



FIGURING THE NEURASTHENIC THOMAS EAKINS, NERVOUS ILLNESS, AND GENDER IN VICTORIAN AMERICA

The melancholy tone and signs of weariness in the portraits of Philadelphia painter Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) have long been acknowledged. Indeed, the slouched posture, teary eyes, and tilted head of Suzanne Santje in *The Actress* (fig. 20) convey a sense of exhaustion and depression, as do the downcast gaze, drawn features, and emaciated figure of *Frank Hamilton Cushing* (fig. 21). However, these indications of physical, mental, and/or emotional fatigue have given rise to widely divergent readings. Whereas Santje's portrait has been thought to represent "the mysterious beauty ... of sadness"¹ and to show the actress "in a state of near collapse," Cushing's portrait has been seen as a "tribute to [Cushing's] daring and contributions to social science,"² revealing "the moral force of intellect."³ What did Eakins bring to these paintings that would encourage such varied reactions?

While recent Eakins scholarship attends to gender issues, it often fails to sufficiently connect these issues with the pervasive weariness shown in the portraits and, additionally, to treat this weariness within the context of period thoughts on chronic exhaustion and fatigue, most predominantly encompassed by the nervous illness that was known as "neurasthenia." It is my

contention that an exploration of Eakins's portraits of men and women at this intersection of gender and illness will enable us to understand better the divergent responses to the artist's works, as well as the subtle and elusive coding of the paintings themselves. As society perceived female and male neurasthenics in dramatically different ways, Eakins's portraits both reflected and contributed to these perceptions.⁴ Malleable in definition, neurasthenia functioned for the artist and his culture as a means of exaggerating and encompassing already-present gender myths, providing explanations for the otherwise inexplicable. It unified seemingly irreconcilable contradictions and served to control tensions both in the artist's personal life and in the wider culture of nineteenth-century America.

Also known as "nervous exhaustion" or simply as "nervousness," neurasthenia referred to a weakness of the nerves and a depletion of energy or "nerve force" that resulted in tiredness or depression. For roughly forty years following the coining of the term in 1869 by physician George Beard—notably the time span of Eakins's

FIG. 20 [facing] Thomas Eakins, *The Actress*, 1903. Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Given by Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams.



FIG. 21 Thomas Eakins, *Frank Hamilton Cushing*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 90 × 60 in. Courtesy of the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

activity—neurasthenia spread throughout America's medical and popular culture to almost epidemic proportions. Three hundred and thirty-two articles were published on nervousness in medical journals alone. A household word at the time,⁵ neurasthenia confronted Victorians in advice books and columns of popular magazines, in novels by Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser, and in advertisements, such as that for Winchester's Specific Pill, which claimed to cure "Nervousness: Exhausted or Debilitated Nerve Force." Eakins himself had a bout with the illness in 1886 and knew numerous others who suffered from the sickness; he was even friends with doctors who specialized in its

treatment. By the turn of the twentieth century neurasthenic language was so pervasive that it infiltrated the discourses of economics, religion, politics, and industry, producing terms such as "nervous bankruptcy."⁶

Definitions of the illness remained vague, however, and its frequency, symptoms, causes, and cures all varied greatly according to the patient. As neurasthenia was primarily considered an affliction of the white middle and upper classes, these differences were typically based on gender rather than on race or class. Like numerous physicians of his time, Eakins typed his female sitters as ill or on the brink of illness while showing the male neurasthenic as an anomaly of his sex. According to contemporaries, a woman was susceptible because she had a highly emotional nature and disease-prone sex organs that dictated her entire being. Although it is difficult to recover the realities of nineteenth-century women's health, the female invalid was a standard feature in American culture by the mid-1800s.⁷

Such a climate resulted in statements such as that by S. Weir Mitchell, a friend of Eakins and a prominent neurologist in the artist's hometown of Philadelphia, who claimed, "The man who does not know sick women does not know women."⁸ For Eakins, perhaps typing his female sitters as neurasthenic functioned as it did for the physicians—as a method to understand that which seemed impossible to understand, as a means of fitting problematic, mysterious, and confusing women into a neatly defined and understandable, scientific category. Indeed, with the sparse and repetitive format of *Addie* (c. 1900), *Miss Alice Kurtz* (fig. 22), *Clara* (c. 1900), *Lucy Lewis* (1896), *Maud Cook* (1895), and numerous others, these portraits appear similar to pathological studies. Not only does the artist consistently pose his sitters with tilted heads, downcast or sidelong gazes, and a three-quarter turn of the body, but he also often employs a blank background and a close-up bust format that further accentuates this categorization. Unlike the majority of portraits of the period, including those by John Singer Sargent, which emphasized lush surfaces and material surroundings, the scientific quality of these works instead places them closer to Eakins's anatomical photographs and medical

paintings such as *The Agnew Clinic*, in which several male medical assistants probe a diseased female body (fig. 23).

Other details in Eakins's portraits of women further contribute to the paintings' resemblance to pathological studies and point more directly to the symptoms of female neurasthenia. Completed in the mid-1880s, *Portrait of a Lady with a Setter Dog* (fig. 24) is a portrait of the artist's wife, who, although said to be lively and energetic, is here shown with a dull expression, weary and teary-eyed, slouching under an emotional heaviness. The overall tone is dark, with the dramatic lighting calling attention to the wrinkles on her face and the bags under her eyes. Her dress is wrinkled and unkempt as well, adding to this sense of emotional disarray. Lines droop and slope downwards in a weighty manner that is emphasized by the heavy curtain behind the sitter. Throughout the production of this painting, Eakins made alterations to his wife's frame so that her shoulders would appear smaller, making her seem even more frail and vulnerable.⁹ The most blatant sign of this weakness and weariness, however, lies at the very center of the painting, where the sitter's unusually large hand lies upward and open on her lap, impotent and useless. In all, the portrait seems to illustrate Mitchell's observation regarding the female neurasthenic: "everything wearies her—to sew, to write, to read, to walk."¹⁰

Eakins consistently repeated iconographic elements throughout his portraits of women. Almost without exception, all are shown in a state of complete inactivity with slouched, tired postures, heavy limbs, and tear-filled eyes. Along with wearily tilted heads and disheveled hair and clothes, these signs point to a state of depression, physical exhaustion, and a tendency to cry, the three most commonly noted symptoms of neurasthenia in both medical and popular literature. With dark colors, dramatic lighting, and downward sloping or jagged lines, the artist further intensified the general tone of melancholy and emotional trauma.

