

ESSAY REVIEW

Thomas Eakins Reconsidered

Thomas Eakins. By LLOYD GOODRICH. (Cambridge: Published for the National Gallery of Art by Harvard University Press, 1982. Volume I, xvi, 336 p., Volume II, 366 p. Illustrations, chronology, bibliography, index. \$90.00.)

Thomas Eakins: Artist of Philadelphia. By DARRELL SEWELL. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1982. Catalogue of an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1982. xvi, 136 p. Illustrations, checklist. \$12.95.)

"Thomas Eakins is a difficult subject for the usual biography, because of his objection to having his private life written about," wrote his widow Susan Macdowell Eakins to her grandniece in the 1930s. When the young scholar Lloyd Goodrich brought the manuscript of *Thomas Eakins: His Life and Work* to her in 1932, she wondered again about so many words on the subject of "a man who did not care to be written about." Goodrich's book, published by the new Whitney Museum of American Art in 1933, now seems like a modest effort, although his claims for Eakins's importance were large and surely the impact of the book was significant. Today, one wonders what Tom and Susie would think of Goodrich's revised biography, now two volumes and almost 700 pages in length, not including a third volume still in the works, containing an up-dated catalogue raisonn . Doubtlessly Eakins himself would be by turns amused, appalled, puzzled and infuriated by this display of research and speculation. Honored in his own day, as he testified, by "misunderstanding, persecution and neglect, enhanced because unsought," Eakins would have to view such belated attention ironically. Secretly, knowing his own worth very well, he must be gratified.

Scholars and admirers of American painting need not hide their sense of pleasure and relief. Goodrich's biography was badly needed in 1933, and it has deserved revision and expansion for years. When first published, it was the only book on Eakins's life and the most complete catalogue of his work. For a while, it served the artist as well as the needs of mid-twentieth-century scholarship. To American historians of 1933, searching for a national identity free from European domination, Eakins appeared as a native hero of authentic quality and originality. A major talent, seemingly generated out of the American "tradition" of realistic observation, unmoved by the influence of

foreign schools and dedicated to the depiction of the American life around him, Eakins offered excellent material to the myth-makers of the 1930s, Goodrich among them. This generation elected a great triumvirate of nineteenth-century American painters—Homer, Ryder, Eakins—and Goodrich wrote pioneering texts on all three. The taste of this period served the national purpose by choosing the stylistic extremes of unsentimental realism and visionary abstraction, and celebrating artists who were self-taught, independent, even anti-social—artists who fit international romantic canons of avant-garde behavior without (evidently) owing allegiance to foreign models. “He belonged to no school of painters,” wrote Susan Eakins about her husband; he showed “no trace of a derived style,” claimed Goodrich. The Eakins legend was born.

In 1982 we were given the opportunity to re-evaluate the Eakins legend, both through Goodrich’s expanded biography and a major exhibition of the artist’s work, organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Judging from the popular success of the exhibition, Eakins is now securely rescued from persecution and neglect. While not everyone will insist, along with John Russell of the *New York Times*, that Eakins was America’s greatest painter, *ever*, few will deny that he is Philadelphia’s finest, or that *The Gross Clinic* stands as the single greatest masterpiece of American painting. Misunderstanding, however, continues to threaten Eakins’s work. Judging from Goodrich’s book, the old notions of propriety that wounded Eakins in the late-nineteenth century have been dispelled with condescending shakes of the head. Those Victorians! But have we reconsidered the prejudices of our own modernist youth?

In acknowledging the increased sophistication (or at least thoroughness) of American art history since the mid-1960’s, as well as the changing tastes of our time, Goodrich has modified his earlier claims, though often without deleting the sentiment—or the exact sentences—proposed in 1933. Some of his earlier observations have been developed, qualified, even overturned: he admits, for example, to have over-emphasized Eakins’s obscurity at the end of his career. Other positions have not been reconsidered, but they are substantially undercut by contradictory evidence now added to the record. The complete texts of his letters from Europe, for example, must make us rethink the notion that he derived little from contemporary Parisian painting. But Goodrich, in undertaking this reassessment of his own work, cannot escape all of his earlier positions. Wisely, he understands himself to be an actor caught in the drama of Eakins’s history, and he reminds us of his own engagement frequently: “Mrs. Eakins told me. . .,” he writes, punctuating his comments with personal pronouns and reminiscences that reveal the extent to which the Eakins legend was the collaborative project of Goodrich, Susan Eakins, Samuel Murray, Charles Bregler and a host of partisan bystanders. Almost all of these informants are dead now, freeing Goodrich from obligations of delicacy or ad-

vocacy. Much that he knew and left unsaid then has now been published, and his opinions about the authenticity or motivation of certain testaments can now be aired. At last, the wealth of oral history that he gathered is accessible as an invaluable archive of the facts, rumors, prejudices and loyalties of Eakins's circle during his lifetime, and in the decades following his death.

