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Walt Whitman and New Biographical Criticism

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Pollak, Vivian R. 2000. *The Erotic Whitman*. Berkeley: University of California Press. \$50.00 hc, \$18.95 sc; xxiv + 261 pp.

Krieg, Joann P. 2000. *Whitman and the Irish*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. \$39.95 hc, \$19.95 sc; xvii + 273 pp.

Where is biographical criticism going? Studies of Walt Whitman could be excellent places to ask this question. The exemplary poet of the self, whose self moves so insistently out toward the world, arguably provides perfect grounds for rethinking how we might use biography as a portal for understanding literature, and perhaps culture, and perhaps the self itself. Indeed, Whitman *invites* such rethinking—and waits somewhere for us, we might say, to catch up. Now that the death of the author has become a cliché, as has the glib student's quick satisfaction with an easy biographical interpretation, it is certainly time to ponder again what biography can do for us. So little rethinking has been

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done, even as the theoretical denunciations of biographical interpretation have subsided, and as literary biography and biographical criticism (along with psychoanalytical criticism) have moved persistently along in their furrows.

Here are two books that speak to the current state and the possibilities of biographical criticism. They both have great virtues, and they provide estimable contributions to scholarship about Walt Whitman—Pollak staking out well-worked territory but making a strong argument that she carefully distinguishes from previous work, and Krieg informing us about a timely concern as our understanding of the nature of ethnicity sharpens. Whereas they address rather different topics, the books relate to each other, and form a kind of salient contrast in method, because each undertakes an essentially biographical kind of study. The difference in what they understand biographical study to be can help us see both the virtues and the shortcomings of these books—as well as the way their biographical intentions both enable and obscure what they have to offer. I'll venture that their differences can also suggest to us something about the possibilities of current biographical criticism.

Vivian R. Pollak's *The Erotic Whitman* is, she says, a blend of biography and criticism. There is nothing methodologically new about her blend, and, indeed, the book resonates strikingly with Pollak's *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender* (1984), her previous work of self-avowedly biographical criticism. Many of the concerns of the Dickinson book resurface almost twenty years later in the Whitman book: the poet's crisis of sexual and gender identity, family relationships as the grounds for understanding the literature, the idea that the art is a response to psychosexual anxieties, the idea that the poetry provides a critique of gender roles under patriarchy. The familiarity of the themes doesn't take away from the accomplishment of the book. Like the Dickinson book, the Whitman book's value lies in Pollak's critical sensibility, especially in her attunement to the complicated ambivalences of the poets, and to the correspondingly complex contradictions and paradoxes in their poetry. But the familiar shape of the kind of biographical criticism used here generates familiar kinds of quibbles. While the mix of biography and criticism is often skillfully blended, for example, the proportions of the ingredients sometimes get out of balance. At times the biographical detail becomes too full, and the biographical story takes off on its own trajectory, veering so much into life narratives (of Whitman's father, his mother, himself) that we lose sight of any critical argument. At other times too much about Whitman and his writing is subsumed under the main critical argument—that in his early life, and in his early fiction, Whitman wrestled with his relationships with his parents, and with patriarchal and matriarchal forms of the family, only to reject the competition and cruelty of patriarchy and the helplessness of feminine domesticity for comradeship, a different model of "family" that

found expression in his poetry. To remedy the imbalances in Pollak's study, in each case a biographical element needs reining in—perhaps, from another point of view, a biographical strength. Sometimes the wealth of research into Whitman's life needs trimming to let us see the critical argument. Sometimes the psychobiographical argument needs to be lifted to let us see Whitman's poetry. These of course are the familiar pitfalls the biographical critic tries to avoid, and can't ever avoid entirely.

