

## REVIEW

*Dear Brother Walt: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman.* Ed. Dennis Berthold and Kenneth M. Price. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1984. xxxvii, 202 pp. \$27.50.

Whitman's favorite brother "Jeff" may have been even more seminally important to his emotional and imaginative life than scholars have realized. Indeed, the poet's love for Jeff might well have been the prototype for those intense and tender "Calamus" relationships he developed in the Civil War hospitals and continued to form later with such men as Peter Doyle and Harry Stafford. Such is the appealing suggestion that Professors Berthold and Price pursue in the early pages of their introduction to this excellent edition of Jeff's letters.

An integral connection between Jeff and the "gospel of Calamus" has of course been noted before, as early as in Horace Traubel's obituary of him, which Berthold and Price print as an appendix, and as recently as in Justin Kaplan's 1980 biography of the poet. But the subject has not been treated with the convincing directness that it is given here. Drawing evidence from Whitman's poetry, prose, and correspondence to show that he consistently conceived of perfect manly love in terms of the bond between older and younger brothers, and coupling this with the facts of his particularly close, nurturing and affectionate relationship with the boy and youth who was fourteen years his junior, the editors make it seem altogether reasonable that Jeff was the first and most "primal" of the poet's brother-son-beloved-comrades. They also provide a thoughtful (if in some ways maybe a little too forgiving) evaluation of his character, emphasizing those musical, aesthetic, and humane qualities that so endeared him to Walt. A comparison of Jeff's description of a wretched itinerant family in caravan on the streets of St. Louis (extracted from one of the letters) with Walt's sketch of "A Specimen Tramp Family" provocatively illustrates the "common ground of sensibility" shared by the two brothers—though urging a parallel structure in the two passages seems strained, as does the claim for "rudimentary literary power" in Jeff's account: an instinct for close and sympathetic observation of detail is frequently evident in Jeff's letters, but nothing, in my judgment, of literary *power*. Of further interest is speculation on the degree to which Jeff's marriage affected Walt's emotional tie to him and brought about a change in the poet's understanding of male friendship. But if Walt lost something of his brother, he also gained a sister, for, as Berthold and Price point out, he came to love "sister Mattie" above all other women save his mother.

The second half of the introduction is devoted largely to a discussion of Jeff's career as a civil engineer specializing in water works, first in Brooklyn and later in St. Louis. Here, and later in the copious annotation of the letters themselves, Berthold and Price's research in the history, management and personnel of the two cities' water systems (and associated political machinations) is remarkably thorough. For those reading *Dear Brother Walt* only out of an interest in the famous addressee, some of the resulting detail may seem an excess of riches; but as Gay Wilson Allen observes in his foreword, the book reveals the writer of the letters himself to have been a figure of heretofore unrecognized importance as a pioneering and influential figure in his field, and students of the history of American municipal development

will find this dimension of the work interesting and valuable.

The first four letters in the volume are those exuberantly newsy yet homesick ones (previously printed by Edwin Haviland Miller in *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*) written to the family in 1848 by the fourteen-year-old who had accompanied brother Walt to New Orleans for his short-lived stint at the *Crescent*. The remaining letters fall into two groups. There are fifty-five "Brooklyn letters" dating 1860–1866, all but one—this to William Douglas O'Connor—addressed to Walt. The bulk of these were written between December 1862 and summer 1865 when, with brother George in the army and Walt in Washington, Jeff was the main provider and head of the Whitman household: he, his wife Martha ("Mattie") and their daughters Manahatta and Jessie Louisa sharing quarters with mother Whitman and the retarded brother Edward, with the largely dependent brothers Jesse and Andrew living nearby. The dominant subject of these letters is concern for the welfare of George, but that subject comes mixed in with a rich conglomerate compounded of the ordinary—and sometimes extraordinary—details of the family's domestic life: everything from the boils and bruises of Jeff's children, neighborhood news and gossip, the cost of rent and utilities, and such touching notes as a request that Walt return Jeff's woolen shirts if he doesn't need them, "for they were all I had and I had worn them up until the time that you went away," to the agonizing illness and death of Andrew and the violent, deranged outbreaks of Jesse. Of the forty-seven letters in the second group, just under half are addressed to Walt, the others to mother Whitman, George, Jeff's daughter Jessie, and William Douglas O'Connor. Most of them were written from St. Louis over the period from April 1867 when Jeff moved there to take over building and operating the city's water system, to May 1889, only months before his death. They are notable for the tension between their loving reports on the growth of "Hattie" and Jessie and the sad tidings of the steadily failing health and painful death of their mother (news of Hattie's own sudden death in 1886 was telegraphed to Walt, but apparently no letters about it were written). In addition, the St. Louis letters constitute a record of Jeff's rise to a position of importance and respect in his profession.

The Jeff Whitman letters confirm some unpleasant things we already knew about him—that he was not without his faults of pettiness, bitter ethnic and religious prejudice (against the Irish and the clergy, for example), and at least moments of extravagant, contemptuous hatred, even for his own (Edward was "the most infernal lazy and most ugly human being I have ever met," and Jesse a "treacherous cuss" and a "perfect helldrag," whom Jeff wished in his grave). And there is a tantalizing suggestion that during Mattie's illness he may have taken solace in the company of another woman. But in the main, Jeff—faithfully raising money for Walt's hospital work, writing with verve and informed opinion about opera, politics and other subjects, supporting the family in straitened and tension-ridden times, delighting in his children and grieving for his wife, while all along educating himself for and advancing to prominence in a highly technical career—emerges as a man of much greater substance, range and merit than hitherto known except by those who have read these letters in holograph.

All of this is brought forth with clarity and coherence by Berthold and Price's painstaking but almost always graceful editorial procedures. Occasionally the accumulation of footnote numbers becomes distracting, a problem that could have

been alleviated to some degree by combining notes that fall close together, at least at points where several occur in a single sentence. On the other hand, I noticed one place at which an explanatory note of some importance is lacking: letter 94, the first of several written to Walt when he was living with George in Camden, bears no indication that such was the case, rendering certain allusions in those letters obscure. But these are minor flaws indeed in a first-rate scholarly apparatus which—along with an extensive index that failed none of my checks of its accuracy, a handsomely designed page, and high-quality bookbinding—makes *Dear Brother Walt* a most valuable addition to the growing body of published Whitman family correspondence.

*Ohio Wesleyan University*

RANDALL H. WALDRON