

Polly Thayer (Starr)

Poetry of Heart and Hand

by Dorothy Koval

This biographical essay was written for the 2001 exhibition of Polly Thayer (Starr)'s work at the Vose Galleries of Boston, and a condensed version was printed in the catalogue of that show. It was read to and discussed with the artist, who died in 2006. The full text follows.

Polly Thayer's quest of almost a century has been to see into the heart of things; and when she sets her mind to an undertaking, she pursues it with inimitable ardor. From the grimy girl of nine recalled by her first teacher to the luminous woman whose inner sight has had to take the place of most of her physical vision, she has tirelessly sought to understand the nature and effects of seeing, as well as to coax her own highly-trained hand into locating and somehow conveying what she calls the "invisible within the visible," the enduring spirit within each expression of what we see as reality. Fortunately we have rich resources, in the form of letters, talks and journals, to help us understand her experiences along the way; and while words can never replace another art form - "if I could tell you, I wouldn't be dancing it," responded Pavlowa on being asked the meaning of her Dance of the Dying Swan - they may help orient us, and draw our attention to aspects which might otherwise elude us.

Named Ethel Randolph Thayer after her mother, though always called Polly, she was born in 1904 to a family that had encouraged forthright communication for generations (Ralph Waldo Emerson was among her forbears), and learned early to think about what she wanted and how it would affect those around her. Her father, Ezra Ripley Thayer, a Boston lawyer who became Dean of Harvard Law School, was the son of Harvard legal scholar James Bradley Thayer; her brother Jim would eventually become an authority on Roman Law and also teach at Harvard; and her sister Eleanor was outgoing and empathic; the dining room table of her childhood was a lively debating-ground.

Winters were spent in a Boston townhouse on Bay State Road, which was still rural enough so that her parents could enjoy horseback riding in the Fenway when her father came home from work. Each spring the family would swathe the furniture in protective coverings and move by carriage to Weir River Farm in Hingham, where Polly took boundless delight in the goings-on of the farm creatures and the offerings of nature. Sadness struck heavily with the sudden death of her father when she was eleven, but the family somehow maintained its routine, and summers were still memorable for engrossing games of croquet, chess, bridge and charades. Her widowed mother, the former Ethel Randolph Clark, occupied herself increasingly with religious and charitable affairs, encompassing both people and animals in her affections.

A close observer of her children, Mrs. Thayer must have noticed during a visit to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts that her young daughter could not tear herself away from a group of art students drawing from plaster casts. She arranged for Polly to take drawing lessons from Beatrice Van Ness, a student of Benson, Tarbell and Hale, several times a week after classes at Miss Winsor's School.¹ Polly threw herself into the activity with such enthusiasm that Van Ness could barely see the child for the charcoal.

School classes themselves were problematical while Thayer was at Winsor. A shy girl, whose mother was known to have little sympathy with the systematic demonization of Germans in those early days of World War I, she was a target for childish taunts from some of her classmates and felt isolated and uncomfortable. In 1919 she was transferred to Westover Boarding School in Middlebury, Connecticut. Although the art curriculum there left something to be desired ("the general level of [artistic] activity was that of an oyster bed" she later estimated), the atmosphere of the school more than made up for it. Westover invited prominent writers, musicians and actors to perform for the students; and the penalty for minor rule infringements was having to recite a poem in front of the entire school at assembly. Although Thayer says she chose the shortest ones she could find, she did not escape the purpose of the discipline, which was a lifelong awareness and love of poetry, along with a skill for memorization. It was "a rich broth" for the development of the artist.

The year after graduation was occupied with Thayer's *debut* in Boston, a time filled with parties and social excitement. Most of her friends expected "coming out" to bring them closer to marriage, but Thayer was considering careers in acting or singing as well as in art. She was an active member of Harvard's *Cercle Français* and the semi-professional Footlights Club in Jamaica Plain, acting in Shaw's *Androcles and The Lion* and Moliere's *Tartuffe*, and received outstanding reviews. However, it soon became clear that painting was too important to her to forego, and she decided to attend the Museum School the next fall. Her mother marked the milestone by taking Polly and Jim on a voyage to the East. They traveled through China and Korea before the holiday ended in Japan with a cataclysm which did more to mature the talented young woman than all the wonders of the Orient.

On September 1, 1923, as their ship the *Empress of Australia* was about to leave Yokohama, she "shivered like a human thing in pain," and suddenly the pier which had been filled with people throwing streamers and waving goodbye broke apart and was swallowed by ocean, leaving only, Thayer recalls, a detached fragment bearing a pitiful old horse. The sky glowed, and a whistling wind filled the air with so much dust that the shore was completely obscured.² The greatest recorded earthquake so far in Japanese history had just struck, devastating Tokyo and Yokohama and killing over 100,000 people. The Captain managed to untangle their mooring ropes from those of a nearby ship, but the sea itself became an inferno as fuel from the exploding oil tanks on shore spread over the sea and caught fire. In the ensuing days the *Empress of Australia*, having managed to escape most of the destruction, was converted into a hospital ship, and the nineteen-year-old Thayer found herself nursing people of all nationalities suffering from intolerable wounds, both physical and emotional. The experience would

remain with her for the rest of her life as a touchstone of what was truly important. By the time she returned to Boston, her understanding of what it meant to be human had expanded dramatically, and she may have been beginning to sense that love was one of the lenses that would become most important to her.

Thayer entered the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the fall of 1923, enrolling in classes in Anatomy and Life Drawing with Philip Leslie Hale. She later described his teaching method to Robert Brown of the Smithsonian Institution:

You did a nude in a week, and you worked all day on it, as far as I can remember, each day. You began by outlining it. You established the form, in the first two days, then you carved the detail for the next four. It was a regular system on every one... You were given a ruler and a piece of paper the size, as you held it up, of what you saw on the model stand. And you cut off that little strip of paper, thumbtacked it to your ruler, and then divided it into seven and a half heads. Then you reproduced that on your paper, so you were establishing your *exact* points... Your drawing would be as faithful as it could possibly be made, using the plumb line and diminishing glass and this ruler with the paper on it. That took quite a while... Then, you blocked in the shadows... You blocked in the area with the heaviest charcoal you had, and then you stumped the charcoal so it would be very smooth...then you got your shapes of shadows down, inside your outline, and then you turned the edges of the shadow.... I can't imagine the patience that I used; but I loved every second of it!...It took a long time to form *itself*, you didn't really know what was coming. ³

Hale would come by occasionally and comment on the drawings, or make little anatomical sketches of his own in the margins to show the students where they were going wrong, but he was always very careful not to smudge or damage anything, because he knew how attached the students became to their work. Surprising herself, Thayer won prizes for her drawings week after week.

