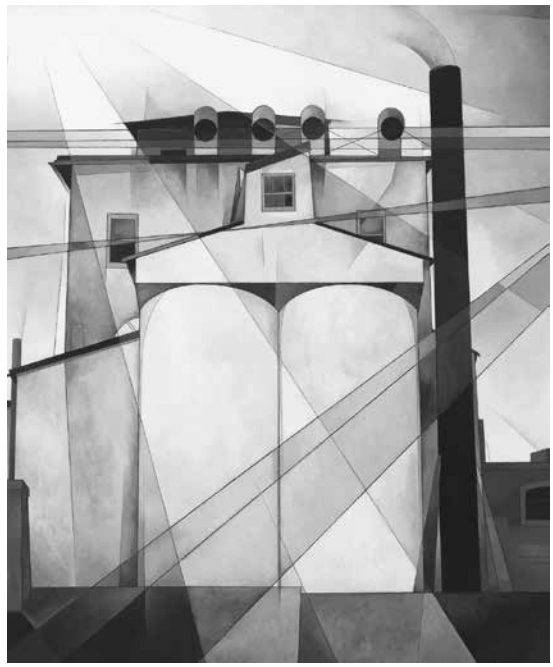
6. Charles Demuth, *Poster Portrait: O'Keeffe*, 1923-1924, poster paint on board, 59x48 cm, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

7. Charles Demuth, *The Figure 5 in Gold*, 1928, oil on cardboard, 90.2x76.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection 49.59.1.

muth's portraits at the entry to the 1925 exhibition *Seven Americans* «where they functioned as advertisements for the work of Dove and O'Keeffe, all the while underscoring [Stieglitz's] main ambition for the show: to identify a cohesive, definitive group of native talents»[45]. Demuth willingly participated in this co-optation; indeed, he viewed Stieglitz's strategy as legitimizing and heartening. However, the artist's change in stylistic direction, so different from the facture of the earlier rarefied watercolors for which he was better known, «inspired frustration and resistance among the art critics who reviewed [the posters]»[46]. Confirmed in his convictions by mixed reviews as well as fortified by Stieglitz's support, Demuth persisted along this avenue of investigation. «I want to finish the posters, too», he wrote Stieglitz four months after *Seven Americans* came down. «I'll do three, or more, more and show them all next winter. I'll make them look at them until they see»[47].

Following *Seven Americans* in 1925, Demuth made good on his intentions to increase the number of his poster portraits, sporadically adding to this body of work over the next three years. He capped the series with two of the three largest paintings he ever produced after his diagnosis of and treatment for diabetes: *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (fig. 7, pl. XVI) and *My Egypt* (fig. 8, pl. XVII). This pair of paintings shares not only the same timeframe, dimensions, media, and material support, but also the same depth of thought and level of achievement. It follows that they should be understood as companion pieces.

Inspired by William Carlos Williams's 1921 verse *The Great Figure*, *Figure 5* not only attempts to replicate pictorially the rush and clamor of an emergency vehicle at close range but it also functions as a visual encomium to Demuth's great friend and fellow modernist. The two men had met as undergraduates in Philadelphia during academic year 1904-1905, a fact that makes the poet, of all the 'sitters' for the posters, the individual with whom Demuth had enjoyed the longest and closest relationship[48]. The duo left significant traces of their reciprocal devotion in material records: besides their surviving correspondence, Demuth inscribed the 1920 tempera *Machinery* to Williams and the poet reciprocated by dedicating his 1923 volume *Spring and All* to the artist. There is also textual evidence that Demuth and Williams regarded *Figure 5* as a dialogic collaboration[49]. If, in the Albertian sense, portraiture is the «weaving together of fidelity, mortality, and representation [that] shapes [...] Western art», then *Figure 5* and *My Egypt* function as the two sides



8. Charles Demuth, *My Egypt*, 1927, oil on composition board, 90.8x76.2 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase, with funds from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.172.

of the same coin: the first, a paean to friendship, and the second, a prosopopeial epitaph before the fact. Together they embody the truism that «it is death that binds us in social relationships»[50].

