

NEW LIGHT ON EAKINS AND WHITMAN IN CAMDEN

To date, much of the information about the relationship between Walt Whitman and the painter Thomas Eakins, especially their personal contacts in Camden, has been drawn from the daily diaries kept by Horace Traubel, Whitman's close friend, advocate, and spokesman, published in six volumes under the title of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (covering March 28, 1888 to July 6, 1890).¹ Whitman's daybooks and correspondence, also published, offer additional brief references to Eakins' visits to Whitman in Camden.² But newly-discovered evidence indicates that Eakins spent far more time visiting Whitman than has heretofore been acknowledged and that the interchange between the two men was extensive during the last few years of the poet's life. This evidence comes primarily from Traubel's unpublished diaries, written in longhand, that extend well beyond the published volumes to the very moment of Whitman's death on March 26, 1892.³

These unpublished documents had passed from Traubel, after his death in 1919, to his widow, Anne, and then to their daughter Gertrude, a talented singer and music teacher, also an early feminist, who died in 1983. My grandfather, William T. Innes, was a lifelong friend of Horace Traubel's and also of Gertrude, who, I discovered, had known Alfred Stieglitz and Marsden Hartley. Therefore, in the course of my research on Stieglitz and his circle during the early 1970s I interviewed her at her home in Germantown, on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Additional visits led to growing trust between her and myself, and I was named as one of her executors. When she had to be confined to a nursing home in 1980, I was asked to recover any Whitman items in her house material that had been promised to the noted collector, Charles Feinberg, for the Library of Congress. Feinberg and Gertrude's lawyer thought the unpublished Traubel diaries were still extant, and several were found in her safe deposit box. But I came across others, stuffed in brown paper bags, carefully inscribed, tucked away in obscure locations.

Because the later Traubel diaries were unavailable or, after entering the Library of Congress, went unnoticed, writers who dealt at some length with Eakins and Whitman, such as Lloyd Goodrich, Elizabeth Johns, and Henry B. Rule,⁴ drew their information only from the printed volumes and Whitman's published correspondence. Too,

Eakins' celebrated oil portrait of Whitman in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts has served as a major focus for discussions of the painter and poet, especially that of Lloyd Goodrich in his magisterial two-volume book, *Thomas Eakins* (1982).⁵

From existing sources, before the discovery of the unpublished diaries, we learn that Eakins had been brought to Whitman's home by the Philadelphia journalist Talcott Williams and returned to Camden within a few weeks, canvas in hand, prepared to paint the poet's portrait.⁶ Whitman admired Eakins' unceremonious directness in taking this step.⁷ Throughout Traubel's published diaries, we hear Whitman praising Eakins' forthright, unconventional behavior, and lauding, as well, a comparable attitude that informed his paintings—an honesty and uncompromising truthfulness to what he saw in man and nature.⁸

Much of Whitman's admiration for Eakins centered upon the portrait. After it was completed, Whitman asked his friends how they liked it, and the great majority expressed a low opinion of the work. Nonetheless, Whitman praised the portrait for its directness and honesty, finding it "a quite extraordinary piece of work."⁹ His high opinion of the painting was brought into even sharper focus when he compared it to his portrait recently painted by Herbert Gilchrist (Library, University of Pennsylvania), son of his close friend and admirer, Anne Gilchrist, a painting he told Traubel was a conventional and proper work, lacking guts. Whitman was particularly offended by the curly ringlets of hair and the painter's failure to offer an honest portrayal.¹⁰

About Eakins' portrait, Whitman is recorded as saying: "Eakins' picture grows on you. It is not all seen at once—it only dawns on you gradually. It was not at first a pleasant version to me, but the more I get to realize it the profounder seems its insight . . ." ¹¹ Comparing it to the more polite, academicized version by John W. Alexander, Whitman issued his often-quoted remark, "Eakins is not a painter, he is a force. Alexander is a painter."¹² The implication is that Alexander is merely a painter, and Eakins is much more than that.