The next fall she enrolled in Leslie Thompson's class on portraiture, but soon became dismayed by his insistence on treating the model simplistically. "Paint what you see, like a child," he demanded, as Hale had with the nudes the first year. "It did not commend itself to me, when I got to thinking about it," she remarked later, "that I should turn off processes that seemed to me important, such as the intellectual or the thoughtful... My difficulty from the start was to put together what the teachers were telling me to do - to copy exactly what I saw - and still to fulfill the desire I knew was in me to say something about it... Painting, for me, was a way of understanding what I saw."⁴ Upon learning that Hale was willing to teach her privately at the studio on the top floor of her Back Bay home, Thayer left the Museum School.

According to Hale, there were three methods of painting: the Grizzly Bear Method, whereby, like a grizzly making its mark against a tree, you measured yourself by what had succeeded in the past; the Spider Web Method, in which, like a spider spinning a web, you just pulled your material out from inside yourself; and the Chicken Hash Method, which was that you took the prettiest girl, and you took the handsomest

costume you could find, and the most beautiful background and Chinese jar, you put them all together - and you had the best of everything. He made no bones about including his own paintings in the final category.

Hale's painting methods were surprisingly similar to those he had used in teaching drawing. An outline with shadows was made on the canvas with charcoal and then fixed, and color was applied on top of it from the edges in. As Thayer describes the process, you inched around the picture concentrating on the edges, putting down a worm of red, a worm of blue, a worm of yellow, which you pulled together -turned - until you had the "value" just right and moved on to the next. At any stage you might have completely finished little squares in some parts of your painting while others were still untouched. The painting got a lovely professional look to it, "the Boston look," but lost spontaneity and pure color in the process. Her first full-scale painting of a nude pleased Hale so much that he suggested she exhibit it in New York.

Thayer was impressed with what Hale was teaching her, but she wanted to know more about color and composition. Soon after leaving the Museum School she got together with another former student and the two aspiring artists rented a fish-house over the water in Provincetown for the summer so they could study with Charles Hawthorne.⁵ Hawthorne was known for encouraging his students to paint in full sunlight with a two-inch putty knife. "The results were called 'mud-heads' because the figures looked like blobs - simple masses of reflecting color. In this way, he taught his theory of capturing patterns of light and dark before the details."⁶ After the thin layers and infinite patience demanded by the Museum School method, it must have seemed like a real emancipation. Thayer reveled in the sense of *matière* she gained from the thick paint, and felt that Hawthorne had done a good deal for her palette.

Hale was still visiting Thayer's studio while she painted "The Algerian Tunic" (exhibited at the Philadelphia Academy of Design in 1928), and the portrait of her sister-in-law Sara Apthorp Thayer. The latter, in spite of its use of exotic accessories, already suggests Thayer's growing interest in the Spanish masters by the juxtaposition of an almost monumental quality with a touch of highly personal realism in the way the necklace has been pulled over to one side by the heavy silk shawl.

Thayer did quite a bit of traveling in the next few years. She spent a winter in Paris with her mother, taking classes at the Académie Collarossi, and subsequently toured Italy early in 1928 with Rose Standish Nichols, the landscape architect, who was then working on her book *Italian Pleasure Gardens*. The trip was an adventure both socially and artistically. Miss Nichols, a veteran traveler and outspoken advocate of international peace, was insatiably interested in the world around her: "Wherever we went, whoever we met, it was only minutes before Rose was discussing their condition, their politics, and their circumstances,"⁷ remembered Thayer. Recognizing in Nichols the kind of "grim rejoicing" she admired so much in Eakins' portraits, Thayer asked to paint her not long after their return. Here was no charming girl in a sunlit salon, but a woman whose eye and mind cut straight to the bone and did not accept easy answers.

In the spring of 1929, Thayer crossed the Atlantic on the same ship as Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald to visit Morocco and Spain.⁸ She wrote to Donald Starr (her future husband) from Fez:

Every level of the hotel garden is paved in glittering colored tiles with fountains plashing perpetually. It used to be an old palace of the Pasha and by moonlight it is hardly real it is so beautiful, bananas & mimosas dripping over the walls. I cannot tell you what freedom it is to thread these pullulating, stinking alleys without even a look backward in any direction... I can go anywhere in the most blessed freedom and even paint unmolested. These rutilant, unbaked walls just paint themselves!⁹

Her trip was cut short by severe illness and she was operated on for a burst appendix,¹⁰ but not before receiving the news that her nude "Circles" had been awarded the prestigious First Hallgarten Prize from the National Academy of Design.

It is unclear whether Thayer got to Madrid in 1929, but the next spring she was finally able to follow the advice of Royal Cortissoz, art historian and critic for the New York *Herald Tribune*, who had recommended in a letter dated July 29, 1929 that she spend some time studying Velasquez at the Prado. He had assured her, that it would be "like listening to one master with a dozen others putting their oars in in the recesses." Thayer also went to a bullfight while she was in Spain. Taking her paintbox along with her, she was "as excited as a child at its first party," but was appalled by the reality and left before the first bull was killed. (When she got back to Boston, however, it was not long before she was learning everything she could about bulls and drawing them by the dozen). Still lapped in a "flood of glory" by the Prado when she reached Paris, she acknowledged that "Velasquez can possess the soul to the exclusion of everything disturbing or annoying in life"¹¹; but the voice that had spoken to her most directly was that of Goya. She felt he was talking about the colors of life that mattered to her, and upon returning home she would copy from his work again and again trying to interpret the affinity.