My Egypt presents the viewer with a closely-cropped worm's-eye-view of a pair of concrete storage towers situated on the John W. Eshelman & Sons industrial complex, which stood approximately one kilometer from Demuth's home and studio[51]. The enigmatic image and its equally perplexing title have, since their first public appearance, engendered much speculation about the relationship – and meaning – of them both. On its current Web site the Whitney Museum of American Art (the work's repository since 1931) summarizes the conventional interpretation of the picture: «In Demuth's image, the majestic grain elevator rises up as the pinnacle of American achievement – a modern day equivalent to the monuments of ancient Egypt»[52]. For Fahlman, the painting touches upon «local agribusiness, the monumental tombs of ancient pyramids suggestive of death (and by extension, Demuth's own fragile health), and even the biblical stories the artist had been told as a child»[53]. Elsewhere I have interpreted

the panel within a phenomenological framework as an act of indirect self-portrayal; indeed, the composition meets the desirable criteria that Demuth had observed in Washington Allston's own image: «When I first looked at it, it seemed good, very traditional –, and then slowly it starts to 'live'»[54]. As a sphinx-like icon, *My Egypt* bears all of these analyses – and awaits further elucidation in the future. But viewed within the framework of intentional relationship and inevitable mortality, *My Egypt* – «a culminating reprise of themes, methods, and relationships pieced together in a biographical context haunted by the shadow of death»[55] – now reveals yet another facet of its «considerable iconographical richness»[56].

If *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, a picture that incorporates implicit motion via repetition in a futurist idiom, is about imminence, then *My Egypt*, a picture that employs explicit stability through a composition of a pyramidal form with connotations of the past, is about antecedence. And if *Figure 5*'s illustrative image and innocuous, conjunctive title relate Williams's poem *The Great Figure* to the here and now, then *My Egypt*'s poetic image and oft-remarked, disjunctive title draw attention to the panel's theme of death and afterlife. And this is as it should be, for as Townsend discerns: «[N]ot only do signs exist beyond the specific context of their inscription, it is perhaps only in this radical separation (the separation of death) between referential context and sign that we can even understand that a sign *is* a sign; only through the absence of the signified that a signifier actually produces meaning. Death, that end to all things, is the ultimate producer of language, precisely because we are compelled to step round it, over it, and through it; and just occasionally to confront it, *obliquely*»[57].

But, though the pale headstone-like forms that occupy Demuth's self-representation contrast considerably with the bright radiating numerals that noisily enliven Williams's 'likeness', *My Egypt* is not without hope; on the contrary, it is an image of a *grain elevator* after all. While commentators frequently recapitulate the building's associations with Egyptian engineering and American commerce, now additional implications come into focus. To represent his experience of near-death and his consequent change of heart, Demuth conscientiously selected the motif of a granary, a structure that thematically recalls a central – yet oxymoronic – tenet of Christian teaching: «Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal»[58]. If *Figure 5* overtly expresses kinetic force in its abstracted fire truck, then *My Egypt* latently embodies potential energy in its twinned silos. Seeds, too, house future promise. This nesting, of 'storage units' inside of storage units, provides additional conceptual complexity to the picture. The picture's radiating light arrests the moment – and power – of conversion; its predominant whiteness and flatness suggests a 'clean slate'. This charged blankness in the picture recalls the desirable ego emptying – the *kenosis* – of Lutheran tradition, that sacrificial dying to self in order to live on behalf of others.

Stieglitz himself recognized these complex dynamics in *My Egypt* when his gallery An American Place issued the statement «It Must Be Said» in November 1935. It read, in part: «[*My Egypt*] represents gift-giving [...] its history may some day be known. a slow process, this knowing, knowing history. hard to know. the painting may then be seen, be received. hard to see, to receive [...] it makes one wonder if giving and receiving – giving and seeing – are not the same thing»[59]. This lyrical statement captures the painting's thematics of times gone by («history») as well as glosses its tension of death («giving» of self) and friendship («receiving» of community).

