

DEAR BROTHER WALT: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman.  
Dennis Berthold and Kenneth M. Price, eds. Kent: The Kent  
State University Press., 1984. pp. 202 + xxxvii. \$27.50.

It seems especially fitting that this issue of *MSR*, which examines the theme "Whitman and the Earth," should contain a review of the letters of Walt Whitman's younger brother, Thomas Jefferson Whitman. Known affectionately in the family as "Jeff," the seventh of the eight Whitman children and thirteen years younger than his brother Walt, he applied his father's mechanical turn of mind to the physical properties of nature and became an important figure in the urban industrial America that emerged from the War between the States. Beginning as an engineer with the Brooklyn Water Works in the 1850s, Jeff became the Water Commissioner and chief architect of the St. Louis water system in the late 1860s and '70s, where he erected standpipes, created reservoirs, and diverted rivers to slake the thirst and cleanse the dirt of a city. Jeff was one of those men who built with granite and brick and steel, and set in motion the huge dynamos that his more famous brother could only admire from a distance. When he died in 1889, he was praised in a eulogy (which brother Walt had helped write) as one who "depended less on formulae and mathematical deductions than on native talent sharpened and instructed by the hard experiences of a life spent in actual construction...." As Walt was to poetry, Jeff was to engineering and the physical world.

Well-regarded as Jeff Whitman may have been in his own time, we still may ask whether his letters deserve our attention now. The answer, even for readers not avidly interested in the details of Walt Whitman's biography, is clearly yes. Jeff Whitman's 106 letters to his brothers Walt and George, to his mother Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, and to a few other correspondents offer a fascinating insight into the tight relationships, the continual struggle for health, and the unending sacrifices of a 19th century American family. Though Jeff had no pretensions at being a literary man, and was much more concerned to obtain the latest publication on the art of sinking a sound foundation into sandy soil than to see his brother's latest edition of *Leaves of Grass*, there are moments of intensity here—as when Jeff describes his

wife Mattie's last moments of life—that bring us closer to the Whitman family than the best modern biography can do. Jeff had none of the radical and visionary ideas about society or human experience that his brother had—as his racial attitudes show, he was a rather conservative and conventional thinker—but he was an affectionate and deeply caring man, a good son, brother, father, and husband whom the reader comes to respect by the end of the book.

For the reader who is interested in the image of “dear brother Walt” that emerges from these pages, however, the reward is even greater. The popular misconception of Walt—that he was a boundless egotist, a loafer, a disreputable, dirty old man—is not borne out here. Conventional as Jeff Whitman was, he loved and admired his brother to the end of his days. Jeff generously supported Walt's hospital work during the war, sought his advice on family matters, and implored Walt to visit him and his family, both in Brooklyn and St. Louis. In fact, the only regrettable part of Walt's history that is revealed here is the necessity which he apparently felt to separate himself from the entangling emotions of his family.

The editors use the letters to substantiate another point of Walt's character. Walt was responsible for much of Jeff's bringing-up, and took him along on that excursion to New Orleans in 1848. The intensity of their brotherly relationship apparently had much to do with Walt's adoption of various “sons” among the wounded soldiers and his need for emotional relationships with other young men, especially after Jeff's marriage to Mattie in 1859. The emotional yearnings which Whitman experienced as he assisted younger men like Jeff into maturity and heterosexual relationships appeared in 1860 as the Calamus poems. Though explicitly sexual, those poems, as Justin Kaplan remarked in *Walt Whitman: A Life*, dramatize at most a desire for an emotional attachment to a younger man, a more mature form of the comradeship Walt and Jeff had had in the 1840s. In the obituary he wrote for Jeff Whitman, Horace Traubel pointed to the relationship of the brothers as a prime example of what he called “the gospel of ‘Calamus,’” declaring that there is “nothing more beautiful and rare than this undemonstrative and yet frank love of strong men.” Jeff Whitman's letters bear out this explanation of Walt's “adhesiveness” with other men, and help to restore the politically radical meaning which Whitman appears to have intended for the metaphor of the calamus.

A final word should be said about the quality of the work of editors Berthold and Price. Apart from the helpful introduction and the rare photographs that illustrate the book, this quality is most apparent in the footnotes at the bottom of each page that explicate obscure allusions, names, and historical events mentioned in the letters. The editors often give the context in which the letters were written, including cross-references to Walt's correspondence and prose works, but seldom attempt to justify the Whitmans or influence the reader's perception of them. They say just enough to let us fully participate in the daily struggles, disappointments, and pleasures of the man who, for a time, loved Walt Whitman best.

— Geoffrey M. Sill