Not only did Whitman admire the portrait Eakins made of him, he also liked his celebrated painting of Dr. Samuel Gross in the midst of an operation, *The Gross Clinic* (1875), now at Thomas Jefferson University, of which Eakins gave him a photograph (Whitman never saw the original painting) that was displayed in the first floor living

room of his Camden home.¹³

We know far less of what Eakins thought of Whitman. However, in the unpublished recollections of Weda Cook Addicks, recorded by Lloyd Goodrich in the early 1930s, we find important clues. Eakins, she said, often talked with her about Whitman, “would sometimes quote verses of his; particularly about the body.” Apparently he enjoyed the lines about “the hand of the mechanic, the hand of the sculptor, the hand of the surgeon, etc.” The aspect of Whitman that most appealed to him, she recalled, was “the realistic; the observation, the truth, the sense of coming direct out of life.” Goodrich recorded her recollections of Eakins’ saying: “‘Whitman never makes a mistake’ (or as she said, an anachronism).”¹⁴

Turning to the unpublished diaries, we find that much of Eakins’ connection with Whitman centers on the visits he made, often in the company of his sculptor friend William O’Donovan, to the aging poet. O’Donovan, a New Yorker who wanted to create a bust of Whitman, not as a commission but under his own initiative, became a temporary resident in Eakins’ Philadelphia studio. This offered him a work place, and allowed him to be close enough to Camden to sculpt the poet from life. Work on the bust began in April, 1891, with O’Donovan visiting Whitman several times that month, again in May, and occasionally thereafter.

An interesting secondary leitmotif—important for the history of photography and Whitman’s own aesthetic credo—also emerges from these visits. On May 1, 1891, according to Traubel’s unpublished diary, O’Donovan brought “a young fellow with a camera” to Whitman’s home.¹⁵ No reason was given for the presence of the unnamed photographer—who can be identified as Eakins’ pupil and friend, the sculptor Samuel Murray—but we must assume that O’Donovan brought him to make photographs which he could consult in Eakins’ studio when he was away from his model. Traubel reported that some twenty-five photographs, including several by “the young fellow,” were found pinned to the Philadelphia studio wall (5/14/91), a situation reflected in an anonymous photograph (though the count may be less than twenty-five), showing Murray, Eakins, and O’Donovan seated at a table, together with O’Donovan’s Whitman bust, then in progress, at the right.¹⁶

For the photography session just mentioned, the *Philadelphia Press*

reported that the poet was brought downstairs to his parlor and that “a couple of good negatives were secured.”¹⁷ Eleven days later—on May 13—O’Donovan and “his photographic assistant” [Murray], accompanied by Eakins this time, again came to photograph Whitman in “various ways.” On this occasion they must have brought the results of the previous session, because Whitman, picking up one of the photographs showing himself in profile, praised it lavishly. His response, recorded by Traubel, tells us a great deal about Whitman’s aesthetic standards and expectations and also how this photograph by Murray, who was much indebted to his teacher Eakins, could satisfy Whitman’s taste. The poet exclaimed that it was “a direct catch—no middleman.” He went on to remark that the head was one of those “curious chances, out of a thousand, which hits a close mark . . . not to be schemed for—not to be purposed: only discovered, revealed, we might say.” Whitman liked the profile so much that he proposed to use it in his forthcoming book, *Good-Bye My Fancy*, already in production. In the final (1891) printing, it appears as the frontispiece, cropped, in a half-tone reproduction. Five hundred extra copies of the half-tone were ordered by Whitman for his own use (5/19/91). On May 19, Traubel brought Whitman a proof made of the profile photograph. The Good Gray poet bubbled over with enthusiasm about the image: “It has that splendid thing, audacity—that real flavor of genius—the will to dare—to spread a big feast—to utter big things in big ways! . . . Among photos it excels any, so far, in the range of its audacity.” He compared the picture to the work of Eakins, “has his best touch—has breadth and beauty, both” (5/19/91).