4. *My Egypt* is also a transitional picture in Charles Demuth's oeuvre. Its hybrid nature combines the conceptual remnants of the posters with an emergent interest in local manufacturing landmarks. Subsequent to 1927's *My Egypt*, the artist managed to add six more oils to this coherent assortment of «portraits of Lancaster architecture», which concluded with 1933's *After All*[60]. This was no mean feat, given Demuth's delicate condition; the artist's letters from this period resound with complaints about his lack of energy. During interludes of relative strength and wellness, Demuth produced finely-wrought watercolors of elegiac still lifes and bawdy – sometimes outright erotic – figures. He also travelled as his health permitted.

Indeed, in 1934 Demuth felt well enough to spend the summer with friends on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where he filled a sketchbook with coastal scenes. The majority of these drawings illustrates bathers disporting at the seashore, but two alternative treatments of the same subject represent people working: *The Artist on the Beach Sketching* (fig. 9) and *The Artist on the Beach at Provincetown* (fig. 10). Atypical within this otherwise consistent subset of watercolors of vacationers relaxing, these sheets merit additional remarks.

Both drawings show shirtless men, seated on the ground, surrounded by wooden piles, and

9. Charles Demuth, *The Artist on the Beach Sketching*, c. 1934, watercolor and graphite on paper, 21.6x27.9 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Dr. and Mrs. William R. Hill in memory of Richard Weyand 1995.51.4.

viewed from behind. Both figures extend their respective right arms, with fingers expertly grasping a brush, towards a blank upright canvas. The skin of both men is tanned or burned, a specific detail that thematizes pigment; Demuth's liquid medium imitates the water depicted. A paint palette at the right foot of each figure confirms that both men are artists. The similarities in composition and subject matter end there, however; in fact, the Carnegie watercolor unquestionably eclipses the Yale drawing in complexity of conception, degree of finish, and fullness of expression.

Art historians have categorized the Carnegie variant as a self-portrait from Demuth's hand, citing Farnham's 1956 interview with the artist's friend Susan Watts Street as evidence: «[De-

10. Charles Demuth, *The Artist on the Beach at Provincetown*, 1934, graphite and watercolor on paper, 21.4x27.9 cm, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Bequest of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Beal 93.189.23.

muth] always sat crooked, sideways on the chair or sofa [...] with one shoulder *much* higher than the other, and with his neck strained into a funny position because of where his shoulders were»[61]. Regardless of whether or not Demuth intended literally to depict himself in this watercolor, the image still addresses the idea of 'The Artist', the same anonymous «lone man», with whom he identified in *The Voyage Was Almost Over*. Further visual evidence corroborates this hypothesis, in the form of the 'dead man restored to life' from Washington Allston's history painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts: the pose is virtually same, except that Demuth has rotated the body 180 degrees in space to face away from the viewer. Following this line of thinking, the painting functions as an aesthetic manifesto inspired «by viewing the world under the aspect of 'last things' and so seeing it for the first time»[62]. Given the blotted diagonal that by-passes the encroaching pilings and that joins the artist's proper right eye to the horizon line, the watercolor reprises the premise that Karal Ann Marling contends undergirds *My Egypt*: «Demuth saw the creative act in terms of an ineffable quest, moving from the perimeters of knowledge past the frontiers of *the unknown*»[63]. In *The Voyage Was Almost Over* the self-absorbed and disconnected «lone man» does not – cannot – resist his annihilation anxiety: «And hate against some unknown Thing filled his soul»[64]. Rather than escape into the «lone man»'s distracting (but ultimately futile) consumption of culture, in *The Artist on the Beach at Provincetown* Demuth manifests his openness to the unknown and welcomes the approach of death, that limit which produces culture, that absence which produces friendship. Demuth had presaged this acceptance of his own mortality in a 1927 letter to Stieglitz: «Still, a few of us have lived, although it almost killed me – will in the end, I suppose – [yet we] are able through this living *to see*»[65].

