

too. The poem allows writer and reader to identify with slaves as in all slave narratives, and through the poem Whitman himself escapes from slavery: "'Song of Myself' is not only the story but the *act* of [Whitman's] own liberation from nineteenth-century conventions of discourse and racial thinking" (140).

Klammer continues his book with discussions of "I Sing the Body Electric" and "The Sleepers." Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" functions as a slave auction, and the speaker touts the value of all bodies—red, white, and black. Klammer notes: "It is a remarkable gesture, for in claiming space for all peoples Whitman rejects every expression of racial exclusivism that formed the earlier contexts of his racial thinking" (145). Whitman's use of the "Lucifer" figure in "The Sleepers" projects an angry slave who curses the entire system of slavery and the society whose indifference to slavery allows it to continue: "Whitman's challenge to slavery moves beyond the forced return of slaves" (153).

Readers cannot diminish the significance of Whitman's response to slaves and slavery in *Leaves of Grass* because he only deals with the subject in three of the twelve poems in the 1855 edition. "Song of Myself," "I Sing the Body Electric," and "The Sleepers" represent only one-fourth of the number of poems in *Leaves of Grass*; however, these three poems make up more than three-fourths of the bulk of the entire volume. Furthermore, Klammer reminds readers that most critical attention has focused on these three poems. Readers may wonder about the relationship of the critical popularity of these poems and the previously unrecognized importance of their African-American subject matter. Unfortunately, Klammer does not venture to connect what he notes about Whitman in his book to the traditional interests of Whitman critics.

In his "Epilogue" Klammer reports that Whitman later retreats from the position he took toward African Americans and slavery in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. Klammer insists again: "[A]ny real understanding of Whitman's writing about blacks and slavery must be understood in light of a close reading of the particular historical context at any given moment in Whitman's career" (162). After 1855 Whitman often spoke and wrote with less sympathy for African Americans than he displayed in the first *Leaves of Grass*. Klammer accounts for this difference by noting that Whitman was never again lucky enough to create something as new as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, that he never again applied his genius in similarly coalescing circumstances, and that, for Whitman, an inspirational historical and discursive milieu like that of 1842-1855 never again existed.

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JOHN E. SCHWIEBERT. *The Frailest Leaves: Whitman's Poetic Technique and Style in the Short Poem*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992. 158 pp.

In *The Frailest Leaves*, John Schwiebert argues that critics have neglected Whitman's short poetry in favor of his long verse and that this neglect is a consequence of the image we have of Whitman as "America's poet-colossus."

While Whitman has long been considered “America’s first quintessential master of the ‘long poem,’” Schwiebert says there is a neglected side to Whitman, a side that he calls “Whitman the miniaturist.” Rejecting the critical preoccupation with Whitman’s long poetry, Schwiebert turns his attention instead to Whitman’s craft in the short poem, offering some insightful and interesting analyses. Although the book is a long-overdue study of Whitman’s short poems, to my mind *The Frailest Leaves* doesn’t adequately address the causes underlying the neglect of Whitman’s short verse and the prevailing image of Whitman as a “poet-colossus.” As a result, Schwiebert occasionally falls into the same pitfalls as his predecessors.

Schwiebert attributes the neglect of Whitman’s short poems in the academy to Whitman’s own attempt to cultivate a large, robust image for himself. As Schwiebert puts it, “the poet himself—in his manner, his appearance, his vision, his self-criticism and self-promotion, and his poetry (‘I am large, I contain multitudes’)—did all he could to cultivate this image [of massiveness] of himself” (1). What Schwiebert ignores, however, are two basic questions. Why might Whitman have wanted to cultivate such an image for himself (that is, why did he think this image might appeal to his audience)? And why did this image in fact appeal to his audience (or at least to the literary academy)? In other words, Schwiebert does not make the connection between the image Whitman cultivated for himself, the academy’s fascination with Whitman’s large, epic-style poetry, and the social issues at play.