Eakins, too, had photographed Walt Whitman, though as I pointed out in a paper and article in 1983, not as often as has been thought, because some of the photographs attributed to him were not by Eakins at all.¹⁸ Perhaps Eakins took several photographs during the session just mentioned, possibly the examples that were later published as illustrations in the Small, Maynard edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1898). Eakins very likely had made these images to help O’Donovan, to place them among the other photographs of Whitman pinned on the wall, cited earlier, of the Philadelphia studio that both artists shared. (If this is so, Eakins’ photographs were not studies for his oil portrait of the poet, discussed earlier, as is so often said; judging by Whitman’s age and general decrepitude, and also the presence of accessories similar to the Murray photographs of 1891, the later date may be more appropriate.)

Whitman, speaking both through Traubel and in his own writings,

said nothing of Eakins' photographs of him; but he remarked at some length about Eakins as an artist, as a force, and about the well known oil portrait the Philadelphia painter had made of him. I have already cited some of Whitman's published comments about the portrait, but the remaining unpublished portions of the Traubel diaries contain further insights about the picture and its maker. For example, when Traubel told Whitman of the favorable comments in the Philadelphia *Press* about Eakins' paintings, including the portrait, on view at the Pennsylvania Academy's annual in 1891, Whitman was "pleased." "I have no doubt Eakins' picture deserves all they say about it," Whitman remarked (2/1/91).

After visiting the exhibition, which also included portraits of William D. Marks and Letitia Wilson Jordan Bacon, Traubel told Whitman of the complaints about Eakins' "coarseness." Whitman said, "I see—I can understand it fully—the boys over there [meaning at the Academy] must have got it from Herbert [Gilchrist]" Whitman told Traubel that "the cry coarse—is the cry of all the schools—all codes—literary as well as art" (2/25/91). The name of Herbert Gilchrist, not unexpectedly, was like a red flag to Eakins. On May 1, Traubel reported on Eakins' low opinion of Gilchrist's portrait, quoting him as saying it was "quite horrible, missing at every point." Eakins related, further, that "the students at the academy [of the Fine Arts]—some of them—had advised G[ilchrist] that they wished no instructions from a man who would paint so wretched a thing as the Whitman." Whitman himself, as we have seen, did not care for Gilchrist's paintings, complaining particularly of "the damned Romeo curls" in the portrait of himself. Even so, the poet was graciously tolerant of Gilchrist's shortcomings, saying "he is what he is"; yet, at the same time, Whitman understood Eakins' position on Gilchrist: "It is the view of a big man, mastering an art . . . all that Eakins does has the mark of genius" (5/25/91).

From the Traubel diaries, it becomes clear—clearer than ever before—that Eakins and Whitman were kindred spirits. Whitman, in his declining years, saw in Eakins an embodiment of his own ideals of rebelling against the traditional and the genteel, courageously seeking truth—even if it meant stating things plainly and frankly, even crudely, and going against the grain of polite society. As Whitman told Traubel after one of the latter's calls: "Yes—that man Eakins is *sui generis*—himself—I like him—you will like him more and more."

Traubel did get to know Eakins better as a result of visiting his Philadelphia studio from time to time, often to check on the progress of O'Donovan's bust of Whitman. On May 14, 1891, he dropped in on the two artists. Eakins had been asleep, but in Traubel's words, "After awhile came sauntering out & entered into our chat. Both of them interesting men—Eakins more the genius, with art free and original—dry humor—sententious—disposed to look at you & make his quiet wise criticisms & cease." Both Eakins and O'Donovan, Traubel reported, were "possessed with admiration of Whitman." This same sentiment was echoed by Traubel on a visit to Eakins a couple of weeks later, when he spoke of the artist being "*sui generis*, a strong type—lounging, easy, not a useless word, full of admiration of W[hitman]" (5/30/91).