Finely aware of the problem, Pollak says she does not want to reduce Whitman's literary achievement to the sum of his insecurities. Still, her scheme aims to root Whitman's poetry and social ideologies firmly in a psyche hurt and riven by his experience of his family. His dysfunctional family, and particularly the "affectional loss" (159) from his failed relationship with his father, Pollak essentially argues, left Whitman afraid of male aggression and sexual intimacy, two things which he came more or less to equate. His family dynamic also left him with an idealized image of motherhood, which he expanded in his poetry and in his social vision, making it the basis for his inclusiveness, for his nurturance, for subsuming conflict and dissension. Ultimately his artistic and social projects of forging "a poetics of national closeness" and healing the nation's ills emerge out of an attempt to salve his inner tensions and negotiate his fear of erotic intimacy. His writing enlists the image of maternal union in order to imagine camaraderie and sociable intimacy in a way that suppresses male-on-male contention. And thus both poetry and democratic vision arise from Whitman's family and the psychological/erotic complex born there.

Having reduced Pollak's reduction, I must, to be fair, stress that the work is devoted to the complications and contradictions that spin out from the generative psychobiographical matrix that Pollak describes. For example, Pollak has much of value to say about Whitman's criticisms of conventional gender roles—and his accommodations of them. In his early fiction Whitman treats patriarchal violence and white male abuses of power in denunciatory ways, and in the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Pollak writes, he mandates the death of the vengeful father. While aggressive masculinity remained a problem for him, always plaguing his versions of male-male affection, Whitman nevertheless manages to identify with "working-class figures who represent the cruelty he fears" (63). Pollak suggests various ways that Whitman grapples with his problematic, conflicted relationship to rivalrous, competitive masculinity: He fashions angry male figures who are then feminized. He transforms his self-image from the vulnerable Walter to the roughened Walt. And he ultimately evades his anxieties and tensions over masculinity by subsuming them, without resolving them, in an all-encompassing, affectionate friendliness. In Pollak's hands, Whitman's difficult relationship

with his father—and with nineteenth-century masculinities—generates some persuasively complicated scenarios. Fresh understandings emerge from the sturdy psychobiographical paradigm.

Even as Whitman adopts familial models for his poetry of comradeship and connection, Pollak writes, he launches a critique of the repressive aspects of domestic culture. He censures domestic culture for its repression of women and children, its separation of the sexes, its misogyny and homophobia. But Whitman still retreats to the realm of the mother as a refuge from male-male aggression and competition. To the extent that Whitman rehabilitates intimacy between men by the “refeminization of male-male love” (140), and by rewriting such intimacy through tropes of heterosexual marital fidelity and domestic harmony, he raises fears, Pollak argues, of his own feminization. To the extent that he tries to neutralize his anxieties about the dissension and cruelty of masculine and patriarchal culture by drowning them in a quasi-maternal enclosure and embrace, he invokes the matriarchal in a way that makes it function as a falsely unifying, de-eroticized, and premature solution to his problems. Such articulations of Whitman’s problems and tensions are cogent, and believable. Pollak notes that she transformed a previously published essay into her chapter on Whitman and femininity, trying to make it “less theory-driven and more closely attentive to the emotional complexities of Whitman’s social experience” (239 n.1). The effort pays off.

While Pollak is good at thus pressing her generalizations about Whitman’s familial/sexual anxieties, so that his ambivalences and contradictory feelings about them emerge, her study falls somewhat short of the promise to show how Whitman’s language and poetics issued from these tensions—another familiar difficulty of this kind of biographical criticism. Pollak asserts, that is, that Whitman’s poetry was a means by which “dangerous psychological elements” could be “translated into a new tongue” (88). She says similarly that his poetry was meant to transform “intimate fears and fears of intimacy” into “a new tongue” (193). The self division between Walter and Walt was “the basis of his language experiment” (80). And “his revisionary poetics of the democratic sexual body emerged first out of his own need for a new language of love,” a need that rose from the pain of his family relationships (85). The clearest connection between these psychodynamics and the “tongue” of Whitman’s poetry, however, is simply that between a maternal/infantile inclusiveness and Whitman’s encompassing of multiple voices and his promiscuous jumbling of sounds. In other words, the book is better at thematic psychobiography than at the criticism of poetic language. Notably, on those occasions when Pollak reads the poetry closely, the psychobiographical point can disappear, just as the poetry can disappear under the biographical argument.