Since at least as early as the nineteenth century, there has been a stigma against small size and stature in American culture. Recent sociological studies have revealed some of the effects of this stigma for contemporary America, including: hiring and wage discrimination against short men relative to tall and average men; a preference among voters for taller political candidates; profound discrimination against people with growth disorders such as dwarfism; a widespread desire among American men and women to be taller than they are; a standard in the fashion industry that models be above average height; and so on (see Leslie Martel and Henry Biller, *Stature and Stigma* [Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987] and Joan Ablon, *Little People in America* [New York: Praeger, 1984]). Numerous examples testify to the fact that the stigma against small stature is codified within the English language itself. When we respect someone, for instance, we say we *look up* to that person. If we say we *look down* on someone, we mean just the opposite. If a person does something generous or kind, we say it was *big* of her; if she does something cruel or stingy, it was *small* of her.

Although Schwiebert’s study does not go far enough in identifying the root cause of Whitman’s image, it is certainly true that the literary establishment has contributed to making a “poet-colossus” of Whitman. The effect has been that readers today have difficulty imagining him any other way, and this often constrains our reading of *Leaves of Grass*. Consider, for example, how this image forces Schwiebert into an ironic reading of Whitman’s poem “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand.” In the poem, the unidentified persona speaks directly to the reader: “Put me down and depart on your way,” the speaker says, unless you are willing to abandon “the whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around you.” Assuming that the persona of

the poem is the conventional massive Whitman promoted by the critics, Schwiebert argues that “The speaker’s injunction to the inadequate ‘you,’ to ‘Put me down . . .,’ is comically absurd unless read in [a] figurative sense (can we seriously imagine the ‘you’ carrying the massive Walt in his pocket, or in his arms?)” (107). But there is nothing in the poem itself that suggests the speaker is large. Without a critic present to tell me that Whitman was actually a large man or promoted himself as a large man, I would have no basis for arriving at this conclusion. In fact, the poem is very much about the ambiguity in the speaker’s identity. “I am not what you supposed, but far different,” the speaker says in the first stanza of the poem, later adding, “I will certainly elude you.”

In an 1896 essay, John Burroughs made one of the clearest and most disturbing arguments for the value of bigness in Whitman’s writings:

I see that a plausible criticism might be made against Whitman, perhaps has been made, that in him we find the big merely,—strength without power, size without quality. . . . Undoubtedly one of the most obvious things about him is his great size. It is impossible not to feel that here is a large body of some sort. . . . The page nearly always gives a sense of mass and multitude. . . . But Whitman is something more than a literary colossus. Pigmies can only claim pigmy honors. Size, after all, rules in this universe, because size and power go together. The large bodies rule the small. There is no impression of greatness in art without something that is analogous to size,—breadth, depth, height. . . . You cannot paint Niagara on the thumb-nail. . . . [Whitman] is the poet of mass and multitude. Little detail, little or no elaboration, little or no development of theme, no minute studied effects so dear to the poets, but glimpses, suggestions, rapid surveys, sweeping movements, processions of objects, vista, vastness. . . . He is occupied with large thoughts and images. (*Whitman: A Study* [1896], 171-175)

Schwiebert’s analysis of Whitman’s poetry gives us the necessary context in which to judge Burroughs’s absurd argument. As Schwiebert suggests in *The Frailest Leaves*, Whitman was very interested in short poems, “little detail,” and “studied effects.” Unlike Burroughs, Whitman rarely denigrated smallness and never, to my knowledge, suggested either in his poetry or in his prose that “large bodies [do or should] rule the small.” Rather, Whitman challenges his readers to judge and embrace difference without distinction, and he deliberately acts as a mouthpiece for a diversity of voices. This was true from the very beginnings of Whitman’s literary endeavors. In the earliest notebook containing the trial lines for “Song of Myself,” for example, Whitman wrote, “I am the poet of little things and of babes / Of each gnat in the air, and of beetles rolling balls of dung” (Notebook LC #80, 73).

