

The Posthuman Comedy

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1. Big Historicism

According to Wai Chee Dimock, scholars of American literature should study it in a bigger historical context than the one beginning in 1776 or even 1620, freeing themselves in this way from the narrow-minded nationalism that has so often drawn a border around their research. To view American literature in light of the longer *durée* of ancient civilizations is to see Henry David Thoreau reading the *Bhagavad Gita*, Ralph Waldo Emerson the Persian poet Hāfez, and rediscover in these and other extensive sympathies the kinship of American literature with world literature. Dramatically expanding the tracts of space-time across which literary scholars might draw valid links between author and author, text and text, and among author, text, and the wide world beyond, the perspective of deep time holds the additional promise, for Dimock, of reinvigorating “our very sense of the connectedness among human beings” and of dissuading us, thereby, from the wisdom of war.¹ At the very least we might hope that American soldiers wouldn’t look idly on, as they did on 14 April 2003, as the cultural treasures of the Iraqi National Library—which are the treasures of all humankind—were looted and burned.

Dimock’s *Through Other Continents* is among the most prominent but also most unusual works of the transnational turn in literary studies, and one way of beginning to discern its originality is to run through a checklist of readily offered objections to the way its argument is framed. For starters there is the historical materialist objection, which casts an ironic light on events like those of 14 April 2003, when some ancient “documents of civilization,” as Walter Benjamin called them, finally became victims of the same “barbarism” of which they were originally made.² Refusing to contemplate that original horror, Dimock would seem from this perspective to want to acquit culture of its complicity in historical violence, dissolving

Special thanks are due to the editors of this journal, in particular Lauren Berlant, for inspiring large-scale acts of revision. Thanks also to the many individuals and institutions whose benign influence was felt at various points in the unusually long duration of its composition.

1. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, N.J., 2006), p. 5; hereafter abbreviated *T*.

2. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), p. 256.

it in a “deep time” now recognizable as *aestheticized* time, time stretched beyond the bounds of any obvious social utility or statute of limitations. And what about the book’s subtitle, *American Literature across Deep Time*? Djelal Kadir has noted how, rather than pointing us to the crossing of American literature *by* deep time, as the book often compellingly does, this formulation lends to American literature itself the capacity for exploratory movement across a time span in which it mostly did not exist to do any such exploring.³ Thus, although it hoists the flag of the peacekeeper, the book could be said to keep a token of imperial nostalgia in the hold. If the idea is to plumb the depths of deep time, why not scrap the idea of “American literature” altogether?

Something similar might be said in the idiom of the New Historicism, whose temporal measurement protocols Dimock would seem in particular to be calling into question. There, as exemplified by the invocation of a calendar date in the first sentence of so many historicist essays, the goal has been to locate the intersection of disparate discourses in as thin a slice of the history being studied as possible, exposing the interlacing of literary texts with the institutional powers that discipline, punish, and pleasure the human bodies alive at a certain time and place. Seen in the klieg lights of what we can now call shallow time, Dimock’s assertion that “deep time is denationalized space” (*T*, p. 28) could itself be historicized as the utterance of a particular historical situation—the dark heart of the second Bush administration on the one hand, the liberal humanist academy on the other. Given the powerlessness of literary intellectuals to shape that situation in any noticeable way, it’s a small wonder that the agonized complications of this period inspire a search for paths of symbolic escape. Its vehicle, in Dimock, is the institution of literature, whose political, economic, and other practicalities recede in her account to become a remarkably frictionless conduit of transnational sympathy and identification. And it is here that still another ready line of critique—a media theoretical critique—might present itself. The emphases of scholars like Friedrich Kittler, Siegfried Zielinski, and N. Katherine Hayles have each been somewhat different, but all have sought a revelation of the device of cultural history, asking us to consider again the ways in which the medium has been the

3. Djelal Kadir, review of *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*, by Dimock, *Comparative Literature Studies* 45, no. 3 (2008): 370–72.

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message.⁴ Faced with arguments that leap from Margaret Fuller to ancient Egypt, and from *Gilgamesh* to Henry James, a contemporary media theorist might be compelled to note how tenuously materialized Dimock's connections across deep time appear to be. What about the media of transmission from Háfiez to Emerson and from Emerson to us? What about the long chain of objects, institutions, and techniques that may have had their own agendas in that meeting of minds? What story does this hardware tell? The Kittlerian might say that if the materiality of the media were taken seriously enough, then we would see Dimock's deep time humanism as a sort of sentimental mist given off by remorselessly technical processes of information storage and retrieval.

All of these objections are persuasive to some degree and help us to understand what Dimock's argument for deep time most problematically entails, but none of them is able to hold on to the new conceptual territory brought into focus in her audacious lens shifting of literary history. And yet that territory is the scene of a series of methodological provocations regarding time and context whose interest extends even beyond the new literary critical transnationalism, contributing to another recent turn in literary studies. Visible in the rise of neurological affect theory, cognitive cultural studies, literary Darwinism, and various forms of quantitative formalism, this is the turn toward science both as a cultural historical datum and a possible methodological resource for humanistic research. In Dimock's version, while she doesn't use the term, the sciences of complexity appear to have come to the fore, helping her to weave themes from geometry, geography, and ecological systems theory into readings of American literary texts that stress their "fractal" connectedness to other texts at other places and times ("T," p. 75).⁵ The appeal of fractal geometry, in this instance, would appear to be what Albert-László Barabási called its "scale-free" nature—the same lovely (and appealingly organic-looking) pat-

4. See, for instance, N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, Calif., 1999); and Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

5. Another influence would appear to be the discipline of world history associated especially with the work of Fernand Braudel and, in the US, with William McNeill. In David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley, 2007) the lens of world history is widened even further to include natural history, and the emergence of human life and culture is explicitly seen as one threshold (obviously very important to humans) in an ongoing process of complexification that begins with the synthesis of chemical elements after the Big Bang, continuing with the birth of stars, the accretion of planets, the appearance and evolution of life, and so on. See also Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present* (New York, 2007), and Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley, 2008).

terns repeating themselves at all levels of observation, from the very small to the very large.⁶ This is taken as an image at once of kinship-at-a-distance and of the reassuring persistence of a diversity of nooks and crannies abolished in traditional Euclidian constructions.