Ultimately, two conventional extremes of biographical criticism cling to this study. If Pollak's psychobiographical model sometimes strains to explain too much, there is on the other hand sometimes too much biography which explains little if anything at all. For instance, the first chapter, "The Erotics of Youth," argues that Whitman's important relationship with his mother led him to fashion an idealized maternal figure able to subsume and smooth the problems of his conflicted erotic life, and ready to serve as a model for "a national family romance" of inclusive affection that could replace his actual dysfunctional family life. But any such overarching idea is lost in the surplus biographical details—about Whitman's grandparents, his father, the hardships his mother experienced, Whitman's schoolteaching, and so on. In chapter three, which treats the development of Whitman's divergent persona, Pollak gives a full report on the letters he wrote from 1848–1854, ostensibly to shed some sort of light on his transformation "from Walter to Walt"; but upon finishing the account, she notes that they in fact provide little if any insight (74). Pollak's book, then, is a blend but also a balancing act, an effort to keep her two elements in a kind of equilibrium, and to connect them. She sets terms for our evaluation. Sometimes she succeeds strikingly, sometimes not.

If Pollak's book shows a seasoned critic negotiating traditional problems of biographical criticism, and generating fresh interpretations and insights despite her traditional approach, Joann P. Krieg's *Whitman and the Irish* forms a contrast on several grounds. Instead of offering a blend of biography and criticism, Krieg says the book is "by no means a biography," in the sense of a life story, and she makes no literary critical claims either. Rather, the book is a selection of biographical and historical details that fall under the rubric of "Whitman and the Irish." Krieg recently provided us with *A Whitman Chronology* (1998), a selection of facts about Whitman's life. The cover blurb of that book says that it intertwines the events of Whitman's life and work "without cumbersome layers of speculation." Like her chronology book, *Whitman and the Irish* doesn't venture much in the way of literary-critical speculation. And like the earlier book, meant to be a resource for scholars, and therefore meant to be relatively free of its own critical argument, *Whitman and the Irish* is meant to serve as a basis upon which "subsequent critical and theoretical studies can be built" (xiii). It makes no claim to advance a full-fledged argument about Whitman and ethnicity. We get, instead, a wealth of information—not only Whitman's comments on the Irish, accounts of his friendships and contacts with Irish people, and his reading of and influence on Irish intellectuals and writers, but also biographical details about Irish men (mostly) and women he knew or might have known. The book is organized into chapters about cities—Whitman and the Irish in New York, in Boston, in Washington D. C., in Camden, in Dublin—made up

of a chronological narrative of contacts and intersections between Whitman and the Irish. Although Krieg says the book isn't a biography, her chronologies and narratives give the work a storylike, biographical readability.