After some work at the cubist painter Andre L'Hôte's atelier, with which she was evidently already acquainted, she went briefly to Berlin to see her brother Jim, an exchange professor at the *Institut für Ausländisches* at the time, and then on to Vienna, Prague and Budapest. She wrote to Starr from Budapest, "I have seen so many pictures that I think I shall turn into one. Vienna alone had five private collections of note and a magnificent museum, not to mention another of the moderns. I ran from one to the other like a dog with its tongue hanging out of its mouth."¹²

On returning to Paris, she sublet the apartment/studio of American painter Waldo Pierce near the Chambre des Députés. There she settled down to work on models of her own choice, with her newly acquired Siamese kitten, Hunya, for company. "Through Bandler's kind intervention,"¹³ she noted, "I have met people in Paris who for the first time in my life make me realize...the riches a tradition and an older civilization can dower on society."

Art, as I never dreamed it could be, is a daily and vital interest - it is *more* important than business, than politics, than eating even! You can not think what the effect of it is when always among a group of my fellows at home I have had to keep my greatest interests hooded, or if I mentioned painting it was only to bore, as "talking shop" or "being precious."¹⁴

Thayer always felt the loyalty of a student toward Philip Hale, but she was becoming increasingly conscious of the limitations of her Boston School training. She spent much of the winter months of 1930-1933 in New York City. "Wheels¹⁵ took me around all Friday to exhibitions," she wrote to her mother. "I don't know what to think. I imagine the leaven must be working in me of the new..."¹⁶ Then Eugene Speicher came to her studio just as she was beginning work on a large double nude in the Boston School manner. "Get out on the streets!" he exhorted. "Get into the subway! Get into the park! Get some life into it!" She scrapped the canvas and set herself a new course. She went to wrestling matches, which revealed very different aspects of the human body than an immobile model, and asked a doctor friend to get her into an operating theater. "The operation this morning gave me a profound sense of mystery," she wrote in her journal in 1932:

To see the living organs pushing up uncovered out of a woman's body...in their passionate pulsating beauty was moving beyond description... I forgot everything in the wonder of it... It was a symbolic scene and the deep red hole toward which seven hands were extended & into which the surgeon's hand probed with a curiously commonplace gesture, was a well of life.¹⁷

In the hospital, on the streets, and backstage at the theater (where she sketched Judith Anderson playing Lady Macbeth), she sought the intensity which would bring her closer to the core of what she was trying to get at.

Walt Whitman had said, "I never knew but one artist, and that's Tom Eakins, who could resist the temptation to see what they thought *ought* to be rather than what *is*."¹⁸ Thayer wanted both to perceive clearly and to communicate, but the problem of concurrence between hand, mind and eye still exercised her. She wrote to Donald Starr:

I picked up an old man down in the slums at the City Unemployment Bureau to pose for me who is worthy I should judge and very near to starving. To my distress in sketching him he has come out a wicked looking old devil instead of the creature of infinite pathos & weighed down with suffering that I want him to be and that I see him as. How do these arrogant young moderns pretend and dare to distort and represent by abstractions the soul of a sitter? Is it simply that I lack imagination that it seems banal to pull a face out long and the corners of a mouth down to represent suffering? Were I to feel the most grievous suffering in my sitter I should hesitate to use these obvious tricks and how else can I do it than by putting his face down as I see it? It is a great problem...¹⁹

Although he disclaimed any understanding of the matter, Starr's response showed how carefully he had considered her question:

I throw out the suggestion...that such representation by any form which is significant only as a symbol is not painting at all, but literature. The words, "POOR OLD MAN" are arbitrary symbols meaning "poor old man"; their application to canvas with a brush would not render them painting, or any the less literature...

Thayer decided to use herself as a model again, and the resultant painting, "Interval," won a Gold Medal at the Boston Tercentenary Exhibition of 1930. When she showed the canvas to Philip Hale, however, he bemoaned her independence from his precepts. "I see the slime of the serpent!" he warned on looking at the sober new self-portrait.

It was time for Thayer to consider herself a professional. On New Years Eve, December 31, 1930, her first solo exhibition opened at Doll and Richards in Boston. The *Globe* reviewer declared that it "surely settles her status as one of the foremost painters in the country, especially notable in portrait painting, but evidently gifted with that kind of genius which is not circumscribed."²⁰ Among the paintings exhibited was one of a Spanish bullfight entitled "Blood and Sand," which he characterized as "both vivid and virile." Franz Cochrane in the *Transcript* pointed out that a portrait of Bernard Bandler was notable for its lack of the "incidental accessories so dearly loved by students newly out of the Museum School."²¹ The exhibition brought in eighteen new portrait commissions, many of which were shown the following year at Wildenstein's in New York.

Thayer returned to New York City to study with Harry Wickey at the Art Students League. As she later told Robert Brown:

It really was a turning point. Where Mr. Hale had with charming, delicate drawings on the side of what we were doing at the Museum School indicated what he wanted, Wickey took my first drawing and *slashed* into it. He marked it all over so it would be of no possible use thereafter, to show me *plastic* values. That there was something that went on between the outlines, other than just dark and light. And that - suddenly to realize another dimension - was *very* exciting, and just what I was after. The heavens opened. ²²

Wickey saw forms and spaces as "not merely abstract relationships, but...powerful psychological currents which helped animate and unify the entire composition."²³ Thayer felt an impetus to work such as she had never yet experienced. She wanted to get more into her paintings than the moment that was before her eyes, and she realized that she had much both to learn and to unlearn. "I shall go to Despujols for a summer in Fontainebleau," she resolved,

for his neo-classic, harmonious, and beautifully worked out compositions could not fail to be the best practice in the world to watch & copy & learn the principle of... The method of painfully matching nature's values leads you into such by-paths & snares of accident that the painting has lost all value as a document of anything but accident without any aspect of the eternal. That Courbet, when asked why he had not painted angels in with his Christ, answered he could not because he had never seen an angel, is to me a revelation of terrible limitation.²⁴

Thayer may initially have been a little taken aback to find that Despujols insisted on his students' developing their own strengths instead of having them absorb his methods, but she was struck by his contention that an artist could not give equal weight to value, line and color: "Mostly things that you see aren't sharp against each other, they're blurred," she pointed out later. "You only sharpen the ones that you want to look at... There's a French saying, '*Tout dire, c'est ennuyer.*' If you're saying everything, you're a bore. If you're picking out something, if you want to make a statement, then you need to focus on some one point in it. I began to understand the importance of that."²⁵ It seemed to her that by temperament she must be more closely allied to value and line than to color.