To be sure, there is ample room for skepticism that a formal system elaborated, as fractal geometry has been, with an eye to drawing more and more of an otherwise messy material world under the jurisdiction of mathematics has any intrinsically peaceful implications. And yet Dimock deserves considerable credit for broaching the issue of scale in literary studies so boldly, and she is not alone in wanting, in this time of disciplinary duress, to find scientific sanction for the benefits of literature. Indeed, as is most evident in literary Darwinist models of scientific criticism, one of the striking things about the work being done in the new scientific spirit is how *literature positive* it tends to be. Attributing a broadly “adaptive” value to storytelling, the study of literature can become a form of approval again, just as it had been under the New Criticism; much of the native skepticism one associates with scientific inquiry has been displaced onto those who place too much faith in the powers of social construction to determine literary value. Dimock refrains from the sneering dismissal of ideology critique—in particular feminist ideology critique—one finds among the Darwinists, but her arguments-from-complexity are just as challenging to the critical status quo as theirs.⁷ The time-scales of criticism are only one

6. A deft popularization of his seminal work in complexity and network theory is available in Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life* (New York, 2003).

7. See for instance Jonathan Gottschall, *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (New York, 2008), pp. 89–170. In its efforts to speak up for forms of human reproduction and interrelation other than biological ones, *Through Other Continents* can be seen to offer implicit resistance to literary Darwinism and evolutionary psychology, which make the reproductive imperative paramount to understanding literature. But whether or not it would have been worth confronting literary Darwinism directly, the absence of any consideration of evolution in Dimock’s book is remarkable. One of the more important benefits of taking the fact of deep time seriously is how it alters our sense of the plausibility of the unintended appearance of highly complex biological structures in natural history. Put simply, these “miracles” seem much less miraculous when considered as the product of, say, eighty thousand generations submitted to selective pressures rather than the three or four—or even twenty, on a good day—that humans are ordinarily capable of intuiting as meaningful. And yet, still more fascinatingly, in the school of evolutionary and paleontological thought called cladistics, it is precisely the astonishingly long length of deep time that makes all evolutionary narratives seem “unscientific.” As Henry Gee puts it: “The reason for this lies with the fact of the scale of geological time that scientists are dealing with, which is so vast that it defies narrative. Fossils, such as the fossils of creatures we hail as our ancestors, constitute primary evidence for the history of life, but each fossil is an infinitesimal dot, lost in a fathomless sea of time, whose relationship with other fossils and organisms living in the present day is obscure. Any story we tell against the compass of geological time that links these fossils in sequences of cause and effect—or ancestry and descent—is, therefore, only ours to make. We *invent* these stories, after

object of her intervention into the question of scale and culture, but after Dimock it should be more difficult to look at the habits of historical literary scholarship without seeing their potential for a fetishistic apotheosis of the calendar, as though time could attain a kind of retrojected presence in the date book of our interpretations. It should be more difficult to forget that long duration is every bit as “historical” as rapid change or, if you prefer, that the scale at which we discern that change can itself be quite variable, depending on the measurement protocol.⁸ Distinguishing her work from most other contributions to the new transnationalism, Dimock’s insights into the quantitative elasticity of the period are arguably more radical than her arguments for spatial expansion, and they would be missed in a simple retrenchment in the historical moment.

It’s more productive, I think, to come at the question of deep time from the opposite perspective, accepting Dimock’s challenge to think the periodicity of literary history on a new and larger scale but altering our conceptual orientation to that largeness such that the failure of institutions it predicts—and of which the fall of the Iraqi National Museum is just one spectacularly depressing example—comes into view. This is a project I call the posthuman comedy, a critical fiction meant to draw together a number of modern literary works in which scientific knowledge of the spatiotemporal vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world becomes visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem. It will be aided, first, simply by radicalizing Dimock’s expansion of the timeframe in which we view the institution of literature, reclaiming the term *deep time* from her essentially Braudelien usage, which makes it synonymous with a

the fact, to justify the history of life according to our own prejudices” (Henry Gee, *In Search of Deep Time: Beyond the Fossil Record to a New History of Life* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1999], p. 2). Cladistics replaces narrative evolutionary accounts with a formal analysis of fractal branching patterns of relationships between the characteristics of various species.

8. The same might be said of media theory. At first glance Zielinski’s media archaeology, founded on a notion of the “deep time of the media,” would seem to ally itself with Dimock, except that in practice it proceeds by making a series of cuts in the history of technology. Landing in these historical moments, we recover some of the complexity and once-upon-a-time potentiality lost in linear accounts of progress toward a certain technical end, but we sacrifice diachronic continuity altogether. Similarly, Kittlerian media theory likes to defend itself against the charge of determinism, rightly confident that it can expose the fantasy of indetermination from which these charges issue. Its real mistake, however, is *fetishism*—the assumption that media alone “determine our situation” (Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. xxxix). Dimock’s multiscale analytical acrobatics can help us see how limited, finally, this perspective is. The problem with media theory is less in asserting the dominance of technology over our naïve dreams of personal agency than in inexcusably cheating us of a view of the full range of our determinations, from the materiality of geological and microbial evolution, near one end, to the intimate force of nationalist and other ideologies toward the other.

historical *longue durée* measured, at most, in thousands of years. Here instead we will insist upon its original geological meaning.⁹ Whether it is the 13.7 thousand million years since the Big Bang, or the 3.5 thousand million years in which life on earth has been evolving, or for that matter the 4.5 thousand million years from now until the earth is incinerated in the heat-death of the sun, the deep time of the earth sciences is difficult to integrate into even the most capacious visions of civilizational, national, or institutional continuity.