More specific indications of neurasthenia can be found in the carefully rendered details of the face. In *Mrs. Talcott Williams* (1891), for example, the sitter's red, mottled face, pout, and upturned eyebrows indicate teariness—a disturbed state that again is echoed by the



FIG. 22 Thomas Eakins, *Miss Alice Kurtz*, 1903. Oil on canvas, 23 × 19 in. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums. Gift in part of Mrs. John Whiteman (Alice Kurtz); Purchase in part with funds contributed by friends of John Coolidge, Director, 1948–1968.

wrinkles and crimped folds of her evening gown. In *Clara*, Eakins depicts the eyes as bloodshot and moist and gives a tenseness to the chin that signals an attempt to repress additional crying. All of these expressions are in contrast to the pensive gaze and crinkled brow of the male subject in *Henry O. Tanner* (1902). The women in *The Old Fashioned Dress* (fig. 25) and *Letitia Wilson Jordan* (1888), among others, are shown with a vacant look. As a symptom attributed to the neurasthenic, the vacant stare was originally thought to occur immediately before or after the hysterical fit, and it was later seen as a sign of the neurasthenic's unawareness of her surroundings.¹¹ Like rumpled clothes and tousled hair, the vacant stare came to be incorporated into the repertoire of iconography used to indicate mental illness in

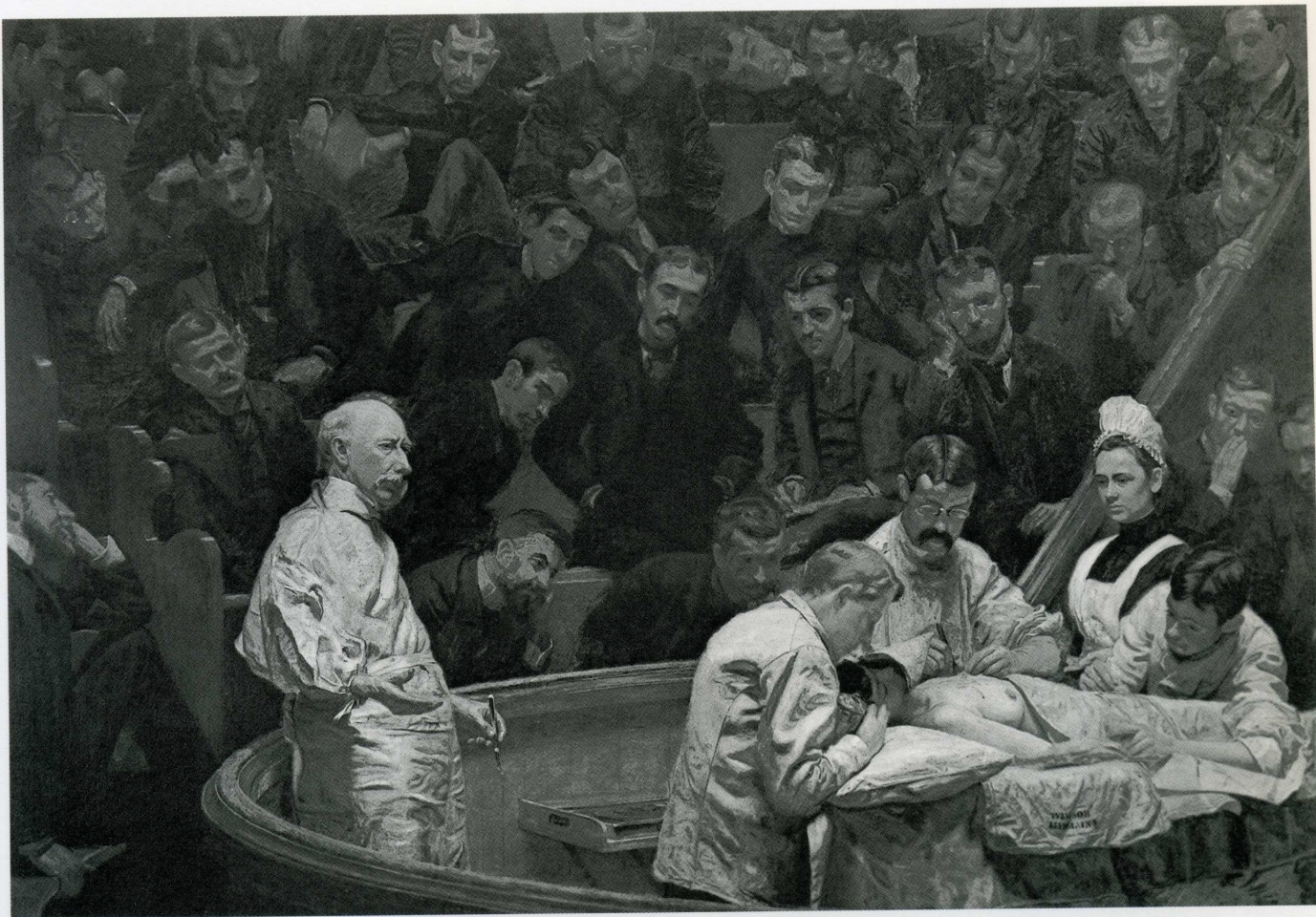


FIG. 23 Thomas Eakins, *The Agnew Clinic*, 1889. Oil on canvas, $84\frac{3}{8} \times 118\frac{1}{8}$ in. University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

painting, and it gained the praise of critics when successfully conveyed.¹² The precise detail given to Susan Eakins's hand makes it seem stiff and heavy with numbness, beyond weakness and perhaps even suggesting paralysis. In the portrait *Mary Hallock Greenewalt* (1903), the hands again seem heavy and stiff, and the neck appears extremely rigid as well.¹³ Such muscular difficulties, especially in the hands, were commonly cited as symptoms and indications of nervousness. In most cases, these "difficulties" referred to a general weakness, but in some it meant the extremes of numbness, temporary paralysis, and catalepsy, a sudden hardening or stiffness of the muscles.¹⁴

As he did his wife, Susan, Eakins usually painted women in their upper middle age, adding years to the younger sitters. Not only was menopause considered a

"disease-ridden time," but neurasthenics were sometimes noted to have aged and grayed prematurely due to a high level of emotional stress.¹⁵ A comparison of *Amelia Van Buren* (1891) and a photo that shows the sitter to be blond-haired and smooth-skinned reveals Eakins's deliberate aging of Van Buren in the oil painting.¹⁶ Eakins took the liberty of changing the appearance of other sitters as well. Helen Parker noted that through subsequent stages of *The Old Fashioned Dress*, Eakins painted her "really small and dainty nose more and more bulbous," an exaggeration readily visible when the painting is contrasted with a photograph

FIG. 24 [facing] Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of a Lady with a Setter Dog*, c. 1885. Oil on canvas, 30×23 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1933 (23.139).