Demuth lived well enough during the summer of 1934, in fact, to see beyond a restrictive daily schedule into a more expansive future: he and his Provincetown hosts began planning an extended trip to Paris together for fall 1935. Upon the artist's return to Lancaster, however, his health slowly deteriorated over the next fourteen months and he never painted again. Two weeks shy of his fifty-second birthday, Charles Demuth passed away from complications associated with diabetes on October 23, 1935. Through his intentional friendships and his considered output 'midway upon the journey' of his life – embodied especially in *The Artist on the Beach at Provincetown* – Charles Demuth demonstrated the ability of the act of portrayal and the art of dying to open «new vistas beyond meaning's authoritative last word»[66].

Jonathan F. Walz
Sheldon Museum of Art,
University of Nebraska – Lincoln (USA)

NOTES

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1. D. French, *Oh Dear Silvia*, New York, 2013, p. 12.
2. J. Derrida (G. Collins trans.), *The Politics of Friendship*, London, 1997 (2005), p. 302.
3. B. Fahlman, *Charles Has Only Just Gone: A View from the Province*, in B. Fahlman, C. Barry (eds.), *Chimneys and Towers: Charles Demuth's Late Paintings of Lancaster*, Fort Worth, 2007, p. 71.
4. C. Demuth, in B. Kellner (ed.), *Letters of Charles Demuth, American Artist, 1883-1935*, Philadelphia, 2000, p. 26.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 38.
6. E.A. Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, edited by P. F. Quinn, New York, 1984, p. 485.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 490.
8. B. Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, New York, 1987, p. 56.
9. Fahlman, *Charles Has Only Just Gone...*, cit., p. 59.
10. E. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York, 1973 (1997), p. 233.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 230.
12. Louis Golden, quoted in Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 31, n. 13.
13. E. Farnham, *Charles Demuth: Behind a Laughing Mask*, Norman, 1971, p. 15. Cfr. Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 40, n. 15.

14. Demuth, published in Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 47.

15. J. Katz, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, in J. D. Katz, D. C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, Washington, DC, 2010, p. 24.

16. J. Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde*, New Haven, 1993, pp. 45-46. Cfr. P.E. Allara, *The Watercolor Illustrations of Charles Demuth*, Baltimore, MD, 1970, p. 65.

17. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, cit., pp. 197, 233.

18. J. Kahler, email to author, January 31, 2014. Cfr. Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 98.

19. J. Pahl, email to author, November 16, 2013.

20. W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Goodyear, AZ, 1902 (2008), p. 62. The seventeenth-century German Lutheran theologian Jacob Behmen is more commonly known as Jakob Böhme. Cfr. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, cit., p. 88.

21. L.E. Bull, *The Resurrection Mural*, http://www.trinitylancaster.net/mural.pdf (February 24, 2014).

22. The source for Allston's title character is the liminal demi-god Ilissos from the Parthenon's west pediment. Cfr. Elizabeth Johns, *Washington Allston's* Dead Man Revived, in «The Art Bulletin», vol. 61, n. 1 (March, 1979), p. 84.

23. From the photographic record and through the process of elimination, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Archives Coordinator J. Richmond-Moll verified Farnham's assumption. Cfr. Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 49.

24. *Ibidem*, p. 100.

25. *Ibidem*, pp. 100-101.

26. *Ibidem*, p. 150.

27. C. Daniel, quoted in Fahlman, *Charles Has Only Just Gone...*, cit., pp. 81 and 132, n. 122.

28. Demuth, in Kellner, *Letters of Charles Demuth*, cit., pp. 46, 49. Demuth frequently called Lancaster, in contradistinction to Philadelphia or New York, «the province».

29. Fahlman, *Charles Has Only Just Gone...*, cit., p. 83.

30. Demuth, in Kellner, *Letters of Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 53.

31. Fahlman, *Charles Has Only Just Gone...*, cit., p. 83.

32. M. Hartley, «Farewell, Charles», in *The New Caravan*, New York, 1936, p. 559.

33.Cfr. J.F. Walz, *Performing the New Face of Modernism: Anti-Mimetic Portraiture and the American Avant-Garde, 1912–1927*, College Park, MD, 2010, http://hdl.handle.net/1903/10814 (February 24, 2014).