Although Whitman sometimes celebrates his own size (“I am larger, better than I thought”), he also attends to the smallest, most neglected parts of his own body. As he writes in “Song of Myself,” “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.” Accordingly, he devotes long passages to minute details of his and others’ bodies—the “eye-fringes,” “jaw-hinges,” “toe-joints,” and “lung-sponges”—in spite of what Burroughs claims about the lack of “little detail” and small images in Whitman’s poetry. Thus, when Whitman claims “I am large, I contain multitudes,” the

emphasis is not on his relative bigness but on the sense of the multitudes within him. He is large because he is made up of so many parts. When Whitman uses the word *large*, in other words, he is most likely referring to this definition in the 1859 Webster's Dictionary: "Extensive or populous; containing many inhabitants; as, a *large* city or town."

Schwiebert argues that "Whitman wrote proportionally more and more short poems" in his later years. From 1871 to 1881, most of his new poems were shorter than twenty-six lines. After 1881, the vast majority of Whitman's poems were fewer than eleven lines. As other critics have argued before him, Schwiebert contends that Walt's increasing physical debility is responsible for this change. With the decline in his health, Schwiebert argues, Whitman was simultaneously losing his inspiration (130). While this is possible, the argument is based on two problematic foundations. First, it assumes that the stylistic shift was not deliberate (an assumption that makes sense only if we assume that longer verse is better than shorter verse). Second, the argument implies a value judgment: the decreasing size of Whitman's poems was bad, a sign of dwindling inspiration. But there may be other explanations for the change. With the Civil War over and Reconstruction enforcing a tense union among the States, and with the boundaries of the nation solidifying and the frontier disappearing in the years after the War, Whitman must have begun to recognize the need for poetry that expressed the possibilities for diversity and sectionalism within a unified, limited space.

The revisions and new poems of Whitman's later years repeatedly emphasized the possibility for containing diversity and multitudes within limited boundaries. He revised the line "I am large. . . . I contain multitudes," for example, to make it progressively less expansive, more confined, and less boastful over time. In 1855, the line was the longest typographically that it would ever be, with ellipses separating the two clauses. In the 1856 edition of *Leaves*, Whitman shortened the line by replacing the ellipses with a comma. In the 1860 and 1867 editions, he visually shortened the line even further by using a dash instead of a comma, and in the 1871 edition he surrounded the entire line with parentheses, adding a sense of containment, a sense of enclosing the diversity of the self within clear and defined boundaries. In 1881, with the Reconstruction period over and sectional tensions within the country diminished (at the cost of racial equality), Whitman finally expanded the line slightly by substituting the comma for the dash.

Schwiebert argues persuasively that it is not entirely fair to say Whitman is the poet of massiveness, the "poet-colossus." He claims it is the literary establishment that has created this image and ignored "Whitman the miniaturist." It is to Schwiebert's credit that he recognizes the role of the critics in making Whitman into a colossus. Whitman's writings do not necessarily emphasize largeness in the physical sense, but largeness in the sense of *multitudinousness*. Thus, even when he celebrates his own physical largeness, we should bear in mind that for him this may not have meant that he regarded bigness as a special value in itself; instead, it most likely suggested to him his innate potential (equally possible for the smallest among us) for containing diversity, shifting identity, connecting with and understanding others. As he put it, "I resist any thing better than my own diversity. . . . And am not stuck up, and am in my place."

Schwiebert's book is a welcome change from the critical preoccupation with Whitman's long poems, but it does not address the ways this preoccupation is connected to a continuing cultural bias against smallness. Without an awareness of the underlying social issues, Schwiebert sometimes reinforces the blindnesses of the past. *The Frailest Leaves* is a good example of the possible benefits and the continuing need for a greater awareness of size discrimination among scholars.

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