FIG. 25 Thomas Eakins, *The Old Fashioned Dress*—Portrait of Miss Helen Parker, c. 1908. Oil on canvas, 60 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Given by Mrs. Thomas Eakins and Miss Mary Adeline Williams.

of Parker.¹⁷ Though it is likely somewhat retouched, a publicity photo from around 1900, showing the smooth-complexioned actress Suzanne Santje in comparison with her wrinkled and heavy-featured appearance in Eakins's painting, is further evidence that the artist, far from being a simple recorder of facts, willingly transformed the realities in front of him.¹⁸

Eakins gained familiarity with the symptoms of female neurasthenia not only through his friendships with neurologists Horatio Wood and Mitchell, his interest in medicine, and the pervasiveness of neur-

asthenic representation in mass culture. Events in his personal life also contributed to his awareness of these signs of female nervousness and invalidism. First and foremost was the death of his mother. In June 1872, after two years of suffering and requiring constant care, Caroline Cowperthwait Eakins died from a recorded case of "exhaustion from mania."¹⁹ Eakins had returned to Philadelphia in June 1870 to live with his parents after four years of study in Europe, and he would have been present to witness the entirety of his mother's decline. The premature deaths of three other loved ones likely added to his sense of women as unstable and unpredictable, prone to illness, and weak. In 1879, his fiancée, Kathrin Crowell, died of meningitis. Only three years later, his favorite sister, Margaret, who had the burden of managing the household after his mother's death, died from typhoid at age twenty-nine. Although she was shown in photographs as active and sporty and remembered by her nieces as a fun-loving aunt and a "grand person,"²⁰ the energetic aspects of Margaret's personality are not revealed in Eakins's portraits of his sister, *Margaret* and *Margaret in Skating Costume* (both c. 1871). Instead, the artist uses the formal elements found in his other portraits of women—bust format, tilted head, downcast gaze, harsh lighting—to portray his sister as brooding and wearied beyond her years. Six years after Margaret's death, Eakins's youngest sister, Caroline, died in 1889 at the age of twenty-four. She and her brother had not yet made amends over a feud that began three years earlier when Caroline heard about the indecent behavior of which Eakins was accused—sexual relations not only with his female students but also with their sister Margaret. From 1888 to 1892 a close friend and former student, Lilian Hammitt, sent Eakins a series of love letters discussing their upcoming marriage and his anticipated divorce from Susan; Eakins responded that she was "laboring under false notions," excusing her plans as a "mental disorder" and, later, as a "form of insanity."²¹ Ultimately, Hammitt was put into a hospital. Though some claimed she was not insane, in Eakins's mind this was yet another encounter with an unstable, nervous female.²² Finally, Ella Crowell, Eakins's seventeen-year-old niece who aspired to become an artist, came to live with Susan and him in

1890. She was committed to a hospital in 1896 and ended her life soon after. Ella's father had accused Eakins of corrupting, disturbing, and perhaps molesting his daughter. He banished the artist from the family farm at Avondale and forbade him contact with his nine other nephews and nieces—a result that would have confirmed for Eakins that the sick female was an especially troublesome figure.²³

In light of such biographical issues, motivations for Eakins to paint the female neurasthenic become readily apparent. Around the time of his mother's death he began his excessively detailed perspective studies for his series of paintings showing rowers on the Schuylkill, perhaps expressing a sort of obsessive need to control the uncontrollable—nature, woman, illness, and death. The public's continual lack of acceptance of him and his art, the scandals in which he may have been unjustly accused, and his forced resignation from the Pennsylvania Academy would all have contributed to this need for regulation and mastery. As with the perspective studies, depictions of women with signs of neurasthenia functioned to fulfill this need: not only might they have quelled any guilt he may have felt for causing or not preventing their illnesses,²⁴ but they also would have lessened the women's threat to Eakins, whether this be the damaging of his reputation, the unjust blame and ostracism by living relatives, the pain caused by the women's introspection and death, or their potential challenge to male power and traditional gender roles.

The desire for self-control was also a likely impetus for producing these paintings. This applies both to the artist's alleged homosexual desires and to his status as a recovering neurasthenic—identities often conflated in the public mind. Physicians promoted self-restraint, control, and emotional detachment as a means of coping with the ever-present potential death of loved ones and decreasing the chance of nervousness.²⁵ As historian G. J. Barker-Benfield and others have noted, such demands for self-control were "often translated into a need to control women and resist their civilizing influences."²⁶ While the artist's manly "camp cure" out West allowed him an immediate escape from these feminine, "civilizing influences," Eakins's career-long representation of the female neurasthenic acted as

continued self-therapy through the transference of controlled object from the self to the nervous woman.²⁷ Further, this figure provided an "even less vigorous yardstick,"²⁸ one even more feminine and emotional, by which to judge himself.

In compliance with the troubling female presences in Eakins's own life, pervasive cultural concepts of the female invalid also influenced the artist's perceptions of the neurasthenic woman. In literature, popular magazines, and medical studies, female neurasthenics were represented as conniving, power-hungry, sympathy-craving, passive-aggressive creatures who endangered innocent lovers and husbands or impressionable younger women.²⁹ Although neurasthenia was commonly associated with the socially aberrant or intellectually ambitious woman, the neurasthenic as mother was considered particularly harmful. This may be another reason why Eakins did not depict woman as mother, though his sitters were certainly in the likely age group. While a healthy mother embodied self-sacrifice, the sick mother abandoned her duties and selfishly focused attention on her own ailments, jeopardizing the well-being of innocent family and friends who previously had depended on her. This configuration of the neurasthenic held particular significance for Eakins, considering that his invalid mother died early in his career, that his career was one of continual failure, and that the artist himself had a bout with neurasthenia.³⁰ The invalid mother was detrimental to the well-being of her whole family, but she held a special threat to the development of masculine traits in her son through her "demoralizing" and feminizing influences.³¹