34. L.B. Alberti (R. Sinisgalli trans.), *On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, New York, 2011, p. 44 (emphasis mine).

35. C. Townsend, *Art and Death*, London-New York, 2008, p. 110.

36. P. Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, Minneapolis, 2006, p. 14.

37. *Ibidem*.

38. Townsend, *Art and Death*, cit., p. 73.

39. S. Critchley, quoted *ibidem*, p. 47.

40. Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, cit., p. 485.

41. Townsend, *Art and Death*, cit., p. 108 (emphasis mine).

42. Cfr. R.J. Frank, *Charles Demuth: Poster Portraits, 1923-1929*, New Haven, 1994, p. 24.

43. Bosc pears originated in France or Belgium; Granny Smith apples first grew in Australia; gourds came from Meso-America. These identifications and the ensuing interpretation are my own. Cfr. Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 175; Frank, *Charles Demuth*, cit., pp. 25-26, 31; and W. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*, Berkeley, 1999, pp. 228-229.

44. Cfr. Kellner, *Letters of Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 76, n. 2.

45. C. Brock, *Charles Demuth: A Sympathetic Order*, in S. Greenough *et al*. (eds.), *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries*, Washington, DC, 2000, p. 366.

46. Kellner, *Letters of Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 69, n. 3.

47. Demuth, *ibidem*, p. 69.

48. Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 190.

49. Cfr. Demuth, in Kellner, *Letters of Charles Demuth*, cit., pp. 80-81; Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, cit., pp. 185, 191, n. 33; Frank, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 75.

50. Townsend, *Art and Death*, cit., p. 4.

51. Cfr. S.L. Faison, *Fact and Art in Charles Demuth*, in «Magazine of Art», April 1950, vol. 43, n. 4, pp. 122-128 and B. Fahlman, *Charles Demuth's Paintings of Lancaster Architecture: New Discoveries and Observations*, in «Arts Magazine», March 1987, pp. 24-29.

52. Cfr. http://whitney.org/Education/ForTeachers/Collection/CharlesDemuth/31172 (July 27, 2014).

53. B. Fahlman, *Charles Demuth's Lancaster: The Late Architectural Paintings*, in *Chimneys and Towers*, cit., p. 111.

54. J.F. Walz, *The Riddle of the Sphinx or 'It Must Be Said': Charles Demuth's* My Egypt *Reconsidered*, College Park, MA, 2004, http://hdl.handle.net/1903/2101 (February 24, 2014); Demuth, in Kellner, *Letters of Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 100.

55. K.A. Marling, My Egypt: *The Irony of the American Dream*, in «Winterthur Portfolio», 1980, vol. 15, p. 33.

56. Fahlman, *Charles Demuth's Lancaster...*, cit., p. 111.

57. Townsend, *Art and Death*, cit., p. 41 (emphasis mine).

58. John 12:24-25, King James Version.

59. Reproduced in Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 161; cfr. p. 160, n. 7. My transcription retains the initial minuscules of the original.

60. Fahlman, *Charles Demuth's Lancaster...*, cit., p. 109.

61. H. Adams, *The Beal Collection of Watercolors by Charles Demuth*, in «Carnegie Magazine», 1983, vol. 56, n. 12, pp. 21-28. The information on the Carnegie Museum of Art Web site follows Adams's identification and evidence, http://www.cmoa.org/CollectionDetail.aspx?item=1033283 (February 22, 2014). For the original quotation, cfr. Farnham, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 40.

62. Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, cit., p. 14.

63. Marling, *My Egypt...*, cit., p. 39 (emphasis mine)

64. Haskell, *Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 47.

65. Demuth, in Kellner, *Letters of Charles Demuth*, cit., p. 98 (emphasis mine).

66. Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, cit., p. 14.