This half-acknowledged truth hovers in the background of Dimock's otherwise optimistic account of literature's ability to bridge time, casting the shadow of death upon it, and our ghoulish task here will be to draw a kind of chalk outline around that shadow. For her, our biological "fallibility" as individuals is redeemed by the fact that we can "count on the species as a whole to serve as a . . . vast, ever-expanding, and ever-receptive archive, compiling and collating all that we have done and all that we would ever want to do. Human beings are the only creatures on the planet who reproduce through archives" (*T*, pp. 57–58). But never mind how this formulation seems to leave beyond critical purview the long history of *ignoring*, *forgetting*, and *erasing*; surely the flow of deep time, while it might provide occasion for overcoming some of humanity's limitations, is also a problem in its own right, holding the virtual certainty of extinction? No doubt it poses a great representational challenge to literature, whose most epic productions are, matched against deep time, what Italo Calvino might call cosmicomically small.¹⁰ For Dimock, the genre of the epic appeals as a form longer-lived than any nation, and too large not to have absorbed all manner of alterity into its linguistic fabric. For her this is true of all major genres, whose bounds always exceed the borders of nations.¹¹ In the post-

9. Credit for the term *deep time* is usually given to John McPhee, *Basin and Range* (New York, 1981), a journalistic account of the geology of the western United States; see, for example, p. 20.

10. See Italo Calvino, *Cosmicomics*, trans. William Weaver (New York, 1968).

11. Another way into the question of genre and nation is to look at the generic forms of nationalism, as Patrick Colm Hogan does in his *Understanding Nationalism: Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity* (Columbus, Ohio, 2009). Grounding his analysis in human cognitive structures understood as universals, Hogan performs "view[s] nationalism working over a much longer time scale" (p. 5) than is usually understood to be the case, seeing modern instantiations thereof as larger versions of an in-group/out-group dynamic basic to all organized social relations stretching back through history. Hogan divides nationalist narratives into "heroic," "sacrificial," and "romantic" tragicomic forms. The last, which often takes the form of a "love story in which society . . . prevents two lovers from uniting" (pp. 12, 13) seems most pertinent to Dimock, in that it is the narrative form of nationalism most attuned to the necessity for the synthesis of subnational into national forms: "As a result, the romantic structure may operate, not only as a narrative of national reconciliation, but as a narrative of internationalism. Put differently, it may serve as a means of opposing national divisions just as

human comedy, as we shall see, another implication of genre surges to the fore—the one operant in the term *genre fiction* (its science fiction and horror variants in particular) that names those literary forms willing to risk artistic ludicrousness in their representation of the inhumanly large and long. For all of its investments in canonical texts, *Through Other Continents* might itself be seen as a critical science fiction in this sense, blowing open the doors of disciplinary historicism to the outsize wilds of time travel.

Once upon a time the posthuman comedy had been a more serious affair, an occasion for rhetorical elevation under the sign of the sublime. And while Edmund Burke's empiricist account of sublimity is still serviceable in the explication of generic horror, the more prestigious Kantian formalist version we associate so easily with romantic poetry is, by its lights, suspiciously dignifying of the human. Aggrieved partisans of genre fiction are forever lobbying for its recognition as serious literature, which is fine, but it is just as important to draw the philosophical lesson embedded in its apparent lowliness, which points altogether beyond the pale of aesthetic redemption. In the clutches of the outsize realism of science fiction and horror, the two-stage Kantian sublime—*first* the failure of the senses in the face of the very large, *then* the triumph of reason in the concept of infinity—enters into a third stage, unable now to shake the knowledge that reason, too, is sure to be engulfed in a larger darkness. That time will be the time not only of our death but of the death of death and the concept of infinity, too. Even Jean-Paul Sartre, author of "Existentialism Is a Humanism" (1946), granted the logical force of this posthumanist perspective. In a famous essay on William Faulkner he critiques the conception of time as a futureless void that he finds in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), judging it false to the inherently anticipatory nature of consciousness. For him, Faulkner's narratives have the same effect of looking backward out of a speeding convertible; the past gains clarity as it recedes, the peripheral present is a fractured jumble, and the future cannot be seen

it may serve as a means of opposing subnational divisions. Indeed, the logic of the romantic plot seems to push inevitably toward undermining categorical identifications of any sort, including national identifications (and toward challenging group hierarchies of any sort)" (p. 16). In Dimock's critical text, we could say, the intimacy of writer and reader (no matter how far-flung in space or time) becomes a romantic dyad modeling a transcendence of national categories. Focused as it is on the in-group/out-group distinction, Hogan's text does not explicitly address the question of social scale in social identification, but one could simply point out that what he calls models of national identity—the generic narratives or even single metaphors that organize nationalist sentiment—are a means of scaling down a large and complex social reality.

at all. This, for Sartre, is artistically interesting but philosophically false, since we live into the future regardless. And yet he concedes that “if we begin by plunging [man] into universal time, the time of nebulae and planets, of tertiary formations and of animal species, as in a bath of sulfuric acid,” well then, yes, “the time of man will [seem to be] without a future.”¹² Seen in a large enough time frame, Hāfēz and Emerson appear as contemporaries. Seen in a larger one still, they and their kind barely appear at all.

Why, though, would one want to take this conspicuously impractical, if not simply pointless perspective, which Sartre shrugs off so easily? Certainly there is much to be said philosophically for resisting the demand for relevance embodied in such a question, which accedes too quickly to the pragmatic voluntarism (as though we simply choose our relation to time) whose limits any critical posthumanism would want to explore.¹³ Another response, more important to my purposes here, would be more methodological in character and would stand partly in agreement with the judgment that deep time is irrelevant. And yet the point would be that the establishment of a boundary between the relevant and irrelevant is an achievement we shouldn’t take for granted. This is especially true in the condition of modernity in the broadest sense, one of whose features has been a continuing expansion of the range of potential human empirical observation, from the subatomic to the cosmic realms, while in between these extremes our attention span now ranges easily from the profoundly local to the promiscuously global. In such a world, the natural-historical and political-economic process of distinguishing the relevant from the irrelevant is a complex dialectical negotiation of competing drives toward expansion and contraction.