Traubel's witness accounts are invaluable because he testifies to Eakins' devotion to Whitman—something previously assumed but never actually stated at the time by a contemporary. Unfortunately, Traubel went into no more detail on this matter in the diaries, but through his writings for the periodical *The Conservator*, which he also edited (and which was published by my grandfather Innes), we learn of Eakins' warm appreciation of Whitman's sense of form. These remarks were uttered by Eakins two months after Whitman's death—at the gathering of admirers who were celebrating the poet's birthday (May 31, 1892). As Traubel reported: "In direct and simple phrase [Eakins] dwelt upon Whitman's vast knowledge of form, as discovered by him, Eakins, at the period the now historic portrait was in process: a knowledge minute, irrefragable, astonishing—as of drapery and mechanics, of facial and bodily lines and masses; a possession the speaker [Eakins] never before had realized in anybody not specially given to that study [meaning the study of art]. 'And yet,' concluded Eakins, 'he [Whitman] probably had never seen a Van Dyck or a Rembrandt.'"¹⁹ Beside these words, there is further evidence, some already cited in the literature, of Eakins' tributes to Whitman and his memory. He attended, and spoke at, Whitman's seventy-second birthday party at his home in Camden, and upon Whitman's demise, served as an honorary pallbearer. With the help of several assistants he also made a death mask and cast of the poet's hand.²⁰ Traubel's eyewitness account of this work is fascinating.

On the morning of the day after the poet's death, Eakins appeared with Samuel Murray and two assistants. They went upstairs in the Mickle Street house, where Whitman's body lay, and addressed their

task. Traubel reported: "Eakins threw back the shirt from the shoulders— . . . They worked & worked—I watched & watched." Eakins both supervised and participated in this three-hour endeavor, with William O'Donovan coming in "before it was finished." Both Whitman's face and hand were cast in plaster.

That evening, Traubel wrote in graphic detail of the dead poet's appearance and the effect upon Whitman's physiognomy of the making of the cast: "The head tonight seemed no way the worse," Traubel said. "The wavy float of the beard rather damaged—and a red line across the bridge of the nose, as if the plaster had at that point been stubborn." Then Traubel, confronting his deceased hero, waxed poetic, remarking on "Walt's serene face & folded hands & bared shoulders—as a god stretched out on god's [sic] own altar—dead" (3/27/92).

The words just quoted are nearly the last in Traubel's diary. He had faithfully completed the record, a chronicle that covered many subjects of concern to Whitman—including Thomas Eakins—affording us rare glimpses of the painter's and poet's interaction in the years between 1888 and 1892. The Traubel diary is, without question, a priceless document written by a sensitive soul who, if he did not match Whitman and Eakins in creative stature, recorded their thoughts and words with intelligence and sensitivity.

The new information I have brought to light should help us understand, better than before, the community of spirit and aesthetic attitudes shared by these two giants of American culture—Whitman the poet and Eakins the painter. It can be assumed that each, in his special way, reinforced the beliefs of the other, and that both must have been strengthened in their courageous opposition, as staunch individualists, to the genteel status quo in American culture of the late nineteenth century. Yet this is not to say that the two were identical in attitude, because there were a number of significant differences. Lloyd Goodrich's unpublished notes on his interviews with Weda Cook Addicks reveal that Eakins, unlike Whitman, "despised the average man." According to Mrs. Addicks, he would say: "the average man is a nincompoop." He admired, in her words, "anyone of real strength and sincerity." He was always talking, she recalled, of "the true aristocrat"; "the true aristocrat would not be shocked by things."²¹