But the organization almost hides what is especially compelling here, and what seems to me to offer the invitation to use biographical criticism of Whitman in a fresh way—Whitman's attitudes about ethnic identity, especially as they intersect with ideas about class and religion. Krieg, of course, cannot write about Whitman and the Irish and totally avoid critical generalizations about Whitman's conceptions of ethnicity. The most basic one, she notes, is that Whitman, like so many other non-Irish Americans of the time, thought of the Irish in highly stereotypical ways, based on conceptions of "blood," "stock," and national character. So, for Whitman, Irish character, at least in its "higher samples" (ix), was noble, tenacious, loyal, humorous, courageous, warm, combative, fiery, frank, virile, emotional, and so on. More particularly, Krieg suggests on several occasions a kind of narrative arc in Whitman's attitudes about the Irish. It begins with his nativist denunciations of the Irish in the 1840s; moves through his poetic identifications with immigrants, the Irish included, in the 1850s; and ends with the belief, strong at least by 1871, that even the Catholic Irish could absorb the principles and practices of democracy and could learn to become independent and free. What one notices immediately in this story, however, is the way it is crossed, and therefore complicated, by questions of class and religion. The generally anti-labor-union Whitman was antagonistic toward Irish labor organizers in the early 1840s ("coarse, blustering rowdies" [33]), but felt a quick liking for working-class Irish "b'hoys" and their rough male subculture of fire companies, stage drivers, and Irish policemen. Contradictory attitudes about the significance of class, as it shapes an idea of poor Irish immigrants, surface here (entangled with the kind of ambivalences about masculinity that Pollak could help us with). Even more troublesome, in 1842 Whitman denounced Irish Catholics who wanted state funds for parochial schools ("filthy wretches" [40]), and he supported anti-Catholic violence perpetrated by Irish Protestants; in 1871 he sided warmly with the Irishmen of the New York Police Department (including the brother of his close friend Peter Doyle) as they beat up members of "the Irish lower orders (catholic)" who were protesting Protestant Irish parades in memory of the Battle of Boyne (33). Ethnicity, religion, and class interweave in their familiarly vexing and inextricable mix, combining in the multiple ways that generate contradictions in attitude.

Even though Krieg tries to clarify the matter by noting that Whitman was persistently anti-Catholic, because he believed that Catholicism was incompatible with American democracy, the remark about the "lower orders," and his preference for the "higher samples" of Irishmen reconnects

religion to class and disturbs any such sense of easy coherence in Whitman's views. He recoils from labor organizers but likes working-class b'hoys. He shuns "lower-order" Catholics because of their subservience to the church, but he generally admires the Irish as revolutionaries and rebels against European tyranny. He supports radical-abolitionist Irish friends, but he also endorses the proslavery Irish of the Democratic Party who embrace slavery as a way to protect Irish workers from wage competition—and to distinguish them from blacks. The multiplicities within Irish America also fan out, their own conflicts along lines of racial attitudes, class, and religion resonating with the contradictions in Whitman's views of the Irish. Krieg's wealth of detail preserves the complexities in the meanings the Irish held for Whitman. But an ungrasped opportunity emerges from this material to say something about the relations among ethnicity, class, race, and religion, to use Whitman's conceptions as an occasion to think through the multiple meanings of Irishness; that is, to use Whitman's life as a focus for understanding a complicated cultural issue.

We could characterize the shortcoming of Krieg's book as a welcome abundance of detail that frequently begs for explanation, for meaning. We get a surplus of information about Whitman's Irish friends—Peter Doyle, William Douglas O'Connor, John Boyle O'Reilly, et al.—but the relevance of much of it to "Whitman and the Irish" is unclear. Oscar Wilde visited Whitman, so we get much detail about Whitman and Wilde, with attention to questions of homosexuality, but there isn't any "Irish" point to it. Or we learn, say, about the painter John Mulvaney because Whitman liked his work, and because he was Irish, but there is no indication that his national origin made any difference to Whitman. We get a full account of the land reform ideas of Irish radicals, and information about the National Land League and the American Land League, and their leaders Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell, because Whitman knew men involved in the land reform movement, including John Boyle O'Reilly and James Redpath, although, as Krieg ultimately says, it "is doubtful Whitman was aware of the complexities of the land movement" (151). The purpose of all this information evaporates. But the main shortcoming of the book is not so much its occasionally uncritical selection of material, or its lack of interpretation, than it is a missed opportunity. The very topic of "Whitman and the Irish" is enabled by, and emerges onto, a scholarly landscape shaped by recent studies of ethnicity, race, and whiteness. An interest in the relations between ethnicity and Whitman's poetry might have taken what we have learned from new historical study of literary-cultural relations and shot it through the prism of biography—as a kind of history—with new conceptual implications for both