Perhaps more important even than her classes with Despujols was her coming to know Neyan Stevens, a rather romantic character who had been born in Egypt, studied white magic with the Moroccans, and traveled around the world with the renowned Dr. Boronov, whose rejuvenation formula, which involved implanting monkey glands in the human male, was the Viagra of the day. Stevens was a painter and lecturer, among other things, and "one of those people with whom there is immediately so much in common that distance, time and age make no difference."²⁶ It was Stevens who revealed Van Gogh to Thayer: "To a Boston trained person, Van Gogh looked wildly distorted. She just sat me down and explained what was going on and what you could do with it, and I began to play with it..."²⁷ Before returning home, Thayer spent a week at the fifteenth-century Abbaye de Pontigny, which had been converted to a retreat by a group of thinkers that included Gide, Valery, Maritain, Maurois and Charles Du Bos among others. Although several of the luminaries she had looked forward to meeting were absent from her session, the conference made a profound impression on her. Association with serious intellectual activity, she assured her mother, "helps work just like hearing good music."²⁸

Thayer had sublet a studio at the Fenway Studio Building in Boston, but she still felt drawn to New York, to which she returned in the early months of 1933. It was at this time that she painted the portrait of Olivia Chambers. "I am thrilled over her," Thayer reported to her mother, "if only she does not get tired of it in the middle as unprofessionals will." Concurrently she was copying Goya's portrait of Dr. Perez at the Metropolitan Museum, and had become quite perplexed over his use of so much black.²⁹ She must have been considering it as she worked on the portrait of Olivia. The expanse of the black shawl, set off by the soothing blue background, draws us into an

enigmatic calm whose feminine aspect is suggested by the delicacy of the fringes just visible at sleeves and lower right.

Among the subjects of Thayer's portraits in charcoal or oil were a number of highly creative friends - writer and monologist Helen Howe and her brothers Quincy (journalist) and Mark (historian); poets May Sarton, John Wheelwright, Evarts Scudder and Eric Schroeder; future psychoanalyst Bernard Bandler; writers Lewis Galantieri, Guy Murchie, Jacques Barzun and Frances Rodgers; actors Molly Manning and Eliot Cabot; and artists Agnes Yarnall, Robert Hale, Gardner Cox and Charles Hopkinson. All, of course, were struggling with their own approaches to getting at what was important to them, so conversation was endless and intense.

For some years Thayer had been seeing a good deal of a young Boston lawyer named Donald Starr, who had been at Harvard with her brother. In spite of their mutual attraction, she was hesitant to enter into marriage, unwilling to put less than her whole heart into either marriage or career, and uncertain as to how well the two could coexist. "I have been working like a dog...and for the first time feel a power in me that, if I have the strength, I can make grow... How much it amounts to I don't know and I fear, and sometimes it almost makes me face abandoning it, that the handwriting on the wall reads that only what *you* are is what counts," she wrote to him from Paris. In 1932 Starr resigned his post as Assistant Attorney-General of Massachusetts to sail around the world with several friends in a schooner he had built for the purpose.³⁰ A year and a half later Polly Thayer went to meet him in Genoa, Italy, and became Polly Thayer Starr.³¹ The couple spent their honeymoon in Paris and then Donald rejoined the *Pilgrim* to finish his circumnavigation, while Thayer, whose tendency to sea sickness made her an unenthusiastic sailor, steamed home directly.

Somewhat to her surprise, marriage did not initially put much of a crimp in Thayer's artistic activity. While her husband, home from his expedition, deliberated on his plans for the future, she painted a life-sized portrait of him whose elegance expresses what she once described to him as "your extraordinary...romantic appeal, your unequalled physical beauty, your tender consideration...sympathy & imagination." She also met May Sarton, who was at that time just beginning to turn her attention from acting to writing. "She could make anything come alive for you," she remembered. "I've never known anybody who had quite that quality of imagination..."³² The two became friends immediately, energizing each other's work:

You often say you have done nothing for me in painting - where I have pulled poems continually out of you, but if I could put the imponderable into words I could tell you the atmosphere you have surrounded me with that is the substance of creation, the perspectives like green tunnels in a Versailles garden that seem to have opened all about me since you came...³³

A trip to Nassau in 1936 was a revelation to Thayer's color sense: "The sun burns and heals & shines either in full blaze or through thin clouds that diffuse its light so

delicately it seems a world of mother of pearl," she rejoiced to May. Even the rain was a delight. "Today for the first time it is raining in the daytime. It is really dark but so *warm* the damp smells deliciously. I feel like an earthworm. The rain rattles on the palms like hail. Everything in the tropics is so extravagant! It appeals to me temperamentally right down the backbone."³⁴ But already trouble with her eyes made her avoid the intense light for drawing. "I sketched in the markets & along the wharves in the dusk as the easiest hour on the eyes," she admitted to Donald, who had had to stay home attending to his law practice, and added:

I walked about perfectly rapt the colours are so wonderful. There seems to be light behind, inside every object that deprives it of all semblance of weight & makes it ecstatically insubstantial. Do you remember these houses, Muff, these combinations that make Van Gogh seem literal-minded, greys & hennas and pinks on reds? Truly they are glorious.³⁵

That same year, the Starrs decided to build a summer home on land which had been given them by Thayer's mother from the farm in Hingham. Meanwhile they rented a house nearby for what proved to be a busy and highly productive summer. Diana Crombie, who had already posed for two paintings ("Diana," which had been purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy, and "Woman in Black," which was to be acquired by the Brigham Young University Museum in Utah) came to pose again in June. In July, Thayer wrote to Sarton, "Donald seems to think he...will break me in to a little gentle cruising along the coast - heaven help me!"³⁶ The expedition had an unexpected side-effect. After two weeks on the water, Thayer asked to be put ashore at Old Lyme, Connecticut, and was stunned by what she experienced:

I wanted to kiss the ground. I'd never felt about the land as I did then. It was newly revealed to me, as if I'd been born again... What came was primitive... At the time I couldn't analyze it, didn't know what I was doing. Just *there* it was, and I wanted to celebrate it, praise it... I could see line, design, even the color!³⁷

She settled herself at a small inn and painted for ten days straight. The landscapes she created expressed an awakened breadth of vision, a more instinctive use of the skills she had until then used so consciously, and one where she gave free reign to her enjoyment of what Elizabeth I had celebrated in her motto *Per molto variare la natura e bella* - the variety which makes nature so beautiful.