In many cases—in Eakins's painting and in the wider culture—the danger posed by the neurasthenic woman commingled with her status as desired object, a combination derived from her association with "essential" womanhood and the dichotomies this concept incorporated throughout the nineteenth century. The state of illness not only exaggerated the contradictory roles of women as angelic martyr and evil temptress but also encompassed them both.³² For the artist and his culture, emphasizing the female neurasthenic as sexual object expressed this simultaneous desire and threat; the fantasy of sexual possession served a

metonymic function in which it stood as a substitute for a more general and complete control over and knowledge of the neurasthenic. The disheveled hair and clothes of many of Eakins's female sitters, while showing a distaste for the feminine and refined, also alluded to the sexual, as do these sitters' submissive, averted gazes. Medicine's treatment of the sick woman firmly established her erotic quality. Case descriptions of female patients often used sexual language, such as "an erotic tinge may be observable in her manner"³³ or Mitchell's suggestive "Too weak for wholesome restraint, she yields."³⁴ In his widely popular lecture demonstrations, Jean-Martin Charcot, as the master doctor, pushed buttonlike "hysterogenic," or ultra-sensitive, points on the patient's body to induce a convulsive, orgasmic hysteric fit. Whether viewed as a monster to be tamed, or as innocent, childlike, and vulnerable, the eroticized sick woman was customary in the arts as well. In Tony Robert-Fleury's 1878 painting, *Pinel Freeing the Madwomen*,³⁵ the patients rip open their blouses to expose their breasts, kneel, kiss men's hands, and willingly render themselves defenseless against the men's visual inspection of their bodies.³⁶

Given the much more ambivalent feelings about male sickness and the biologically grounded association of women and illness, it is not surprising that indications of neurasthenia in Eakins's portraits of men are infrequent, ambiguous, and indirect. Whereas the female sitters are passive, emotional, and, in nearly all cases, confined to the interior, the artist depicts men as thinkers and doers, actively pursuing their specialty in the office or the outdoors; the teary eyes, vacant stares, and dimpled chins used to indicate neurasthenia in the portraits of women are nearly absent here. In this and in his reluctance to show men and women in the same painting, Eakins subscribed to the prevalent gender ideology of "separate spheres." In those few paintings that depict men and women together, such as *The Gross Clinic* (1875) and *The Agnew Clinic*, the contrast of the sexes is heightened through comparison: the women are passive and emotional, the men active and collected.³⁷

Among the portraits of men alone, the most explicitly laudatory are the sporting scenes³⁸ and the *portraits d'apparat*, or those showing professionals in their work

environment. In the latter, for example, *Professor William D. Marks* (1886), the men are typically shown seated at their desks, at the site of their intellectual creativity and in the midst of work. They are surrounded by their inventions, tools of the trade, or masses of books—all material evidence and verification of their productivity (as opposed to Eakins's childless women) and intellectual capacity. In contrast to the paintings of seated women who slouch or lean back in their chairs, these men sit assured and confident and often lean forward with their forearms on the desk, their hands holding a pencil or keeping a place in a book. Intersecting diagonals and straight lines give action and vibrancy to the canvases, in striking contrast to the drooping lines of *The Actress* or *Lady with a Setter Dog*. In others, masculine signs of activity, intelligence, and professional standing are more subtle, whether simply the held piece of paper in *Professor Leslie Miller* (1901) or the robed attire of the figure in *The Dean's Roll Call* (1899) or, in both cases, the title. Even in the bust portraits, the men are usually shown with brows crinkled in thought, gazes confronting the viewer, heads held upright, and direct frontal or impersonal profile poses. Unlike the blank stares, averted gazes, tilted heads, and three-quarter turn commonly found in the portraits of women, these iconographic elements deemphasize any emotional content.³⁹

Nonetheless, neurasthenia is occasionally indicated in Eakins's portraits of men. While these signs at first appear to be entirely absent from the *portraits d'apparat*, the sloped shoulders and downcast gaze in *Frank Hamilton Cushing*,⁴⁰ for example, or the red-rimmed eyes of *Professor Henry Rowland* (1897) suggest otherwise. Such elements seem incongruous with the portraits' overall emotional reticence and the abundant signs of the sitters' professional successes (such as the Zuni artifacts surrounding the anthropologist Cushing, or Rowland's invention and claim to fame, the spectroscope, prominently displayed in the scientist's hand). However, the subtle suggestions of weariness gain meaning and clarity when read in the context of period discussions of male nervousness. Physicians specializing in this area often downplayed the emotional excess so crucial to the diagnosis of female neurasthenia. Beard, for example, made it

clear that "nervousness does not mean . . . a predominance of the emotional, with a relative inferiority of intellectual nature." He even invented a term to distinguish nervousness in professionals from that found in bored housewives: "cerebrasthenia," or brain neurasthenia. Further, unlike the biological cause of neurasthenia in women, overwork was cited as the main cause of nervousness in men, thus emphasizing this state as exceptional rather than as natural and normal. Through showing mental and physical exhaustion, rather than emotional strain, Eakins best communicated the "distinguished malady" that afflicted these male professionals.⁴¹

For nineteenth-century viewers of these portraits, neurasthenic traits would add to, rather than subtract from, the overall heroic tone, particularly in the context of other valorizing iconography. In men, the illness could signal intelligence and fulfillment of duty, determination, and success in their careers—all evidence of virile manhood—while also serving as a badge of their martyrdom and dedication to the progress of the race and nation. Some believed that male neurasthenics were the "superior individuals, the scholars, poets and statesmen" who, physician Mary Putnam Jacobi claimed, "were ready to sacrifice their health for higher goals."⁴² Thus, the artist's insistence that Professor Miller wear an old jacket and Dean Holland old shoes (which still identify them as professionals)⁴³ could have been an effort to symbolize, in Mitchell's terms, this "wear and tear"⁴⁴ due to overwork as well as a disregard for material appearance in a whirlwind of intellectual creativity. However, while celebrating "higher goals" and social progress, these portraits also seem to share with Eakins's Arcadian paintings and nostalgic historical works⁴⁵ reservations about the advent of modernity, believed by some physicians to be the cause of nervousness.⁴⁶ By showing that the illness could afflict the leading American thinkers and producers, Eakins may have been revealing what he felt was a crisis in the nation: the approaching downfall of the caretakers of society, and thus of advanced society itself.⁴⁷

Although the advent of cerebrasthenia allowed men to be ill and retain a sense of masculinity, this state of illness had a long history as one of weakness and thus, as mentioned, as one closely associated with women.⁴⁸

While the woman became like the "unschooled child" when afflicted with neurasthenia, Mitchell believed that when nervous "the strong man becomes like the average woman."⁴⁹ In this sense, then, even as neurasthenia was seen as a sign of manly success and intellect and its cure an indication of strong will, it continued to carry the stigma of failure and weakness for succumbing to emotions and malady in the first place.⁵⁰ If neither overwork nor an unusual, traumatic occurrence could be cited as the cause, doctors were quick to note their male patient was "a delicate looking man" with a "peculiar constitution."⁵¹ Perhaps it was this ambiguous relation between neurasthenia and men—on the one hand a sign of heroism, on the other a sign of effeminacy—that kept Eakins from more frequently showing signs of nervousness in his *portraits d'apparat*.