In stark contrast to the scale-free nature of fractal patterning, here a change in scale often matters greatly—much as it does, for instance, in the sciences of biology and engineering, which have had reason to notice that things cannot be scaled dramatically up or down without also dramatically changing their design. To take a fetching example from Stephen Jay Gould, the gigantic insects of B-movie fame are a physical impossibility; they would collapse on their spindly legs.¹⁴ And isn’t the same true of the scale of our social identifications? In any case, the face-to-face interaction of the

12. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Time in Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury*,” trans. Martine Darmon et al., in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (New York, 1963), p. 231.

13. See, for instance, Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York, 2007).

14. See Stephen Jay Gould, “Size and Shape,” *The Richness of Life: The Essential Stephen Jay Gould*, ed. Steven Rose (New York, 2007), pp. 319–23.

small group would seem to be importantly different, in its physical intimacy, from social forms that only exist by means of symbolic and technological mediation. What's more, the same drive toward an extension of sympathy with the geohistorical other we find in Dimock, unchecked, might become sympathy with the *absolutely* other, with the 13.7 thousand-million-year history of (for the most part) utter indifference to life we find in the geological and cosmic records. Thus when confronted with entreaties, like Dimock's, to think big, it seems fair to ask from the outset what principle of limitation will be called upon to give that vaulting largeness and longness a meaningful form? One will surely be needed.

The book subtitled *American Literature across Deep Time* knows this, of course. And that, more than an improbable imperial nostalgia, is no doubt why it grants the high interest of the disciplinary construction (the reduction of complexity) called American literature even as it aptly critiques the parochialism of that construction on behalf of humanity (a less drastic reduction of complexity) at large. But lest we be naively surprised or inordinately disappointed by the many questionable ways human beings try to scale down the world to make it comprehensible, meaningful, and manageable to them, this needs to be made explicit and its consequences faced. As Nicholas Humphrey has recently argued, a sense of human self-worth begins in the illusory experience of ourselves as somehow more than matter, and facilitating that experience is, for him, the most profoundly adaptive function of consciousness. But that extension-from-matter is meaningless unless it becomes recursive, attached once again to the body or bodies from which it emerged.¹⁵ Not just American literature but most all literature would seem to facilitate this recursive sequence of scaling up and scaling down. This is immediately evident in the institutions of genre, which, no matter how long-lived or sprawling they may be, build a modal specificity into the literary text at its ground. It is also visible in the work of literary institutions in the more ordinary sense, whose affordance of creativity and originality is always also an occasion for the humble practice of repetition and reiteration, of *covering the same old ground*. The unusual and (until recently) uniquely American institution of the graduate program in creative writing makes this scandalously clear. But it is most tellingly evident in those rare works of literature that set themselves the task of scaling our vision dramatically up or down or both, blasting through ordinary perception to the most surprising vistas we can imagine. That these works, upon inspection, fail to transcend their historical and medial conditions of possibility testifies to the limits of the human imagination, true,

15. See Nicholas Humphrey, *Soul Dust: The Magic of Consciousness* (Princeton, N.J., 2011).

but those limits are also what allow us to know and feel our presence in the world as something in particular. Although the opposite is equally true, it's only in the failure of imagination that we find a reason to live.

2. Weird University

The genre that has been most responsive to the hard fact of deep time has no doubt been the horror genre, and simply putting Edgar Allan Poe beside Emerson and Thoreau might already begin to alter the optimistic account that Dimock builds upon the foundations of nineteenth-century American literature.¹⁶ More corrective still, because more definitively post-romantic, would be Poe's successor H. P. Lovecraft, whose stories were published in magazines like *Weird Tales* in the twenties and thirties and aspired to what Lovecraft in one of his letters called "an aesthetic crystallisation of that burning & inextinguishable feeling of mixed wonder & oppression which the sensitive imagination experiences upon scaling itself & its restrictions against the vast . . . abyss of unthinkable galaxies & unplumbed dimensions."¹⁷ In Lovecraft deep space and deep time alike are reasons to doubt the significance of humanity, whose ontological purchase on the universe it inhabits is vanishingly small. We can try to project our pathetic selves outward into time and space, but we must understand that "there are no values in all infinity—the least idea that there are is the supreme mockery of all. All the cosmos is a jest, and fit to be treated only as jest."¹⁸

Partly in recognition of the philosophical seriousness of his deflationary enterprise but also in growing recognition of the importance of genre fiction to literary history, Lovecraft is now available in the Library of America series. And yet the debased status of the horror genre as it was originally constituted in the pulps was ironically more appropriate to his thematic ends, the *pulpiness* of their original material substrate figuring the rank, rotting mess into which the dignity of even the most acid-free human structures can be expected to collapse. We are familiar with the charge that genre fiction is subliterate owing to its "formulaic" quality, but the case of Lovecraft suggests another, equally telling way of looking at the problem of

16. For a number of intelligent readings of H. P. Lovecraft and horror more broadly in the context of speculative realism, see *Collapse* 4 (May 2008). See in particular contributions by Graham Harman, "On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl," pp. 333–64, China Miéville, "M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire: Weird; Hauntological: Versus and/or and and/or Or?" pp. 105–28, and Benjamin Noys, "Horror Temporis," pp. 277–84.

17. H. P. Lovecraft, letter to Frank Belknap Long, 22 Feb. 1931, *The Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York, 1997), p. 340.