In August, due to a confusion of schedules, Neyan Stevens and May Sarton visited Thayer in Hingham at the same time. Thayer had vowed to keep working no matter what, and the dilemma was solved by May's sitting while both Thayer and Stevens painted portraits of her.³⁸ Thayer's portrait of Sarton, now owned by the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard, although it had that little in common with the recent landscapes, gave further evidence of a new confidence and freedom of expression, as she allowed

herself for the first time to sacrifice tonal values to color and line, creating a “shadowless world” which had a force and immediacy quite foreign to the world of the Boston School.

Conscious that her training at the Museum School had done little to enlighten her about the materials used in painting - “we were taught nothing in our supposedly academic training of the grinding or chemistry of paints...nothing of glazes or underpainting”³⁹ - Thayer joined William Littlefield, Gardner Cox and several other artists in a group they called the Painters’ Workshop, with the intention of learning about the properties and potentials of their media. They met in the evenings, analyzing techniques and substances, and comparing the results of their experiments. “There was no telling what you were getting in paint in those days,” so they also wanted to promote some kind of regulation of materials equivalent to the Pure Food Act. It was during the course of these professional discussions that Thayer discovered, or rather recognized, a technique she had been seeking for years: “Venetian, Reubensian underpainting, in grisaille, and then glazing the color over it! *That* was how to get the luminosity of the shadows without losing the color.” No longer would she blend adjacent pigments to form shadows that reminded her of mud. Instead, her darkness would reflect the light at the heart of the painting, through layers of modulated transparent glazes.⁴⁰

The Starrs’ first daughter, Victoria, was born in 1940, and in the same year Thayer was chosen Burton Emmett Memorial Exhibitor at the Contemporary Arts Gallery in New York for 1941. Rosamund Frost, reviewing her show in *Art News*, wrote:

Polly Thayer’s landscapes at Contemporary Arts...have unlimited charm and fascination. The subjects are nothing more complicated than houses and trees - the houses set forth in something of Hopper’s crystal clear unreality, the trees studied and felt and reduced to their essentials of growth in brushwork soft and rich as velvet... She is also an A-1 draftsman, and after noticing how cleverly she follows the tufts and swirls, how she breaks her textures for variety, you realize that these innocent visions are arrived at through a sophisticated selection process. The portraits bear this out. *May Sarton*, which is splendid in color and an absolutely painterly presentation, is drawn with a special kind of nervous understanding. It comes off as few modern portraits do.⁴¹

Around this time, Thayer took a step which was to have far-reaching consequences. Determined in her life as in her work to get closer to essence, she had been seeking for some years a spiritual community where she could feel at home. She found it in the Society of Friends, which she joined formally in 1942. This affiliation was somewhat problematical for her work, not only because historically the Quakers had not looked favorably upon the arts, considering them a form of imitation of the Divine, but also because since the Friends have no paid staff or hierarchy, the members of the Society do everything for themselves, from ministry and counseling to religious

schooling. The system tended to produce endless committee meetings. This, together with a young child, another on the way, and a gregarious husband who loved travel, sports, and club life, severely curtailed the time she had available for painting.

The development of what painting was going to mean for me takes a turn at that point due to exigencies of time. I've read somewhere that Cezanne didn't go to his mother's funeral because it would have taken a day from his painting. It got to be that kind of a choice for me, practically.⁴²

Portraiture, as well as being of intense interest to Thayer, seemed easier to work in among so many obligations than less directed work: portraits could be done in the studio; they generated their own schedule in accordance with the sitters' needs, so were not as easily displaced by family needs as "free" time; and as the subjects usually purchased their own paintings, it did not entail the time and energy of arranging exhibitions. As well as doing many commissioned portraits, she did an astonishingly direct portrait of herself in 1943, combining broad patterns with clearly visible, energetic brush strokes and a left hand which, although its arm recedes almost into abstraction, was painted with the most precise anatomical detail before its fingers were engaged in a piece of delicately writhing coral.

Another approach to work which was compatible with her new responsibilities and pleasures as a mother entailed almost the opposite kind of execution. Thayer began making endless sketches of Vicky and Dinah (her second daughter, born in 1945) in every possible situation, entranced as she was by each fleeting moment of their newness. Sleeping, sitting, playing, acting, interacting, reading and simply being comfortable in those unique positions that children somehow get themselves into, they were the objects of constant observation, of a kind which would not support the long and careful methods of Thayer's early years if she wanted to capture the moments on paper. She filled pad after pad with quick charcoal drawings, many sheets containing eight or ten figures in varying degrees of finish, starting each sketch when the next irresistible moment came along. Some were touched with water-color, pastel, oil or crayon, some were in pencil or ink, some barely begun and others fully realized.

The small creatures that held her children's attention became of increasing interest to Thayer as well, and were sometimes more amenable to posing. Hamsters and mice gave entrée into a whole new world of nature, and from there Thayer would go on to investigate snakes and crabs, cows and squirrels, bees, ants and wasps and the mysterious places of their habitation. "I remember taking walks with her as a child," wrote Dinah. "You know how children are supposed to be full of wonder; with us, the process was reversed. She was always delightedly drawing my attention to things that I would never have noticed otherwise."⁴³ In her 1950 show at Vose Galleries, Thayer exhibited five watercolors of hamsters, as well as paintings of Vicky and Dinah and the formal portraits she had been working on. "That pigment & canvas should be

transformed into sunlight and moonlight, relatives and grazing cows, is magical to the utmost," she commented in a paper written for the Tuesday Club.⁴⁴

Some time around this period, Thayer was given a jeweler's loupe. "It was a watershed," she recalled. "As a child I had been shown how to pat bees by Dean Pound [of Harvard Law School]. It was always a thrill for me, and, to judge by the purr-like vibrations the stroking generated, for the bees as well. But I had no idea of the bronze wings' beaded hinges imbedded in the delicious fur jacket, or the jewelry of their articulation, till I studied them under the loupe's magnification."⁴⁵ She became fascinated with the construction of insects and flowers, and once again consumed by the need to understand an intrinsic meaning which she felt she could only perceive by "identifying with the object." It was the antithesis, in a way, of the Hale method: "Instead of piecemeal, inch by inch, I was trying to get the whole thing in - as a whole."