A handful of emotionally charged anomalies among Eakins's portraits of men include more explicit and more feminine signs of neurasthenia. Hardly heroicizing, these paintings bear striking similarities to the formal, iconographic, and emotional content of Eakins's portraits of women; the artist presents the teary-eyed sitters in sharply dramatic lighting, at a three-quarter angle, and with tilted heads and downcast or vacant gazes. With the exception of the self-portraits, these works portray youths: three of Eakins's own students (*Samuel Murray* from 1889, *Francis Ziegler* from 1890, and *Portrait of Douglass M. Hall* [fig. 26]) and one of a musician, *The Pianist* (1896). With their clear, neurasthenic signs of emotional instability and their effeminizing iconography, the portraits of the young men could indicate the artist's wish to show the inner conflict and trauma of youth, of passing into an unsure, demanding world of adulthood, of coping with a burgeoning sexuality. Representing these young men with signs of neurasthenia only further communicated their liminal status of passage. Contemporary thought on nervous illness held that young men, like all women, were especially susceptible to neurasthenia and emotional breakdowns caused by the stress and strains of the demands of adulthood. Significantly, all four young men were artists (like Eakins), and the general pressure to gain manly success in their careers was magnified by that potentially feminine profession, adding to the already

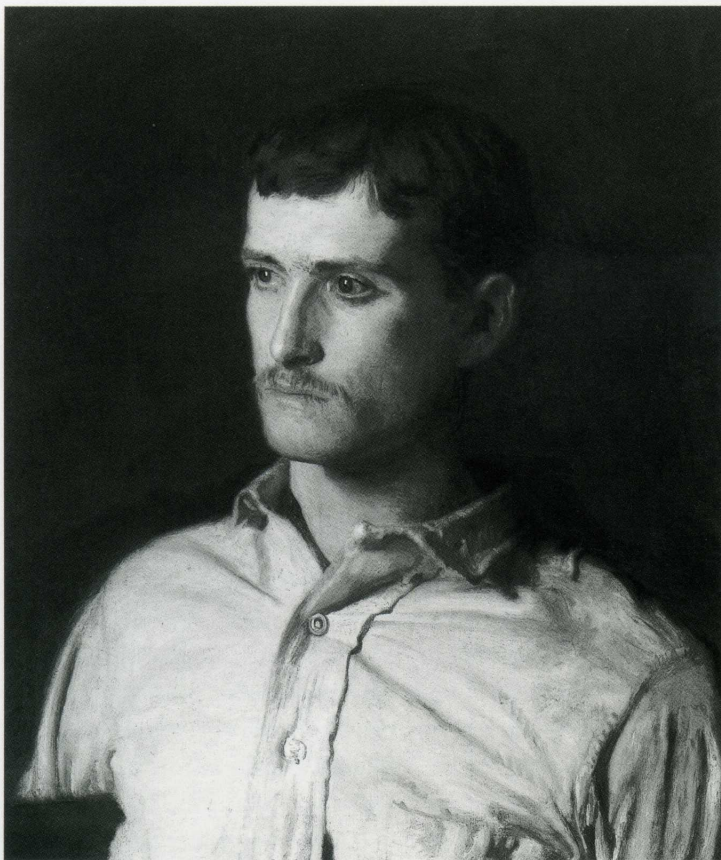


FIG. 26 Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of Douglass M. Hall*, c. 1888. Oil on canvas, 24½ × 20½ in. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Given by Mrs. William E. Studdiford.

high gender conflict of youth.⁵² In *Portrait of Douglass M. Hall*, especially, a melancholy tone accompanies signs of developing sexuality—the visible though somewhat sparse mustache, the strong jawline, and the breadth of shoulders and muscularity, which, judging by the taut lines of the sitter's shirt, were only recently acquired.

Eakins's own experience of young manhood supports this interpretation. Victorian America experienced a widespread gender crisis and questioning of sexual identity, and the artist had a number of personal "failings" in the early 1870s. As Martin Berger notes, Eakins "bought his way out of Civil War service, was unmarried, lived and worked in his parents' home, was engaged in a profession that had long held effeminate associations, and was unable to earn his own living." He had, "in other words, failed to achieve a number of important 'milestones' of manhood."⁵³ Berger looks to the rowing pictures—with their explicit display of

unquestionable masculinity not only in their emphasis on physical musculature and prowess, but also in the attention paid to the outdoors and wide open spaces and to such themes as determination and hard work—as evidence of, and an attempt to compensate for, the artist's gender insecurities. Though not as obviously masculine as the rowing pictures, the portraits of the four young men would have served as compensation as well. Portraying these sitters as emotionally distressed and vulnerable allowed Eakins to normalize his own experience; the insecurities he had as a young man are divorced from his personal failings and become, rather, an intrinsic part of the initiation into manhood.

Secondly, these portraits present homoerotic images, functioning for Eakins as a sort of fantasy, a means to sexual domination through images of young men's emotional and sexual vulnerability. The portraits have been described by one scholar as "romantic" and "sensual"—hardly the adjectives one would use in conjunction with the paintings of middle-aged intellectuals.⁵⁴ Indeed, in comparison with the bulk of depictions of men, these youths are quite feminized and sexualized.⁵⁵ While this reading may partially be inspired by the sitters' rather boyish faces and curly hair, the artist obviously emphasized certain elements. Through lighting, pose, and the close-up, bust format, Eakins accentuated lush lashes and full, curving lips, or fluffy, bright-pink bow ties, contributing to the overall designation of these sitters as effeminate sex objects.