18. Quoted in Joshi, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (West Warwick, R.I., 1996), p. 320; hereafter abbreviated *HPL*.

cultural status, where it appears rather as one of scale. True, one can point to several unambiguously canonical literary works—most famously *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *Alice in Wonderland* (1865)—that test and indeed, in these cases, thematize the problem of scale in various ways, but their frequent placement in the category of children's literature shows where the difficulty with crediting genre fiction with high literary value will come to lie. When, having fallen down the rabbit hole, Alice changes size from too large, to too small, then back again, this could be taken to figure the developmental narrative of childhood as a nonlinear process of scalar adjustment to the adult world. But it also suggests how scalar instability might come to be tagged as juvenile in the pejorative sense.

To see the world through the eyes of a child can be refreshing in some contexts, but from the eighteenth-century forward artistic seriousness in fictional narrative has been strongly associated with realism and realism, in turn, with a reasonable-seeming correspondence between representation and ordinary adult perceptual experience. Even when works of science fiction, fantasy, and horror are clearly intended for an adult readership, an air of adolescent irrelevance hovers about them all the same. Exemplary in this regard would be the case of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*; it begins, notoriously enough, with the crushing of Manfred's heir by a building-sized helmet suddenly fallen from the sky. The story is made less "childish" when Clara Reeve rewrites it as *The Old English Baron*, scaling that wonderful helmet right out of the picture on the grounds of its being ridiculously improbable.¹⁹ It is, of course, except that laughable largeness encodes the existential problem of scale as such. As the recognized initiator of the gothic genre—which genre is itself an important origin-point for the modern idea of genre fiction as ludicrously formulaic—Walpole's place in the canon has been at least marginally secure.²⁰ Lovecraft's case, however similar to Walpole's in some intriguing ways, was different.²¹ With no real social position or higher degrees to speak of and forced to ply his "non-supernatural cosmic art" in the pulps, Lovecraft was fated until very recently to be perceived as lying utterly beyond the pale of artistic seriousness.²²

19. See Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (London, 1765), and Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (London, 1778).

20. On the gothic as an origin of the "tension between 'high' and 'low' literature," see Robert Miles, "The 1790s: The Effulgence of the Gothic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge, 2002), p. 60.

21. Of both Walpole and Lovecraft it can be claimed that a large part of the "life's work" of each is to be found in their stunningly voluminous private correspondence.

22. Lovecraft, letter to Long, p. 341. Another important contributor to the posthuman comedy from the first half of the twentieth century was Olaf Stapledon, whose novel *Last and*

In his own time Lovecraft was a sadly impoverished, embittered, and marginal cultural figure, and piecing through the relation of his philosophical nihilism to his intense racism and xenophobia has been the first order of business for his recent critics and admirers, including the novelists Michel Houellebecq and China Miéville.²³ One can do a lot, in turn, with Lovecraft's long-time hovering at the borders of Brown University, which to his lasting shame would not admit him as a student. Unable to amass the mathematics credits he needed to graduate from high school, he retreated to his family's shabby-genteel house in Providence, rarely leaving it for the next five years. It is easy to imagine those years of domestic darkness as a kind of anticollege, the biographical equivalent of antimatter. When he finally emerged and began to make contact with other struggling writers like himself, Lovecraft spoke ruefully of the observatory and other scientific attractions of the university: "Once I expected to utilise them as a

First Men (1931) spans millions and millions of years, following human evolution step by step far beyond the human as we know it. And yet this magnificently imaginative project also runs up against the limits of the novel genre as we know it, presenting itself rather as a strangely double-voiced chronicle projected back from the future into the consciousness of a contemporary writer for whom it counts as fiction. This narrator is highly self-conscious in his inability to include anything but discontinuous slivers of the evolutionary multiplicity, the near-infinity of birth, death, and rebirth, which is its subject. In Calvino's *Cosmicomics*, by contrast, the representation of the inhumanly vast is accomplished by means of a brazenly improbable personification that projects a coherent comedic consciousness, that of an impossible character called Qfwfq, into the scene of the emergence of time and space and planets and the like. W. J. T. Mitchell's analysis of one of the stories deftly summarizes the deceptively complex temporal structure of all of them: "The spatial structure of Calvino's story is the layering of different levels of temporality, the deliberate confusion of personal, individual time (measured in days and hours), historical time (measured in larger, rather amorphous periods of changing attitudes toward dinosaurs), and the 'cosmic time' of natural history and paleontology, the 50 million years of the narrator's dinosaur life. . . . All these levels are co-present, and the narrative point of view functions like a kind of zoom lens that can slide from a macroscopic overview of cosmic history to a microscopic tale of two lovers" (W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book: The Life and Times of a Cultural Icon* [Chicago, 1998], p. 45). While Stapledon tends to see the evolutionary fate of humanity as inherently tragic, Calvino pictures the evolution of the universe as a kind of literary cartoon, as though only an ostentatiously "childish" representational form can aspire to represent it.

23. See Michel Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, against Life* (San Francisco, 2005), and Miéville, introduction to Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness* (New York, 2005), pp. xi–xxv. Stephen Shapiro adds another dimension to this account, demonstrating how one can read Lovecraft as a regional literary figure, product of an increasingly marginal port city, Providence, in the world system of trade. Shapiro is also able, through the lens of geography and social class, to connect the enigmatical, unpronounceable speech of Lovecraft's Old Ones with, on the one hand, the practice of speaking in tongues in early twentieth-century Pentecostal religious movements and, on the other, the "nonsensical" language of the modernist avant-garde. See Stephen Shapiro, "Pentecostal Modernism: Lovecraft, Los Angeles, and the New World-systems Literary Analysis," unpublished ms.