In 1948 she attended a workshop given by Carl Nelson at the Boston YWCA:

He had us draw from memory and imagination, draw with our left hand, draw with our eyes shut... He used the word "celebration," which has returned to me for a lifetime. He made you think in terms of "painting time," of the canvas instead of time, of different kinds of spacial perception. Depth, growth, unity, disparity... For him they could all be dealt with at the same time. There was none of the "choosing two" of value, line and color that Despujols had talked about. To have the *whole* become suddenly the main point!... I found it very exciting.⁴⁶

It was probably in 1952 that Thayer went to study in Provincetown again, this time with Hans Hofmann. She was interested in his theory of dynamic tension, and she did find that when she faced a landscape she began to think more about "where the tensions came and how to balance them"; but she did not feel it helped her much with the question of relating human subjects to backgrounds, which, she agreed with Gardner Cox, was the hardest thing in portraiture. She wondered, too, how much her fellow-students were really getting from the classes. "One student would produce black and white and gray checks, week after week. They'd be different ones each time, a little bit larger or smaller," she wrote to Helen Howe. "Why he was producing that in the face of a nude model, I couldn't tell!"⁴⁷

One January night in the late 'fifties, Harold Newcombe, superintendent of the Starr's farm in Hingham, awoke to find the sky bright as day from a twenty-five-foot pillar of flame arising from their house at the top of the hill.⁴⁸ That summer, while the house was being rebuilt, the family rented a place on Powder Point in Duxbury, with steps going right down to the sea. Thayer painted the steps, and went out into the marshes near the house day after day to paint the moods of grass, gulls, sand and water. The next summer, staying in Marion, her oils showed broad expanses of calm, intense blue sea, wooden boats, sky, sand and grass, sometimes with small human figures wandering in their midst. She had spent so much time and energy studying

sand, sky, water and the grace of growing things that they seemed to be falling on their own into a larger whole which partook of the powerful movement of nature. She rarely dealt with storms or action in progress, depicting rather scenes which suggested the simplicity, finesse and even whimsicality with which forces "vaster than empires, and more slow"⁴⁹ could manifest themselves. "Movement is not to be confused with action," Wickey had taught his students. "Movement is tied up inseparably with the sense of living form."⁵⁰

Year after year there were expeditions to Naushon Island, where the Starrs - Donald too had begun to paint by now - joined Charles Hopkinson, Gardner & Phyllis Cox, and Eric and Marnie Schroeder as guests of Thayer's cousin, Edward Forbes of the Fogg Museum, on "Painters' Weekends." Alternatively the group would go to Sharksmouth, the North Shore home of Charles Hopkinson. Each time she went to Sharksmouth, Thayer explored a new aspect of stone and sea, often pairing the massive worn rocks with an almost calligraphic rendering of the illusory delicacy of water that had shaped them. If the rocks at Sharksmouth expressed the latent power of the sea, both rocks and water in Thayer's Duxbury paintings seem almost to have been shaped by the sun, recalling the generously layered pigment of Thayer's days with Hawthorne. The dunes, whose primordial curves Thayer never tired of tracing, whether in oil, watercolor, colored pencil, graphite or charcoal, were the ultimate reduction of sun, stone and water to a form at once gentle and ascetic, giving shelter to the lowliest grasses while liable to transformation at any moment by the forces of nature. It is as though Thayer is trying to understand not the contrast, but the unity of the disparate elements, or perhaps the meaning of their coexistence. During the winters, she was beginning to explore the ways of snow.

Thayer's mother died in 1959, after a long and valiant struggle with Parkinson's disease. "She grew in kindness and patience and courage to the very end," Thayer noted. "Her spirit sustains me."⁵¹ With less need to stay close to town, the Starrs acquired a summer house on West Chop, Martha's Vineyard in the early 1960's, conveniently situated for Donald's sailing. Thayer painted or drew wherever she was, exhibiting in Boston, New York and Philadelphia, but in spite of her family's support she rarely felt she had the blocks of time she needed. She found that the practice of yoga exercises, Zen breathing, prayer and poetry, as well as careful attention to diet, helped maintain her equilibrium. One summer, although the house was closed for the season, she went back to work in her studio at 198 Beacon Street, where most of her winters had been spent since shortly after her marriage. "I am supremely happy at the moment, being on my two week vacation of painting," she wrote to Sarton:

Instead of going to Lyme or Wickford or some other sensible painters spot I couldn't get away from the Fenway believe it or not!...I can feel the stomach, mind, face, heart & soul relax....Have you ever spent a summer, or part of it, in the city? It is heartbreakingly beautiful. Downy trees, fluffing over and furring the buildings which

are studded with jewelry, amethyst roofs with ruby chimney pots & sapphire awnings. The pearly gates and golden streets could hardly exceed their beauty...⁵²

Thayer brought to the Boston paintings the awareness of natural forces which characterized her scenes of dunes and marshes, and became fascinated with the effects of snow in the city. Again she was dealing with stone and water, but on a completely different level. The Back Bay brownstones, while maintaining an external architectural precision, became almost animated. They seemed to respond more to their immediate circumstances than the patient country houses she had surrounded with passionate trees in earlier years. When she exhibited the Back Bay paintings at the Boston Public Library in 1969, the *BPL News* observed:

The homes of Boston have a splendor that move her deeply... The endless fascination of the architectural mixture of Moorish, Byzantine, Gothic, and French Renaissance along Commonwealth Avenue may be seen in some of her works on view. With New England sobriety the forms of these houses may "dance in shoes of lead," but *they dance*, and in winter the snow swirls about them and wreathes them in inconceivable fantasies of white.⁵³

For ten years after the Library show, Thayer did not make arrangements for a major exhibition. When one sees the astonishing quantity and quality of work she was creating during that period, one can only wonder if it was because she could not bear to break the impetus of her vision. She was still accepting portrait commissions, but the revelations were happening in her private time. Her pursuit of the meaning within the variety of nature had focused itself, intently, on flowers. She had loved, drawn and painted flowers for years, but now they became for her a direct bridge to perceiving the "invisible." Perhaps some of her relentless activity was spurred on by the fact that in the early seventies Thayer learned that she had glaucoma, and somewhat later, that she was also afflicted with macular degeneration. What had been an exercise in spiritual expansion had suddenly become an immediate necessity: she would have to learn to see in ways she had not yet imagined.

