

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Painting of the day:

Snap the Whip (1872)

by Winslow Homer

I told my students once that if they ever saw me walking down the street singing a war song in Welsh, at the top of my lungs – *Ni chaiff gelyn ladd ac ymlid, Harlech! Harlech! Cwyd iw herlid* – they should remember that I know a little bit of Welsh, so they shouldn't think anything of it. But if they ever saw me walk into a modern art museum, they'd better call for an ambulance right away. It would be a sign that I had lost my mind.

Modern art ... I had a close friend named Rodney who was a boy genius at music. When Rodney was an old man he could sit at the piano and I'd tell him, "Play 'Stardust,'" and his fingers would run over those keys all ten at a time as fast as the wings of a hummingbird. "Play 'I'll Take Manhattan,'" and it was the same, and if it was a couple of notes too high for me and my wife to sing, we'd ask him to move it all down a notch or two, and whoosh, he'd play it, without any sheet music in front of him. He could do that with hundreds and hundreds of songs, big-band and swing melodies on the piano or accordion.

"Rodney," I asked him once, "what do you think of rock and roll?" I was wearing a helmet, so I could ask the question and get away with it.

Let's just say he didn't like it. But he got very

serious. Rodney said that we used to have popular music that was rich and beautiful and intelligent. It rose up from the wellsprings of folk music and classical music. Old people and young people loved it and sang it or played it or listened to it, but all that was swept aside.

Whether Rodney was right about that or not, I think it's certainly true of what happened to painting



in America. When I look at a painting of the human face, I don't want to see three eyes, or the nose under the chin, or a tooth coming out of somebody's ear, or a lot of splashes on a canvas that look as if your dog Buster had eaten some paintballs and then puked them up. I don't have anything against Buster. And it isn't just that the stuff offends my humanity and my common sense. It's like what Rodney said about music. We used to have a rich tradition, full of life, and now we don't.

So I urge my readers to go find that tradition again. Here's a good man to start with, especially if we're thinking of children: Winslow Homer (1836-1910). He wasn't just sentimental. He didn't paint only children. Check out his paintings of men at work on or near the sea. They look as if they might dash you with salt water, they are so alive, with the smell of the ocean in them and the bold broad blues of the sea and the sky and the tan and gold of the beach. Mary Cassatt is our best painter of mothers with children and babies. Winslow Homer is our best painter of boys and girls in action.

There sure are a lot to choose from: boys gathering clams on the shore; two boys in a field, one sitting and one lying down, looking out into the distance; girls with baskets under a ripe apple tree; a girl in a hammock, reading a book; a boy in the shade of a tree at noonday, lying barefoot on the ground, his dog beside him; three boys enjoying a couple of watermelons they have filched from the neighbor's farm, one of them looking over his shoulder, because he thinks the farmer might catch them; a young man with a hunting rifle, posted in a tree; boys on a fishing boat; and this painting of a schoolyard recess, *Snap the Whip*.

For those of my readers who have never been boys or never been outdoors, Snap the Whip was a game that kids would play, in the days when there were kids and they played. It's simple. A group of kids grab each other's hands in a long line, and then they run this way and that, and the idea is to gain momentum and then dig your feet in and change your direction, so that the "whip" that you all make will snap – and some kids will lose hold and go flying off, often tumbling to the ground, as the two boys on the left are doing.

Why would boys do that? Because it's fun.

Running and twisting and leaping build up your heart and lungs, and the sheer strain of it builds up your back and arms. You have to plant your legs like young oaks to keep sometimes from falling headfirst, and if you do fall, the rough kiss of Mother Earth bruises your bones and makes them thicker and stronger. That's the biology of it, but the boys do it because it's fun. It's in their nature, and their bodies and souls cry out for it.

Their minds need other things, and that's why we have the red schoolhouse in the background,

“Why would boys do that?
Because it's fun. Running and
twisting and leaping build up
your heart and lungs, and the
sheer strain of it builds up your
back and arms...It's in their
nature, and their bodies and
souls cry out for it.”

because this is recess, and, in the distance, a couple of young women seem to be looking on. They teach the boys. They don't teach them to Snap the Whip, though. They don't have to do that. They are there just to make sure that nothing gets out of hand, and to call them back in when it is time to go back to the lessons. But we know

that these boys are outdoors constantly. You can't be barefoot in a field unless you are outdoors constantly with bare feet, because otherwise your soles will be too tender for the pebbles and sticks and dirt. You'll get scratches and cuts. These boys don't, because the calluses on their feet would be good and thick. We also know that they are outdoors because of their tanned faces and straw hats and suspenders. They're wearing clothes you wear if you grow up on a farm and do chores. All is in order.

Winslow Homer was not a religious painter. But I like his works, and they feel reverent to me, in their usual friendly way. I don't feel the same reverence when I look at a church banner with Jesus grinning like a fun guy in a cheap cartoon. There are hills behind the boys and the schoolhouse, and a sky bloomed with clouds, and trees beginning to turn their colors, and scruffy flowers here and there. Nobody has planted those flowers; only Nature,

casting her good things broadside, great and small. We know from their forms and their muscles and even their manly hats that these boys won't be boys forever, just as those trees won't be green forever, and just as the recess will end and the boys will have to do their schoolwork. But this, and not the schoolwork, is what *real* life looks like. It is play for the sake of play.

That makes it more like praising God than anything else we do all day long. We may ask somebody why he's cleaning the rust off a pump. But we don't ask *why* he's playing ball. To ask what the point of *play* is, is like asking somebody what he hopes to gain out of love. If you're in it to gain something like money, you're not really in love. If you pray to God only what you can get out of it, you may be a calculating grownup, but you are just a rookie in the glee of praise. You need to look at those boys in the field and be wise.



Magdalen College Program of Studies



- 110-credit core program integrates theology, philosophy, literature, politics, science, history, math, music and art
- Five majors: Literature, Philosophy, Politics, Theology, and Great Books
- The breadth and depth of the Western Canon studied beneath the twin lamps of reason and faith

Apply today at
www.magdalen.edu

Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts is a joyfully Catholic, great books college located on a mountain in beautiful New Hampshire. The college offers a transformative liberal education of the whole person, ordered to human flourishing and communion, animated by the perennial questions, given shape by the classic books, and nourished by a vibrant liturgical and sacramental culture. Magdalen College calls all within her community to enter the great conversation of authors seeking wisdom that has unfolded across the ages, cultivating a life of virtue, poetic imagination, service, and life-giving fidelity.