Homosexuality itself was commonly considered a form of illness. Contemporary articles on homosexuality, labeled "perverted sexuality" and "sodomy," were published in medical journals on both nervous and physical disease, thus identifying homosexuality as an unhealthy state that needed to be cured.⁵⁶ The converse was also true—neurasthenia could be a sign of homosexuality or effeminacy. Medical studies often noted the male neurasthenic's thin, anemic appearance and lack of manly musculature.⁵⁷ French physician Jean Martin Charcot explained male hysterics by claiming that they were unusually "effeminate,"⁵⁸ and, more scornfully, Emile Batault in 1885 wrote that hysterical men were "timid and fearful men. . . Coquettish and eccentric, they prefer ribbons and scarves to hard manual labor."



FIG. 27 Thomas Eakins, *Self-Portrait*, 1902. Oil on canvas, 30 × 25 in. National Academy, New York.

Other physicians actually noted that these men were homosexual.⁵⁹ With his four portraits, as with the Arcadia scenes and *Swimming Hole* (c. 1883–85), Eakins may have been taking a nostalgic look back to youth⁶⁰ when homosocial and even homoerotic desire was considered normal. In tracing a number of intimate letters between young male friends who addressed each other more like lovers, Anthony Rotondo finds that “in young manhood, romantic—even passionate—friendships between males were socially accepted.”⁶¹ However, for a married, working man, the romance and carefree play of youth were set aside: “Friendship did not disappear from the lives of mature men, but it never regained the passionate intensity of youth.”⁶² While the artist’s relationships with his students have long been a point of speculation,⁶³ the point is not to claim that the artist was homosexual, though this may well have been the

case, but to suggest that he indeed felt some sort of tension between homosexual desire and anxiety, and he may have used his canvases as a site to work out, consciously or not, this fantasy and tension.⁶⁴

The only other works that show such conspicuous signs of emotional trauma are the pair of self-portraits completed in 1902. In the first, an unfinished, closely cropped image, the artist peers out at the viewer with a cocked eyebrow. Combined with the dark colors, dramatic lighting, and violent brush strokes, these elements give the work a sinister tone; the artist appears vengeful and angry, even mentally unsound. In the other (fig. 27), a completed work, Eakins posed himself in a role that is not as directly threatening. Using a less imposing, slightly larger format, he shows himself with a tilted head, mussed hair, teary eyes, and a frowning mouth, accentuated by the sloping line of his mustache.

Such iconographic elements clearly affiliate this work with his portraits of women and the several young men. Unlike these prototypes, however, his emotional, "troubled" look is combined with a confrontational, questioning gaze. The result is a painting that readily evokes sympathy from the viewer yet also maintains the accusatory tone of the first self-portrait.

Eakins chose to depict himself with the more explicitly neurasthenic iconography of his portraits of emotional women rather than in the usual format he used to show men as intellectual heroes. Both self-portraits were in response to the requirement for associate membership into the National Academy. After roughly thirty years of neglect and lack of appreciation from the academy, the membership must have seemed a mere token offering, and the artist may have used these self-portraits to communicate his bitterness and scorn.⁶⁵ In the evolution of the self-portraits, he progressed from the overtly hostile and aggressive tone in the sketch (perhaps a way to vent some preliminary anger) to the more clever, passive-aggressive device in the finished painting. Rather than turning members of the academy away through threat, the latter painting may have been intended to evoke guilt for not recognizing the artist earlier and thus preventing his emotional weariness.

Eakins indeed promoted himself as the isolated, underappreciated genius, the overworked intellectual; his use of distinct neurasthenic signs in his finished self-portrait only aided in communicating this status. His 1894 statement stands as just one of many pieces of evidence: "My honors are misunderstanding, persecution, and neglect, enhanced because unsought."⁶⁶ Contrasting the cosmopolitanism suggested by William Merritt Chase's atelier, Eakins left his studio undecorated and messy, with signs of activity everywhere—casts, photographs, works in progress, notes to himself simply written on the wall—giving the message to all who entered that he was constantly in a whirlwind of creative mental activity, similar to the intellectual heroes whom he portrayed with open books scattered across their desks. Analogous to the studio was his unkempt appearance—yet another indication of neurasthenic status—represented in the final self-portrait by his

mussed hair and unevenly trimmed mustache. Combined with his reputation as extra-sensitive and emotional (he was known to have cried at musical performances),⁶⁷ such physical disarray draws upon mythical notions of the artist as gifted seer, as underappreciated because he is ahead of his time, as a mad genius obsessive about his creations and constantly at work. It also works on the notion of the godlike androgyny of genius, in which emotional tendencies translate into enhanced perception. Not surprisingly, the concept of the artist as mad genius entered into nineteenth-century theories of neurosis. One vivid example is Dr. Jacques-Joseph Moreau's (1804–1884) "tree of nervousity," in which each branch divides nervous illnesses into types, one branch reserved specifically for "exceptional intelligence" and with a special sub-branch labeled "Arts."⁶⁸ In addition, neurasthenia was epidemic among cultural producers and leaders of the time. Those afflicted include both Beard and Mitchell, Theodore Roosevelt, Thorstein Veblen, Jane Addams, Edith Wharton, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, and William and Henry James, among a long list of others.⁶⁹ By depicting himself as explicitly neurasthenic and as possessing an otherwise "feminine" sensitivity, Eakins claimed his status among this prestigious group and, undeniably, marked himself as the overworked, misunderstood genius, fully deserving the honors that came all too late.⁷⁰

In all its forms—the sexualized, deceptive temptress, the selfish mother, or the rebellious feminist; the heroic intellectual, the troubled effeminate youth, or the mad genius—neurasthenia provided for Eakins what it did for much of late nineteenth-century America: a magnifier of already present realities and myths, an answer to questions, a definition that embraced contradictions intact that were otherwise incoherent and impossible to unify. On a personal, psychological level, figuring the neurasthenic functioned for Eakins as a means of expressing and controlling the anxiety and tension within himself and his sexuality, his identity as a neurasthenic, and his problematic relationships with nervous women. For us, reinscribing the neurasthenic onto his portraits both clarifies their ambiguity and, at the same time, retains it. The reinscription explains

the worn appearance of many sitters and the divergent messages and interpretations of their weariness, but this explanation is nuanced and multifaceted, acknowledging the very real complexities and contradictions of the paintings, of their surrounding culture, and of the artist that produced them.