Whitman remained for the most part a Romantic Realist, whose

favorite artist, as Laura Meixner reminds us, was Jean-François Millet.²² Eakins was more of an objective Realist who had a kind of scientific overlay in his aesthetics, and this may account for some of the differences between himself and the poet. Eakins was not nearly the egoist that Whitman was, nor did he see the world as much through romantic eyes. Eakins presented himself as an objective artist, a positivist, with only an occasional turn toward romantic sentiment. Nor was Eakins spiritually inspired in the sense that Whitman was. The painter had little interest in the cosmic and mystical, but, rather, had his feet planted firmly on the ground. Eakins did, however, perceive something akin to spiritual qualities in the process of interacting with the individual human being who posed before him. Furthermore, it is my belief that he saw in the nude human form—though he probably would not have admitted it—an example of divine handiwork, a well-designed organism that reflected the intelligence of the Creator. In every other way, however, Eakins was an agnostic with no recognizable commitment to the spiritual life. Finally, the artist seems to have focused his interest on individuals, or groups of individuals, set occasionally against a landscape: he rarely painted landscapes for their own sake, nor did he attempt to present a comprehensive, grand panorama of the American people or of the American environment as Whitman did. Eakins, in short, concentrated on the individual and his activities as his main medium; Whitman, on the other hand, was more capable of dealing with the larger sweep of humanity in the cosmos.

Perhaps the essence of the connection between the two men was best captured by Harrison Morris, who as managing director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts was one of the few who knew both Eakins and Whitman well. As an official of the Academy, Morris tried to bring Eakins back into the fold in the period after his forced resignation in 1886; and as an admirer of Whitman, Morris had often traveled to Camden to visit with the aging poet, even writing a brief biography about him, published in 1929. On Eakins' parallels to Whitman, Morris remarked, "Like Walt Whitman, whom he much resembled in reversion to primitive instincts tempered by nobility of thought, he could see in his disregard of prudish affectations only the return to truth."²³

NOTES

¹ Vol. 1 (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1906); vol. 2 (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1908); vol. 3 (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914); vol. 4 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press); vol. 5 (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964); vol. 6 (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982).

² See esp. *Walt Whitman Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. by William White, vol. 12 (Daybooks, December 1881-1891) (New York: New York University Press, 1978); and *Walt Whitman, The Correspondence*, ed. by Edwin Haviland Miller, vol. iv (1886-1889), v (1890-1892) (New York: New York University Press, 1969).

³ Collection of the Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Henry B. Rule, "Whitman and Thomas Eakins: Variations on Some Common Themes," *The Texas Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1974), 7-57.

⁵ Goodrich, *Eakins*, 2: 28-38.

⁶ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, IV: 155.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See, for example, Traubel, I: 153-154, II: 290, 295, III: 526-527, IV: 155, VI: 416.

⁹ Traubel, II: 290.

¹⁰ Traubel, I: 154.

¹¹ Traubel, I: 39.

¹² Traubel, I: 284.

¹³ Traubel, IV: 105.

¹⁴ Lloyd Goodrich, Interview with Weda Cook Addicks, Lloyd and Edith Havens Goodrich, Thomas Eakins archive, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

¹⁵ From this point onward, in the text, references to the unpublished diaries will be designated by a date in parentheses.

¹⁶ The most accessible reproductions are those of the two variant images found in Gordon Hendricks, *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), nos. 271, 272, p. 187.

¹⁷ *The Philadelphia Press*, May 2, 1891.

¹⁸ "Attributing and Reattributing Thomas Eakins' Photographs," paper, College Art Association of America, Philadelphia, February 13, 1983; "Who Took Eakins' Photographs?" *Art News* 82 (May 1983), 112-119.

¹⁹ Horace L. Traubel, "Walt Whitman's Birthday, May 31st," *The Conservator* 3 (July 1892), 35.

²⁰ Located in the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²¹ Goodrich, Interview with Weda Cook Addicks, Eakins Archive, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

²² Laura Meixner, "'The Best of Democracy': Walt Whitman, Jean-François Millet, and Popular Culture in Post-Civil War America," in this volume, p. 31.

²³ Harrison Morris, *Confessions in Art* (New York: Sears, 1930), 31.