

WHITMAN NAKED?: A RESPONSE

Joann Krieg's essay, suggesting Percy Ives as another possible connection between Thomas Eakins and Walt Whitman in the early 1880s, adds to the growing circle of men who were closely involved with both artists in the years before 1887, the year that Whitman once recalled as the time he first met Eakins.¹ The emerging web of connections—Bill Duckett, Whitman's young friend, driver, and traveling partner who later became one of Eakins's nude models;² Talcott Williams, Whitman's "ardent friend" who was a nude model for Eakins's famous "Swimming" painting;³ S. Weir Mitchell, Whitman's physician and Eakins's patron;⁴ Percy Ives, visiting and drawing Whitman while studying with Eakins—has led some scholars to question Whitman's recollection about his first meeting with Eakins. "Because Eakins had known Williams for some time," writes Elizabeth Johns in an essay investigating the relationship between the painter and the poet, "and Whitman's reputation was widespread, Eakins had perhaps met him earlier."⁵ Whitman's recollection of dates is often faulty in his conversations with Horace Traubel, and, if he did pose nude for Eakins and later regretted it, he would in any case have had reason to misremember the date. (Further, since we know that Eakins did not take all the photographs in his "naked series," and since it is now apparent that Whitman knew several people associated with Eakins and the Pennsylvania Academy in the early 1880s, it is possible that he could have posed for this series without actually meeting Eakins.)

William Innes Homer contends that the "Old Man" in the photographic series simply does not look like Whitman, but a number of scholars who have worked many years with images of Whitman disagree. When I first found this series, I circulated a print at the annual meeting of the American Literature Association and asked Whitman experts whether they thought the "Old Man" could be Whitman; most of those polled concluded that the "Old Man" looked like Whitman. Homer says that the "Old Man" is bald, and that Whitman had a "full mane of hair" in the early 1880s. But, in fact, the photos of Whitman beginning in the late 1870s show a balding man (see, for example, photos 1880s #17 and #19 in the photography issue of *WWQR*⁶) with the same sparse amount of hair on the top of his head as the "Old Man" has. Since we have no photos showing the back of Whitman's head, it is impossible to compare the final two poses of the Eakins series with images of Whitman. Readers comparing these photos can draw their own judgments about whether or not the old man looks like Whitman.

I submitted the "Old Man" series along with a complete collection of Whitman's photographs to Dr. Antonio R. Damasio, a distinguished neurologist and author of *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994). Dr. Damasio generously agreed to examine the photos in light of Whitman's medical history (including his 1873 stroke) and to try to determine whether it was conceivable that the naked "Old Man" was Whitman. His findings are as follows: the "Old Man" photographs "show no direct evidence of paralysis on either side, although there is not enough detail in the left hand or in the face to make any decisive judgment about those areas. . . . I note, however, that a recovered and mild hemiparetic would be able to hold the left upper limb in the way the 'old man' does." Damasio goes on to note

that the photographs of Whitman from around this time “are a little more suggestive of paralysis but do not show anything definite.” He notes Whitman’s tendency in his portraits to have his left hand in his pocket, perhaps “disguising its unnatural state,” but “elsewhere both hands are shown in varied postures and there is really nothing abnormal to report.” Damasio found “no evidence of obvious facial asymmetry, but of course this would be difficult to detect, not only because of the lack of photographic detail but also because of the beard and mustache (most of the interesting facial asymmetry details usually show up in the corner of the mouth and in the nasolabial fold).” Damasio concludes that the “old man” photographs “are entirely compatible with the description of Whitman’s illness”: “In short, it is possible that the ‘old man’ is indeed Whitman.”⁷

Homer bases much of his argument on a portrait by J. Laurie Wallace (another of Eakins’s nude models for his “Swimming” painting) of an “Old Man,” and it is certainly an interesting piece. Sarah Cash published this painting in 1996 and dated it “c. 1880”; it would seem highly probable, as Homer says, that this is the same model who posed for the photographs at around the same time. What do we have here, then—a good painting of a yet-unidentified old-man model, or a bad painting of Whitman? The key questions, I would suggest, remain the same: Who is this “Old Man”? Why, out of all the models who posed for Eakins’s “naked series” photos (many of whom were students at the Pennsylvania Academy), is there only one elderly person? Is it possible that the poet of the naked human body (who had recently written a paean to “Nakedness”) posed one day in Philadelphia for the painter/photographer of the naked human body?

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NOTES

1 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 4:155. It is important to note that Whitman does not actually name a date when he first met Eakins, but he claims that Eakins began painting the poet’s portrait within a few weeks of first coming by his Camden house (accompanied by Talcott Williams); that would suggest a date of 1887, about two years before the poet’s recollection as recorded by Traubel.

2 See Elizabeth Johns, “An Avowal of Artistic Community: Nudity and Fantasy in Thomas Eakins’s Photographs,” in Susan Danly and Cheryl Leibold, eds., *Eakins and the Photograph* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 78-80; and “Swimming: Thomas Eakins, the Twenty-ninth Bather,” in Doreen Bolger and Sarah Cash, eds., *Thomas Eakins and the Swimming Picture* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1996), 72-78. See also Folsom, “Whitman’s Calamus Photographs,” in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 210-212.

3 See Sarah Cash, “‘Friendly and Unfriendly’: The Swimmers of Dove Lake,” 58-59; and “Biographies of Models for *Swimming*,” 119-120, in Bolger and Cash.

4 See Phillip W. Leon, *Walt Whitman and Sir William Osler* (Toronto: ECW, 1995), 58-60.

5 Johns, “*Swimming*,” 69.

6 *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 4 (Fall/Winter 1986-1987), 28.

7 Letter from Antonio R. Damasio, M.D., Ph.D., M. W. Van Allen Professor and Head, Department of Neurology, The University of Iowa College of Medicine, to Ed Folsom, July 21, 1997.