

MY SOUL AND I: THE INNER LIFE OF WALT WHITMAN. By David Cavitch. 189 pp., Boston: Beacon Press, 1985. \$19.95.

Walt Whitman has always been a tempting subject for Freudian critics. What better candidate for the psychological critic's couch than a writer who had this to say about his poetic motivations: "Sex is the root of it all: sex—the coming together of men and women: sex: sex"? Given the strained relations between Whitman and several members of his family, it is perhaps understandable that he would seek catharsis in sexually charged poetry and that he would play the role of a fond father and maybe homosexual lover to several working-class young men.

David Cavitch's *My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman* analyzes in greater depth than previous commentators certain of Whitman's many thorny personal relationships in connection with the major poems. He thus frequently provides provocative analysis of what is already known of Whitman's complex psychological makeup. His intriguing thesis is that the love-hate relationship Whitman had with his family was reenacted in progressive stages of his poetic career. The expansive, all-embracing "I" of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he argues, shows Whitman trying to supplant his testy, remote father and to project into his verse the power and possessiveness of his mother. In his recreation of the parental function, Whitman becomes the powerfully egotistical yet tenderly democratic "solitary singer." His paradoxical poetic voice reflects a radical psychological doubleness stemming from Oedipal fantasies and conflicts.

The death in 1855 of his father, Cavitch suggests, left Whitman with greater freedom to explore his homosexual impulses, which Cavitch says provided tangible alternatives to the frightening mystery of heterosexual love. This turn toward homosexuality was visible in the "Calamus" poems of the 1860 edition, which Cavitch reads as Whitman's announced rejection of his Oedipal doubleness and indeed of poetry in general. The darker tone of some of the later works, such as the "Sea-Drift" poems, reflects Whitman's abandonment of the attempt to poeticize the fatherly role and his new emphasis on the feminine side of his own nature. Cavitch goes on to read other later poems, such as "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" and "Passage to India," in terms of Whitman's problematic relationships with family and friends. Particularly moving is his rendering of the growth and collapse of Whitman's friendship with the literary couple William and

Ellen O'Connor, both of whom independently developed crushes on Whitman, leading to a painful *menage a trois* situation that eventually contributed to Whitman's mental and physical decline.

Cavitch's book offers some fresh connections between Whitman's troubled private life and his poetic persona. But it too often presents Whitman's poetry as a lyrical expression of private neuroses. True, Whitman seemed to sanction such a method when he said that understanding his family background (particularly his mother) was important in understanding his poems. But we should recall that Whitman also demanded painstaking attention to social and literary background. "In estimating my Volumes," he wrote in the 1876 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "the world's current times and deeds, and their spirit, must be first profoundly estimated." Unlike several previous Whitman critics, Cavitch makes little attempt to recreate the literary-cultural climate that helped produce Whitman's masterpiece. Nor does he compare Whitman's private experiences or literary performances to those of other pre-Civil War writers, such as Hawthorne and Melville, who recently have been the subjects of important psychological studies. Perhaps we can forgive moments of Freudian claptrap, such as: "A good poem can contain a supreme erection, one that outmatches his father's and that outwits his mother" (p. 65). And one can overlook certain stylistic quirks, such as Cavitch's annoying overdependence on very long quotations from the poems to make his points. Less tolerable are significant omissions in the private history: where, for instance, are John Addington Symonds, Harry Stafford, and Anne Gilchrist, all of whom surely merit discussion in an account of Whitman's erotic conflicts? Where is the analysis of Whitman's early poems and fiction, which, though flawed, also resonate with psychological tensions and obsessions? Where are all the fiery reformers Whitman hung out with in the 1840s, reformers whose passionate rhetoric fed into Whitman's erotic themes, as did the even more passionate sensational novels Whitman loved to read?

Enough. We could ask such questions indefinitely. If you want to pry into some dark corners of Whitman's *inner* life of Whitman, read this book. But read it after first consulting background studies of wider scope, such as the standard biographies or Paul Zweig's recent *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet*. And as you read, keep in mind that the solitary singer was not nearly as solitary as Cavitch would have us believe.

— David S. Reynolds