Goodrich also accumulated an important collection of Eakins's letters and record books that the scope of the earlier biography could not accommodate. Gathering this material together with recently-discovered troves of manuscript, he has given us a developed self-portrait of Eakins in his own words. The European letters will interest art historians; Philadelphia's social historians will enjoy his correspondence with sitters and patrons; wild west buffs will relish the pistol-packing image of Eakins in the Dakota Territory, defending the ranch against horse thieves. Many of these texts come from Goodrich's own transcripts of letters that have now been lost. Their occasional, excerpted and unannotated appearance in the earlier biography, as well as their seclusion in Goodrich's files for a half-century, has been a tantalizing, aggravating phenomenon. Certainly, the publication and documentation of much of Goodrich's primary source material, both written and oral, makes the single most welcome improvement in his revised text. Scholars will learn gratefully that all remaining unpublished material has been released to Professor William I. Homer, who is preparing a compilation of Eakins's writings.

Building upon these primary sources, Goodrich then takes advantage of fifty years of research and publication by others in an effort to integrate or correct all available knowledge on the subject. This, in itself, is an awesome undertaking, since the bibliography on Eakins has mushroomed since 1933, despite the artist's wishes. Gordon Hendrick's *The Life and Works of Thomas Eakins* (1974), until now the lengthiest biography, supplied Goodrich with much antiquarian trivia and not a few errors deserving correction. Goodrich keeps such details in perspective better than Hendricks, and submits his controversial speculations on Eakins's sexuality to a straightforward and sensible consideration. Other scholars, as Goodrich freely admits, have been more than useful. Phyllis D. Rosenzweig's fastidious catalogue of the Hirshhorn Museum's Eakins Collection (1977) and Theodor Siegl's invaluable handbook of the artist's works in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1978) have helped Goodrich as they have helped us all. Siegl, who learned about Eakins while conserving his paintings, surely produced some of the most mature, logical and sensitive observations ever made on Eakins' life and work. Other scholars who have borne down on Eakins during the past two decades, such as Susan Casteras, Maria Chamberlin-Hellmann, William Gerds, Elizabeth Johns, Louise Lippincott, Barbara Novak and Elwood C. Parry III have been responsibly assimilated and acknowledged in Goodrich's work. The enormous bibliography appended to this book, which would allow a decade-by-decade

plotting of Eakins's reputation over the last century, is in itself a generous act of yeoman scholarship.

Goodrich, the master of this pile of words written or spoken about a man who was suspicious of such texts, would seem to have gained a high place from which to view the landscape of Eakins's life and literature. But even fifty years of experience as an art historian can fail to yield an ability for larger cultural analysis. In fact, the multiplication of detail in this new book has made generalization more difficult for Goodrich; the finale of his earlier work had more energy, conviction and interest than the paean to Eakins's "plasticity" contained in the conclusion now. Goodrich does best when considering smaller topics at close quarters. He is good at organizing Eakins's work into categories for discussion, and makes his most personal contributions in the passages dedicated to visual analysis. Once a painter himself, he gives sympathetic tours of projects like *William Rush Carving the Nymph of the Schuylkill* or the two great "clinic" pictures. As with Sylvan Schendler's perceptive *Eakins* (1967), this book is liveliest when it becomes a personal, almost autobiographical interpretation. From this vantage, however, reconstruction of the Eakins myth can be accomplished only by indirection, by the accrual of new facts. Goodrich retells economically and even-handedly the details of Eakins's great traumas—the disastrous reception of the *Gross Clinic*, the scandals over nude models at the Pennsylvania Academy—such that the motives and actions of all parties regain a muddy complexity we can recognize as truthful. From the assemblage of letters, testimony from friends and contemporary accounts, he gives us a rich sense of Thomas Eakins's personality: his character traits, the texture of his daily life, his values. Goodrich's image of Eakins as a man, especially as an *old* man, displays sympathy and maturity. This new portrait has lost some of the chiaroscuro of the Eakins legend, for even in his brownest decades it now appears that Eakins enjoyed some commissions, some respect as a painter, teacher, sculptor, photographer or lecturer, and that he lived an active, contented, albeit restricted social life. As the image of Eakins as a hermit or pariah blurs, it also becomes clearer that Eakins had enemies more formidable than just the prudish mothers of female art students. Some obstinacy in him continually courted confrontation, rejected compromise. The heroes and villains remain obvious, but the old opposition between stuffy, Victorian Philadelphia and its Bohemian "realist" has gained shades of gray.

The root of many of Eakins's difficulties now seems to be the complex character trait that Goodrich calls "innocence"—the combination of a genuine naiveté that left him constantly vulnerable, and a willful desire to *not* know, a sort of self-conscious inflexibility. A friend, seeing Eakins in Paris in the 1860s, remarked on his immature, "boyish" demeanor; a New York art critic, visiting in Philadelphia, was put off by his roughness. Yet music moved him to tears, and so did the attacks on the *Agnew Clinic*; despite the disappointment of

the *Gross Clinic*, Eakins never seemed prepared for the world's response. The debacle over nude models at the Academy repeated itself ten years later, when Eakins taught at Drexel. Was he oblivious to public opinion, or just determined to enact his own principles? Goodrich shows us a man who chose his own prison and yet beat noisily upon the bars.