regularly entered student, and some day perhaps control some of them as a faculty member. But having known them with this 'inside' attitude, I am today unwilling to visit them as a casual outsider and non-university barbarian and alien" (quoted in *HPL*, p. 87). As the racial "degenerate" is to old-line Providence, so is he to scientific professionalism: an alien. It is perhaps no wonder, one could say, that the university appears again and again in his fiction both as a longed-for seat of intellectual authority and as a serene pastoral enclosure that must be blasted open to the horrible truths of natural history; no wonder if the professors who acquire these dangerous truths must either die or risk going mad. "The most merciful thing in the world," says the narrator at the outset of "The Call of Cthulhu," "is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far."²⁴

Excluded from spaces of literary institutional respectability, Lovecraft sought to visit the horrible truths of deep time upon the island of ignorance formed by the conventions of literary realism. His border transgression inverts, in advance, the optative transnationalism of recent literary criticism. In the original Cthulhu story, the mystery begins at home in Rhode Island, in an increasingly ethnically corrupted USA, with the discovery of some strange documents among the papers of a recently deceased professor of Semitic languages at Brown. But as it unfolds the investigation spreads uncontrollably, first to the swamps around New Orleans, then to Greenland and Paris and Haiti and the mountains of China, and finally to a strange outcropping in the open ocean. The destiny of this transnational expansion of horror is however not the totality of the *human* world but an absolute temporal beyond, a non-Euclidean underground city from which the monstrous Cthulhu is now emerging after eons of absence to reclaim the planet for himself: "Everyone listened, and everyone was listening still when It lumbered slobberingly into sight and gropingly squeezed Its gelatinous green immensity through the black doorway . . . *The Thing cannot be described*—there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order" ("CC," p. 213; emphasis added).

But apparently this Thing *can* be described; or, rather, its indescribability becomes the occasion for a notorious verbosity on Lovecraft's part. This is one of the tics of Lovecraftian narrative—the laboriously descriptive

24. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu (Found among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston," (1927), *More Annotated H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. Joshi and Peter Cannon (New York, 1999), pp. 173–74; hereafter abbreviated "CC."

disavowal of describability—and it betrays his paradoxical attempt, even as he locates it, to structure the vacuum of deep time with rhetoric. His looping streams of overheated verbiage are studded with deliberate anachronisms, technical scientific terms, and most interestingly with language of the Cyclopean beyond itself, which reaches its hearers in low-modernist “enigmatical sense—impacts uninscribable save as gibberish” (“CC,” p. 181). But ironically, in peopling the cosmic abyss beyond the human with a verbal lushness of eldritch demons, Lovecraft’s tales of cosmic horror are as consoling as they are disturbing. At least there’s *intentionality* out there, a source of authority immeasurably greater than any of those that frustrate his literary ambitions. Lovecraft’s verbosity points to the further limits of his otherwise capacious imagination evidenced in the romantic reassurance he took in something as small as Anglo-Saxon “racial superiority”; but, to be fair, it also points to the limits of the human imagination as such, where narrative understanding, at least, seems to need characters of some kind as its vehicles.

Indeed, while stock in Lovecraft is currently soaring on the power and prescience of his theories of “non-supernatural cosmic art,” which seems to speak so directly to the concerns of contemporary object-oriented philosophy and speculative realism, I would claim that an equal part of his interest as a writer is in the troubling shape taken by his limitations. Those limitations are unflattering to him and to humanity and much the worse for the quality of his writing, which was not always high; but they do open up, at the level of daily social practice, to a compelling vision of a writerly existence—compelling because so extraordinarily grounded and collegial, so generous in the expense of personal time. What Lovecraft took in the realm of racial fantasy, that is, he partly gave back in the form of endless hours of help to fellow writers, first under the auspices of the long-forgotten Amateur Journalism movement, of which he became a central figure, then as one of a group of struggling young writers who coalesced around the idea of “weird” fiction, sharing work, sharing imaginative terrain, and freely helping each other toward publication in the pulps. As Lovecraft put it in his official statement of the ideals of the organization of which he was a long-time officer, the United Amateur Press Association, which facilitated the scripting, publication, and circulation of hundreds of homemade newspapers among its far-flung members:

The United aims to assist those whom other forms of literary influence cannot reach. The non-university man, the dwellers in different places, the recluse, the invalid, the very young, the elderly; all these are included within our scope. And beside our novices stand persons of mature culti-

vation and experience, ready to assist for the sheer joy of assisting. . . . It is an university, stripped of every artificiality and conventionality and thrown open to all without distinction. [*HPL*, p. 104]

Working sideways from this journalistic endeavor into the literary community in which his literary efforts took shape, we are tempted to see the generic institution of the weird, too, as a kind of virtual college, a weird college. These social groups give the lie to Lovecraft's melodramatic claim that "there are no values in all infinity"; obviously there are. They are right here, writ small. His mistake was to think that the relative weakness and evanescence of the values shared by his community of literary underdogs meant that they were in fact worthless. This is only true insofar as one has already projected some source of authority into the larger darkness, as though an undifferentiated span of space could pass meaningful judgments. True, human concerns come off looking quite small in the cosmic scheme, but a different measurement protocol might find them all the more valuable for their scarcity. This, as we shall see, is one of the primary aesthetic insights of literary minimalism, which tacks against the kind of windy verbosity we find in Lovecraft, but only to run aground on its own mass of horror, the small horrors internal to literary institutions. It was a shame, certainly, that he could not see the links between the institutional outsiders with whom he identified and the racial outsiders he paranoiacally excoriated in his writing. But surely they are bonded, even if unbeknownst to him, in the monstrous visions of the Outside that populate his fiction. Products as much of self- as of other-loathing, those gelatinous green immensities contain multitudes.