Notes

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1. Sylvan Schendler, *Eakins* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1967), 145.
2. William J. Clark, "The Iconography of Gender in Thomas Eakins Portraiture," *American Studies* 32, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 17, 21.
3. Schendler, 138.
4. Other researchers who have mentioned a possible connection between Eakins's portraits and neurasthenia are Lifton, Johns, Clark, and Lutz. Lifton makes considerable contributions to discussions of the similarities of the careers of and the personal relationship between the neurologist Mitchell and Eakins. The latter three explorations are more brief. See Norma Lifton, "Thomas Eakins and S. Weir Mitchell: Images in Cures in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art* 2 (1987); Elizabeth Johns, *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); and Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
5. Francis G. Gosling, *Before Freud: Neurasthenia and the American Medical Community, 1870–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 50, 78–79.
6. Lutz, 2, 217.
7. For more background on neurasthenia, see Gosling, and George Frederick Drinka, *The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady and the Victorians* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); in relation to gender, see Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), and Anthony E. Rotondo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). For contemporary sources, see George M. Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1881); S. Weir Mitchell, "Clinical Lecture on Nervousness in the Male," *The Medical News and Library* 35 (December 1877): 177–84; Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1888); and Mitchell, *Fat and Blood: An Essay on the Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia and Hysteria* (London: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1891).
8. Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient*, 10.

9. Ellwood C. Parry, "The Thomas Eakins Portrait of Sue and Harry: Or, When Did the Artist Change His Mind?" *Arts Magazine* 53, no. 9 (May 1979): 146–53.
10. Mitchell, *Fat and Blood*, 30.
11. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 190–91.
12. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 43.
13. Generally, the awkwardness of this and other portraits has been attributed to the fact that the artist did not know the sitter. However, Eakins and Greenewalt were, in fact, friends. See Lloyd Goodrich, "About a Man Who Did Not Care to Be Written About: Portraits in Friendship of Thomas Eakins," *Arts Magazine* 53, 9 (May 1979): 96–100.
14. Gosling, 48; Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient*, 120.
15. Smith-Rosenberg, 206.
16. Another photo of the sitter, also dated c. 1891 (Olympia Galleries, Philadelphia), gives Van Buren a more hollowed face, thus indeed looking more like her aged appearance in the portrait. Van Buren is one of the few female sitters who we know suffered from a chronic illness, periodically having to leave Philadelphia for treatment in Detroit. The nature of this illness, its treatment, and its time span are all unknown. If Van Buren did show signs of aging, depression, and illness at the time of Eakins's portrait, the artist only exaggerated these features through methods of lighting, pose, and diminution of the figure by placing her in a large, bulky chair.
17. Gordon Hendricks, *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins* (New York: Grossman, 1972).
18. In addition to such alterations, Eakins was also disinclined to represent certain figures altogether. Although the opportunity to show women as active, outdoors, or heroic in duty was not as prevalent then as now, it is incorrect to think that Eakins had no other option than to depict women as passive, emotional, and confined to the interior. Hendricks points out that photographs by the artist of women horseback riding or swimming show precisely how disinclined he was to incorporate these images of activity into his paintings of women. Considering that Eakins preferred to adhere to roles that better complied with the prevailing traditional thoughts on gender, it seems striking that he did not once depict woman as mother. The absence appears particularly odd since he took so many photographs of Frances, Margaret, and Susan with children; see Gordon Hendricks, *The Life and Work of Thomas Eakins* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1974). The subject was one that could easily have been heroicized, comparable to the images of male leaders he chose to depict. As motherhood represented healthy, functioning womanhood and, further, was sometimes seen as a cure for sickness, the lack of the mother figure in his

paintings may have been an additional way for Eakins to indicate woman's illness.

19. Lloyd Goodrich, *Thomas Eakins*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

20. Margaret McHenry, *Thomas Eakins, Who Painted* (Oreland, PA: M. McHenry, 1946), 95.

21. Kathleen Foster and Cheryl Liebold, *Writing About Eakins* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 98, 99n. 9.

22. Given their friendship and Eakins's paternalistic monetary and emotional support of Hammitt, he may have felt that he could have done more to help Hammitt, or that he had somehow been the cause of her illness by misleading her about his intentions and feelings.

23. The troublesome nature of Eakins's personal relations with females often manifested itself in his seemingly hostile and condescending treatment of the opposite sex. Such behavior included the artist's touching and poking of his sitters' breasts, persistently urging them to pose nude (Hendricks, *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins*), exposing his naked body to a young model, using "feminine" as a derogatory adjective, and making such comments as "I do not believe that the great painting or sculpture or surgery will ever be done by women" (Foster and Liebold, 139n. 9, 236). For more on Eakins's relationships with women, see also Goodrich, and William Innes Homer, *Thomas Eakins: His Life and Art* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), 179.

24. Whether he felt this guilt or not, he was still accused of fault in the case of Ella Crowell and Lilian Hammitt, and it is likely that these accusations may have had some effect on him.

25. Barbara Sicherman, "The Paradox of Prudence: Mental Health in the Gilded Age," *The Journal of American History* 62, 4 (March 1976): 890-912.

26. Herndl, 80.

27. Whereas inactivity, dependence, and domesticity defined the rest cure for women, the men often underwent the camp or exercise cure, which prescribed large amounts of activity and outdoor excursions. See Roy Porter, "The Body and the Mind, the Doctor and the Patient," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, ed. Sander L. Gilman et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 225-85, and Lutz, 32. On the male desire to control and resist the female civilizing influence, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 3-61, and Rotondo, 232-46.

28. Barker-Benfield, 258.

29. See David Rein, *S. Weir Mitchell as a Psychiatric Novelist* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952).

30. With the theory that nervous strength could be inherited, "parents were held accountable for 'husbanding' their own nervous energy so that their children would not be handicapped in the race of life" (Gosling, 88).

31. In the very act of painting, Eakins was able to limit the actions and emotions of his subjects and avoid the extremities of neurosis (the torrents of tears, the uncontrollable, seizure-like "fits"). By eternally preserving the ill woman on canvas and turning her image literally into an aesthetic object, Eakins could gain the detachment suggested by physicians and stave off the emotional pain of her death. Repeatedly painting his female sitters' gaze as indirect and away from himself, as seen in *Alice Kurtz* and *Addie*, among others, was yet another means of solidifying his control and averting the neurasthenic's potential harm.

32. Also see Oliver Wendell Holmes, quoted in Smith-Rosenberg, 207; and also Drinka, 202, and Rein, 103-4.

33. Porter, in Gilman, *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, 254.

34. Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient*, 119.

35. An 1887 painting by André Brouillet (like Eakins, a student of Gérôme's) of Charcot's lecture hall shows the neurotic female, vulnerable and acquiescent in her fainting, further sexualized by her loose, fallen blouse.