Unfortunately, Eakins's blunt, honest, "innocent" way of going on is too easily transposed to his pictures. Goodrich's notion of an "innocent eye," which he attributes to Eakins as well as Homer and Ryder, returns us to the homespun American independent of legend, and to a self-perpetuating insularity. Arguing from a position of originality and isolation, it is difficult for Goodrich to assess Eakins's integration within the larger American art world, much less the European mainstream. Although the new book does a much more responsible job relating Eakins to specific contemporaries, Goodrich's sense of the period has not developed along with his data. As in 1933, his perception of the late-nineteenth century still rests on the historical progression of the French avant-garde as it unfolded from Courbet to Cubism. This model has never fit American painting happily; indeed, its inefficiency or awkwardness seems to have inspired the reactionary rhetoric of independence and innocence to account for the major talents of this period, such as Eakins and Homer. Goodrich has not worried about constructing an alternate American model; he simply thrusts Eakins together with Monet, and remarks (quite correctly) on their differences. Monet is not the relevant yardstick for Eakins, however, and the contemporary artists Eakins did admire and emulate are easily learned from his letters: J.L. Gérôme, Léon Bonnat, Mariano Fortuny. Goodrich finds more sympathy for these popular or academic figures today than he did in 1933, but his appreciation of their importance to Eakins remains shallow. Gerald Ackerman's persuasive article on the impact of Eakins's Parisian training seems to have been dismissed, and Eakins's method or subject categories are rarely understood to be transpositions of his Parisian experience. As David Sellin has argued, Eakins was a radical academic, a product of the reformed curriculum of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, who returned to the United States to plant his own, even more disciplined method in the studios of the Pennsylvania Academy. The radical naturalism espoused by Eakins (and Bonnat) was as controversial in the late 1860s as the nascent ideology of the Impressionists; one realist camp gained sway, however, and the other grew entrenched in conservatism. By 1880, Eakins's position was no longer progressive, and his fall from favor at the Academy may have owed as much to his inflexible insistence on an academic, naturalistic canon (which refused to entertain a more fashionable curriculum including classes in landscape, composition, decoration, illustration) as to any single confrontation over the use of nude models in women's classes. The "poetic" and decorative impulse of American art after 1880 left Eakins in a respected but unpopular rear-guard.

His realism, despite the last flowering of its seeds at the turn of the century in the work of the "Ash Can School," was the end of the humanistic representationalism of the Renaissance. The future belonged to the more subjective materialism seen in Impressionism and the idealizing or expressionistic currents of early modernism.

Goodrich understands Eakins's "realism" only in its most popular sense: as honest observation, meticulously recorded. Such a definition must slight the importance of instruction or ideology, for in this view realism is the "style-less style" of the innocent eye. The promise of honesty and objectivity remains paramount in Eakins's aesthetic, but his works should not be taken just at face value. Their effects were the product of tremendous effort and sophistication, formed by the application of academic methods and values, and colored by decidedly subjective vision. Moving through a gallery of Eakins's portraits, one is struck by the consistent color of this lens. The overall mood is introspective, almost melancholy. Surely the whole of late-nineteenth-century Philadelphia was not so depressed, even though Eakins's grasp of physiognomy and psychology convinces us that we are confronting real people from the past. Accounts tell us Susan Eakins was a peppy, fun-loving woman, while Eakins's portrait of her shortly after their marriage shows her sad-eyed and listless, far older than her years. Goodrich notes Eakins's predilection for the old, rumpled and contemplative aspects of life, but he does not accommodate this bias to his theory of Eakins's "objective" realism. Now that we know Eakins's contradictory nature so much better, it is time to consider the selective, subjective will behind all this moodily realism, and think about why we prize Eakins's "reality" so highly today.

To those seeking such issues, Eakins would respond now as he did to biographers in the past: "For the public, I believe my life is all in my works." The public had a chance to read Eakins in this fashion in the P.M.A.'s recent exhibition, which was documented by Darrel Sewell's catalogue. Sewell respected Eakins's principle by devoting most of the book to pictures. In some ways, the text had already been written; this was the exhibition to accompany Siegl's handbook. Studies and related works from other owners were gathered into the company of the museum's own collection, in order to elucidate Eakins's method as well as his achievement. Because of the scope of the museum's holdings, such a project yielded a major retrospective. As a souvenir of the experience, the catalogue bears brief, thoughtful texts summarizing Eakins's life and introducing the major groupings of the exhibition. Thankfully, it contains a complete set of reproductions. As with Goodrich's new book, the color plates are an improvement on earlier texts, giving those who missed the exhibition or those who wish to explore Eakins anew an opportunity to meet him as he wished to be discovered: "all in his works."