3. Horrible Minimalism

Now in its eighth edition dating back to 1982, Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* is as close as one might conveniently come to a normative center of contemporary creative writing instruction, and for it the *human* is at the center of everything. "The techniques of fiction," claims the foreword by John Leggett of the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, are "simply the study of human behavior, the very essence of humanism, the be-all of a liberal education."²⁵ Thus, as odd as the discipline of creative writing might seem in a hundred other ways, here it lays claim to a kind of liberal-institutional centrality in the merging of humane knowledge and literary craft. "Human character is in the foreground of all fiction," confirms one of the book's two chapters on character development,

25. John Leggett, foreword to Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (Glenview, Ill., 1987), p. viii.

however the humanity might be disguised. Anthropomorphism may be a scientific sin, but it is a literary necessity. Bugs Bunny isn't a rabbit, he's a plucky youth in ears. . . . Henri Bergson, in his essay "On Laughter," observes [that] "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human. A landscape may be beautiful, charming or sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable." Bergson is right, but it is just as true that only the human is tragic. We may describe a landscape as "tragic" because nature has been devastated by industry, but the tragedy lies in the cupidity of those who wrought the havoc, in the dreariness, poverty, or disease of those who must live there. . . . By all available evidence, the universe is indifferent to the destruction of trees, property, peoples, and planets. Only people care.²⁶

Only people care, and people care about fiction because it is always about people, even if those people look like rabbits. And so, too, do the humanities make space within the institution of scientific knowledge for the *valuing* that occurs in the psychic theater of human experience and nowhere else.

As unremarkably anthropocentric as its point about the necessary humanity of characters might seem, Burroway's textbook introduction carries a large surplus of philosophical interest, not least in how it manages to throw the obviousness of the human into an estranging conceptual relief. No one doubts that humanity in the form of character occupies the foreground of fictional narrative, and recent work in cognitive narratology confirms that the techniques of fiction are intimately tied to essential operations of the human mind. But here we are reminded that character is framed by something wholly other—an absolutely indifferent, starkly inhuman universe. Closer at hand, literature is set off against the literalism of science, whose pursuit of objective knowledge, even of intensely "human" things like human cognition, could be described as a kind of antianthropomorphism, an effort to know what is true about the universe behind and beyond the self-interested projections of the human point of view.²⁷ Burroway's textbook dispenses plenty of advice on how to write good stories by creating good characters and provides several examples of the works of "modern realism" in which it believes them most frequently to appear, but not before placing the institution of creative writing against a backdrop of

26. Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, pp. 119–20.

27. See, for instance, Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of Mind and the Myth of the Self* (New York, 2009).

proximate and ultimate—which is to say, institutional and existential—othernesses.²⁸

To bring the wellsprings of the posthuman comedy into better view we'll want to stick with these othernesses a little longer, keeping them at the center of our concern, and we can do that by first returning to Bergson. Far from simply being a compelling analysis of what it means to find something funny, his book on laughter already points the way to the broader and frequently unfunny “comedy” of the human condition such as we find it in Dante's *Divina commedia* or Honoré de Balzac's *Le Comédie humaine*, where it is associated with various forms of ontological *lowliness*.²⁹ Indeed, as Graham Harman observes, “the often thin line separating the realms of comedy and horror can be seen in the now almost hackneyed role-reversals of clowns.”³⁰ It is true, as Burroway says, that for Bergson comedy can only be human, but it is also true that it arises only in the relation of humanity to something other. It is “something mechanical encrusted on something living.”³¹ We laugh when we see our fellow human beings fall prey to impersonal forces, when they lose the flexibility and adaptability that is the species' presumed birthright. Exemplary in this regard would be Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (dir. Chaplin, 1936), whose depiction of intimacy with machines Michael North sees as something more than a mere “encrustation”—rather, as a scandalous discovery of the machinelike nature of humanity itself. And what North therefore calls machine-age comedy is the first act of what I would call the posthuman comedy, the act in which we realize that we cannot be understood apart from our technological prostheses.³² But lest we think that the cyborgic posthuman—the human spliced to its technology—exhausts the category of the posthuman, Bergson avers that “the more natural the explanation of the cause [of comedy to be], the more comic is the effect.”³³ Think here of the pratfall, taking the human down (always down) as though in a sudden gust of

28. Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, p. ix.

29. Intriguingly, Balzac opens his general introduction to *Le Comédie humaine* with an explicit comparison of his novelistic project to zoology: “The idea originated in a comparison between Humanity and Animality.” Thus, even as Balzac goes on to contrast the “infinite variety of human nature” to the relative simplicity of animal nature, the intellectual seeds of what I'm calling the posthuman comedy are already planted in the ground of novelistic realism (Honoré de Balzac, introduction to *The Human Comedy*, in “*The Human Comedy*” and *Other Short Novels*, trans. George Saintsbury [Charleston, S.C., 2006], pp. 49, 52).

30. Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Peru, Ill., 2005), p. 133.

31. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (1911; Mineola, N.Y., 2005), p. 28.

32. See Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (New York, 2009).

33. Bergson, *Laughter*, pp. 12–13.

gravity. This suggests that while mechanism in the modern technological sense is one key to comedy, even more basic are the mechanisms of nature, the entire realm of natural processes that enclose, infiltrate, and humiliate human designs. The second act of the posthuman comedy is in this sense a turn (and continual return) to naturalism, one in which nature, far from being dominated by technology, *reclaims* technology as a human *secretion*, something human beings under the right conditions naturally produce and use.³⁴

As we see, the textbook of creative writing can take us to the threshold of the room whose floor falls away into the abyss of unconscious physicality, but it refuses to step through the door. Instead, turning back to survey the room we always already occupy—call it the space of institutions—it sets about exploring the complex cognitive enclosure of the human point of view. This, it wagers, can be meaningfully tied to the complex but teachable techniques of narrative realism, the kind disseminated in the virtual space of the textbook and the real space of the creative writing classroom. No wonder, then, if the discipline of creative writing has had such a vexed relation to the “subliterary” genre forms that have most frequently and flagrantly attempted to cross the threshold into the inhuman and stay there awhile—science fiction and horror. Not only does genre fiction seem to violate the law of writing what you know from personal experience; not only does it bear its “formulaic” flatness on its grubby sleeve, catering to tastes unformed by the university, but its darkly dorky aesthetic unseriousness is an affront to the humanities—hell, an affront to humanity. Look at those characters, little more than the toys of allegory! If only genre fiction exhibited the chastity of quantitative representation one finds in a scientific paper; but, no, it insists on the comic personification of the absolutely other. It could in all seriousness be said that genre, as an occasion for the externally imposed repetition of a set of rules, is essentially comic in Bergson’s sense, an encrustation upon the primordial flexibility of story. On this basis we could claim that comedy, and not tragedy, is the essential genre in that it includes “genericness” as one of its primary attributes.