As awareness of her dilemma seeped in, Thayer became more absorbed than ever with the qualities of seeing. In 1979 she gave a talk in West Chop on the relationship between love and seeing, emphasizing that both, contrary to popular opinions, need to be learned rather than taken for granted if they are to be made the most of. She expanded the talk into two later versions in the '80's and '90's, warning, "We neglect at our cost the development of our power to see, to activate that 'third eye' we all have, that the East recognizes and that we in the West tend to ignore."⁵⁴ In a paper on "Why I Paint," she wrote:

I find there are secrets, certain numinous things, that seem to speak to me in a special sense, signaling in a language that compels decoding. To be faithful to this task demands absolute attention. The French writer Simone Weil has said: "If you look long enough at almost anything with absolute attention, something is given...a losing of oneself in admiration and joy." It is this celebration that is at the heart of the matter, and the hope that some hint of it, however faint, can be communicated. If "absolute attention is prayer," by it we learn to hear without the ear, and "see not with but through the eye."⁵⁵

During the winters, in her Boston studio, Thayer threw herself into the exploration of white cyclamen blossoms, whose pristine recurved petals, sometimes splashed with red at the heart, must have recalled to her the clean stretches of sand and snow she had portrayed so expressively. The concentration of her effort is revealed in an extraordinary collection of works on paper, many of them done with white chalk on black background, others incorporating pastel, watercolor, oil or collage materials. The images, balancing between the seen and the unseen, lure the viewer into a world quite different from that of the dedicated flower lover or even the paintings of a Georgia O'Keeffe. They are not flower portraits or organic designs, but energies beckoning beyond themselves.

From Beacon Street the Starrs, their children fledged, usually went to pass the spring in Hingham, where in years past Thayer had reveled in the irises and zinnias of her mother's garden. Now the graphite and charcoal of her early training began to give way to rich pastels of white gladiolas, the finished pieces resulting from multiple experiments and close examination of the garden flowers in every stage and aspect. Structure had been internalized through years of discipline, and what became visible was at once the artist's wonder and her keen perception. Some flowers were fully formed and lavish, with pale golden throats and bees and vibrant backgrounds, and some were almost abstract in the simplicity of their lines and planes. In all of them, the focus was the manifestation of light and the joy of participation in essences so fleeting that their visibility seemed a miracle. At times Thayer's subjects underwent a kind of transfiguration:

A process takes over like automatic writing, impossible to describe, an entering into the person or creature or thing you are depicting. You feel you have succeeded if you have captured its essence, revealed its source in the ground of being. The object is transformed in the process - the Queen Anne's Lace becomes a burning bush, the cyclamen is seen leaping joyously toward the sun, the fish's eye is the eye of God.⁵⁶

The result was work which strikes us at once as acutely personal and startlingly independent of anthropomorphic projections. In some, the distinction between the blossom and the light that makes it visible has almost disappeared, leaving only a sense of infinite unfolding and possibility in an abstruse but empathetic universe.

Summertime brought the Starrs still closer to the ocean, where beach peas sprang right out of the sand on the path to the water, and Queen Anne's lace and thistles adorned the wastelands. Examining the tiny pea flowerlets under her jeweler's loupe, Thayer saw their intimate connection with the urgency of nature and represented them on a scale both tender and monumental. Bees, ants, hornets, wasps and spiders joined her repertory increasingly, both on their own account and in partnership with their flowers, and the cats whose souls she had tried to realize since she had brought Hunya home from Paris in 1930 were distilled more and more to nearly transparent essences of lithe line and spirit.⁵⁷

At the age of eighty-seven, when it was clear that her eyesight would not permit her to commit her observations to paper for much longer, Thayer undertook two of the most precise and poetic projects she had ever attempted. The first was an infinitely delicate sequence of drawings depicting the life cycle of that under-appreciated flower, the thistle. In the more than two dozen pieces that comprise it, all drawn directly from nature, no shadow falls between vision and reality: they are equally literal and metaphysical - unsentimental examinations of birth, growth and death, light and darkness, evanescence and recurrence. The second was a final portrait of herself. The physical skills she had challenged and honed for seven decades were at the command now not only of an eye, but of a soul which looked *through* the eye- directly at the viewer - and acknowledged both its own strength and its fragility.

Thayer loves to quote the words of the Japanese artist Hokusai, written at the age of 75:

I have drawn things since I was six. All that I made before the age of 65 is not worth counting. At 73 I began to understand the true construction of animals, plants, trees, birds and insects. At 90 I will enter into the secret of things. At a hundred and ten everything, every dot and dash, will live.

"You never achieve what you want," she admits, "but you're always getting nearer to the essence. And that's a search that is all-important... To the extent that I have been able to enter into the secret of things, and to convey something of this experience to others through my art, I am deeply grateful."

A note on sources:

Unless otherwise indicated, the manuscript materials referred to here are in the possession of Polly Thayer Starr. The general tenor of this essay is the result of many discussions in which the author has been privileged to participate in the course of more than five years of working with Thayer's papers. Invaluable resources have been the interviews conducted by Robert Brown of the Smithsonian Institution in 1995 and 1996, and the cataloguing and archival collections of Wendy Swanton

Abbreviations:

PT: Polly Thayer (before her marriage)

PTS: Polly Thayer Starr (used here for sources dating from after her marriage)

ERT: Ethel Randolph Thayer, the mother of Polly Thayer.

DCS: Donald Carter Starr, who married Thayer in 1933.

¹. Van Ness, who became a prominent art educator and painter, was just beginning her teaching career. (www.spfld-museum-of-art.org/catalog/vanness.html and AskArt.com)

². Manuscript account by Ethel Randolph Thayer, "The Japanese Earthquake, September 1st 1923"; *Official Report of Capt. S. Robinson, R.N.R., Commander of the Canadian Pacific S.S. Empress of Australia...* (Canada: no date); there is also among Thayers papers a typescript "Account of the Experiences of Miss Gertrude Cozad in the Earthquake at Yokohama..." For part of this time Thayer kept a journal, which is at present in the keeping of a friend.