36. Some scholars have suggested that Eakins was expressing a form of sympathy for, or even empathy with, women through the production of these works, providing a sort of feminist critique of patriarchy (Clark, "Iconography of Gender," 6, 26). However, given the prevailing gender ideology as well as the difference in cures and connotations of his illness as a man, this sympathy could only have been a patronizing one, much like the "pitying patronage" and "condescending tenderness" that male physicians felt toward their female patients (Golden et al., 111, 116; Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient*, 11). Though Eakins certainly had the ability to criticize his surrounding culture, to endow him with such great powers of sympathy is to see him as transcending his own time and gender role to achieve the mythical identity of the artist as a gifted seer, a neutral and omniscient genius.

37. For more in-depth treatment of gender in the *Clinic* paintings, see, for example, Diana E. Long, "The Medical World of *The Agnew Clinic*: A World We Have Lost," *Prospects* 11 (1987): 185-98; or Judith Fryer, "The Body in Pain in Thomas Eakins' *Agnew Clinic*," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 30 (Winter 1991): 191-209.

38. For a thorough discussion of the rowing paintings and their heroic element, see Elizabeth Johns, "Max Schmitt in a Single Scull or *The Champion Single Sculls*," in Schendler, *Eakins*.

39. For examples of such iconography in Eakins's portraits of men, see Frank Linton (1904), William Merritt Chase (1899), and Henry O. Tanner (1902).

40. According to William Truettner ("Dressing the Part: Thomas Eakins' Portrait of Frank Hamilton Cushing," *American Art Journal* 17 [Spring 1985]: 48-72), Cushing's four-and-a-half-year stay (a few years prior to this portrait) in the Southwest to study the Zuni culture ruined his health and resulted in his suffering bouts of anxiety regarding his cultural identity (50-52). Perhaps these individual stories account for the appearance of neurasthenia in the portraits of men.

41. George M. Beard, quoted in Lutz, 6.
42. Sicherman, 911.
43. Hendricks, *The Photographs of Thomas Eakins*, 250.
44. Mitchell, *Wear and Tear; or, Hints for the Overworked* (London: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1871).
45. See, for example, Eakins's painting *In Grandmother's Time* (1876).
46. Gosling, 90.
47. For more on the work ethic of Victorian manhood, see Rotondo. Others, such as George M. Beard, also expressed "fear of the possible degeneration of the handful of people who are the caretakers of a fragile civilization," cited in Lutz, 7.
48. Even the mad genius myth, while almost exclusively associated with illness in men, was designated for the unusual, those extra-sensitive gifted artists and thinkers who were so above others as to, like God, combine traits of both sexes.
49. Mitchell, "Clinical Lecture on Nervousness in the Male," 179.
50. See Lutz, and Rotondo, 222–46, for discussions of these differing attitudes toward male illness.
51. Mitchell, "Clinical Lecture on Nervousness in the Male," 182.
52. See Rotondo, 56–91, for more on young manhood, gender insecurities, and male compensation in the Victorian era.
53. Martin Berger, "Painting Victorian Manhood," in *Thomas Eakins: The Rowing Pictures*, exh. cat., Yale University Art Gallery, ed. Helen A. Cooper (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 102–4.
54. Schendler, 111.
55. During this time, homosexuality was defined as specifically feminine; Beard said homosexuals were "men become women" (Rotondo, 276–77).
56. Whitney Davis, "Erotic Revision in Thomas Eakins's Narratives of Male Nudity," *Art History* 17, no. 3 (September 1994): 301–41. Davis cites the following examples: William Dickinson, "A Case of Sodomy," *St. Louis Medical and Surgical Journal* 40 (1881): 196–97 (which notes that anal intercourse is "frequently committed" among boys); G. Alder Blumer, "A Case of Perverted Sexual Instinct," *American Journal of Insanity* 39 (1882): 22–25; and J. C. Shaw and G. N. Ferris, "Perverted Sexual Instinct," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 10 (1883): 184–204. Davis is one of several scholars who have recently explored Eakins's relation to homosexuality.
57. Gosling, 39.
58. Drinka, 101.
59. Porter, in Gilman et. al., *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, 289.
60. That Whitney Davis, 330, has pointed out that some of the figures in the *Swimming Hole*, including Eakins himself, are far past their youth even further supports this scene as a sign of "escape," though temporary, from the adult world of responsibility and strict heterosexuality.
61. For a discussion of these letters, see Rotondo, 75–91.
62. Ibid., 7, 90–91.
63. It is well known that he formed close friendships with many of them, particularly with Samuel Murray. The two were said to have spent much time with one another and to have taken long trips together, and Murray did not get married until after Eakins's death. In addition, Eakins let only Murray feed him on his deathbed, refusing the offers of women, such as Addie and his wife, to do so (Hendricks, *Life and Work of Thomas Eakins*, 221–22, 276). The artist and his students often posed nude for each other, and though at first this may simply seem a typical act of economy and practicality, it gains additional meaning in this context.
64. A similar dynamic of conflict appears in other paintings by Eakins as well, namely *Salutat* and *The Swimming Hole*, in which the artist places homoerotic elements in the context of a safely masculine sporting atmosphere or the innocent boyhood world of play. See Davis, 315–18, 328, for more on the homoerotic elements of *The Swimming Hole*.
65. For other indications of the artist's bitterness, see Goodrich, 201. Darell Sewell also made this connection, though in a somewhat different context. See his entry on the portraits in *Thomas Eakins*, ed. John Wilmerding (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993). Although Eakins himself underwent a period of nervous exhaustion in 1886, these portraits were painted a full sixteen years later, and thus the experience seems an unlikely reason for the portraits' outcome. Lutz notes that neurasthenia was described by many period authors as "caused by a society with too strenuous a reaction to scandal and too disciplinary a reaction to scandalous desires" (52–55). It may have been such a critical statement on society's overreaction to scandal that Eakins was trying to communicate with the representation of himself as neurasthenic.
66. Goodrich, 160.
67. Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Paintings: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 115.
68. Moreau, known as the creator of the "genius myth" as an explanation of neurosis, worked most of his life at the Bicetre, the counterpart for men of the Salpêtrière, the famed Parisian hospital for female neurotics.
69. Lutz, 19.
70. These self-portraits, in their depiction of an overtly emotional artist suffering from inner turmoil, stand in a long tradition of artists' self-portraits—for example, some of those by Rembrandt and Courbet. This would further solidify the view that Eakins was trying to place himself within a tradition of "genius" artists.