³. PTS to Robert Brown, interview of May 12, 1995.

⁴. PTS to Dorothy Koval, interview of January 26, 2001.

⁵. PTS to Robert Brown, interview of May 18, 1995.

⁶. Quoted from biography in the archives of AskArt.com .

⁷. PTS, "Rose Standish Nichols," in *Rose Standish Nichols As We Knew Her* (1986), p. 20.

⁸. PT to DCS, letter postmarked March 12, 1929, on stationery from the Hotel Reina Victoria, Ronda, Spain.

⁹. PT to DCS, letter postmarked Fez, Morocco, March 25, 1929.

¹⁰. It was never quite clear that is what was wrong with her, as symptoms remained with her for quite a while after the operation, but it is probable that at the very least the surgeon did relieve her of the appendix.

¹¹. PT to DCS, postmarked Paris, June 16, 1930.

¹²

. PT to DCS, postmarked July 12 [1930].

¹³. Bernard Bandler was at the time editor of the literary review *Hound & Horn*.

¹⁴. To DCS, probably July 12, 1930.

¹⁵. Poet and social activist John Wheelwright, a close friend and somewhat of an eccentric, whose portrait Thayer painted about this time.

¹⁶. PT to ERT, probably 1930.

¹⁷. Pages from PT's journal, dated April 7, 1932.

¹⁸. Quoted in John Walker, *portraits: 5,000 years* (NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.).

¹⁹. PT to DCS, postmarked March 7, 1931.

²⁰. *Boston Globe*, January 9, 1931.

²¹. *Boston Transcript*, January 10[?], 1931.

22. PTS to Robert Brown, interview of May 30, 1995.

23. Harry Wickey, *Thus Far* (American Artists Group, 1941), pp. 70-71.

24. Pages from PT's journal, undated but probably written in 1932.

25. Interview with Dorothy Koval, January 26, 2001

26. PT to ERT, probably Paris, 1932.

27. PTS to Robert Brown, interview of May 30, 1995.

A few years later, Thayer herself championed Van Gogh when an exhibition of his work was attacked in the Boston press. "I wonder how often [Mr. Castano] has found in Boston contemporary painting 'a definite attitude towards the primary mysteries of existence, the unsolved and ever fascinating problems at the bottom of human life'...a definite way of translating their challenges into paint," she wrote to the Boston *Herald* on March 4, 1936. "It is precisely here that our Boston painting in general is most inconsequential. As if paralyzed by fear of ideas, the democratic distrust of whatever strikes below the prevailing platitudes, one is conscious of no brave and noble earnestness in it, no of no generalized passions for intellectual and spiritual adventure, of no organized determination to think things out..."

28. PT to ERT, probably Paris, 1932.

29. PT to DCS, March 11, 1933.

30. Starr's account of the voyage, *The Schooner Pilgrim's Progress*, was published in 1996 by the Peabody Essex Museum.. More about the man and the circumnavigation is available online at www.wellofstars.com/DCS .

31. There has been some confusion about Thayer's identity due to the fact that, although she was named Ethel Randolph Thayer after her mother and was sometimes referred to as Ethel in reviews or exhibition catalogues, she was always called Polly by her friends and signed her work "Polly Thayer." After her marriage she continued to use Polly Thayer as her professional name, eventually changing her first name legally from Ethel to Polly. In some exhibitions after 1950 she used the name Polly Thayer Starr or Polly Thayer (Starr) on announcements, but never on paintings.

32. PTS to Robert Brown, interview of May 30, 1995.

33. PTS to May Sarton, Nassau, March 16, 1936
34. *Ibid.*
35. PTS to DCS, "mailed 1-13-36."
36. PTS to May Sarton, Nassau, March 16, 1936. ||CHECK DATE/compare w text||
37. PTS to Robert Brown, interview of May 30, 1995.
38. The other portrait of Sarton had an odd future ahead of it. After Stevens took it back to New York with her, it was stolen from her apartment. In December, 1959, Thayer was called on to identify it by police seeking to break up an art forgery ring in New York, where two brothers named Lass were trying to pass it off as a Picasso.
39. PTS, letter to Boston *Herald* on March 4, 1936 (manuscript).
40. The artists of the "Painters Workshop Group" also exhibited together, on at least one occasion, at the Grace Horne Gallery in Boston. An undated clipping names Allan Rohan Crite, Carol Blanchard, Ville Barss, Elizabeth Converse, Peggy Mowry and Frank Sterner as well as Thayer and Cox as among the participants. Thayer's book of "Painting Notes" made at the time, which includes many technical notes and observations, is among the papers she has preserved.
41. *Art News*, November 15-31, 1931.
42. PTS to Robert Brown, interview of February 1, 1996..
43. Introduction to "On Seeing," by PTS, written as a talk to be given at Brookhaven in November 1997.
44. PTS, "Who Are the Outstanding Contemporary Artists," written for the Tuesday Club in the mid-1940's.
45. PTS, "On Seeing," *op. cit.*
46. Interview with Dorothy Koval, autumn, 1997. Dorothy Adlow is said to have called Nelson "the best loved art teacher in the City of Boston." Born in Sweden and trained at the New York Art Students League, Nelson came to Boston shortly after World War I as a member of Boris Mirski's newly established gallery/school, and taught at the YWCA from 1946 to 1970. His papers are at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, which provided the above information.
47. PTS to Robert Brown, interview of May 30, 1995.
48. Taped interview with Harold Newcombe (undated).

49. From Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," one of Thayer's well-loved poems.
50. Harry Wickey, *Thus Far, published by American Artists Group, 1941/42.*
51. Written on a packet of letters of condolence received on Ethel R. Thayer's death.
52. PTS to May Sarton, probably c. 1965.
53. "The Boston Scene An Artist's View," in *BPL News*, May, 1969 (vol. 20, no. 5).
54. PTS, "On Seeing," in *Friends Journal*, September 1/15, 1981.
55. PTS, undated manuscript.
56. Dinah Starr, introduction to PTS, "On Seeing," a talk given at Brookhaven, Lexington, Massachusetts, in the autumn of 1997.
57. Thayer's present cat, Benny (Benison), however, has insisted on his blackness and solidity.