But while it mostly eschews the excesses of genre fiction as one finds them in Lovecraft, the discipline of creative writing is not without its own relation to the generic. Most simply, one could point to those many Amer-

34. These two versions of the posthuman can conveniently be associated with Hayles, in the first case, and Cary Wolfe in the second. See Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, 1999), and Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, 2010). The idea that all technology is “biotechnology” is found in Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Evolution from Our Microbial Ancestors* (Berkeley, 1986), p. 29.

ican program writers, ranging from John Hawkes to Ben Marcus and Shelley Jackson, whose avant-garde resistance to the tenets of modern realism has brought their work into (typically fractured and surrealized) relation to gothic and other genre forms. More interesting to me in this context, however, is the way that genre reinscribes itself even within the bounds of textbook realism. This it does in the form of a genre sometimes called the workshop short story, whose ubiquity, I have elsewhere argued, is owed equally to its inherent artistic possibilities and its pedagogical, professional, and existential convenience.³⁵ To tune into the discourse on the workshop story in literary journalism is to hear many of the insults usually directed against genre fiction repurposed as a condemnation of the all-too-many works now written with the program's guidance: repetitive, unoriginal, irrelevant, mere widgets spit out of the institutional machine. But whereas Lovecraftian genre fiction is faulted for trying to support too weighty a portion of the existential outside on the soft ground of pulp, the alleged sin of the workshop story is something like the opposite; it has been *domesticated* in several overlapping senses, walled in by the daily-ness of modern American consumer culture. Thematically and formally, it is simply *too small*.

And yet it is worth remembering that the scale of the posthuman resides both on the small side of the human and on the large. This was the great lesson of the evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis, who spent her illustrious career arguing that the real action in life takes place on a level of which humans are barely aware. For Margulis, human beings are simply not the "dominant species"³⁶ they take themselves to be but rather the clown, the "planetary fool" dressed up to deny his deepest identity as "glorified sludge."³⁷ And it's true that for every gelatinous green immensity we could hope to see, there are untold legions of insects and mollusks, seething billions of microbes, trillions of atoms no less disturbing, from a certain

35. See Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), p. 294.

36. Lewis Thomas, foreword to Margulis and Sagan, *Microcosmos*, p. 10.

37. Margulis and Sagan, *Microcosmos*, pp. 13, 19. Margulis's project is taken up and transformed in the register of political theory in the recent work of Jane Bennett, which would similarly "chasten [our] fantasies of human mastery" with a fuller philosophical consideration of the vibrancy of nonhuman matter conceived as an "agentic swarm." One of Bennett's formulations in particular points the way to a kind of internalized Lovecraftian horror: "My flesh is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners" (Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* [Durham, N.C., 2010], pp. 122, 32, 112). The swarm is obviously a compelling object with which to ponder the problem of scale. Not only does its mobile elasticity nicely illustrate the instability of form in time, but as a visibly *particulate unity* it manages to be disturbing simultaneously for its engulfing largeness and for the many, too many smallnesses of which it is made.

perspective, to the dignity of humankind than old Cthulhu. In them, the problem of absolute largeness that preoccupies weird fiction is converted into the differently scaled problem of manyness. These disturbingly numerous small things are matched, in turn, to physical processes so fast, so brief in duration, as to be almost unthinkable.

Our utter undermining by the small—this, it seems to me, is the dimension of posthumanity the genre of the workshop story is most fit to explore, though perhaps only rarely as literally as one finds it in Raymond Carver's very short story, "I Could See the Smallest Things," included in his most notoriously minimalist collection, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*. This was one of the key texts in an extraordinary reefflorescence of the American short story in the seventies and eighties, a phenomenon strongly associated with the rise of the creative writing program, on the one hand, and with the assertion of a deliberately ordinary, "lower-middle-class modernist" sensibility on the other.³⁸ Carver's story tells the tale of a married woman woken by the sound of an open gate in her front yard. Staring out the window into the bright moonlight, she notices that she can "see everything," even the "smallest things," all of the details of her suburban surroundings.³⁹ Putting on her robe and walking outdoors to close the gate, she notices her neighbor Sam Lawton rooting around in his rose bushes with a flashlight. He is poisoning some slugs. "They're taking over," he says, showing her the "slimy things," killing one of them with a sprinkle of powder.⁴⁰ They talk a bit more, and then she returns to bed with her grotesquely snoring, bed-hogging husband Cliff, settling in . . . only to realize that she has forgotten to close the gate. The end.

Things in this story could hardly be more ordinary, even with that Hawthornian moonlight cast over everything. It is a vignette of suburban American life, small, realistic, and—as represented by that gate—highly confined. Time in this story, such as it is, only extends backwards a few years, long enough to accumulate some deeply human regrets, but even that is made manifest mostly by implication from the narrative present, not as a fully articulated history. No need for that, the story seems to suggest. We are already familiar with histories like these. And yet that moonlight does seem significant, an appropriately modest intervention into debates about realism. The inclusion of moonlight seems to say, this is not romance, not in any of the senses of that term, and it is not even realism at the scale you have come to expect, but it is worth paying attention to all

38. McGurl, *The Program Era*, p. 63.

39. Raymond Carver, "I Could See the Smallest Things," *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (New York, 1981), p. 31.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 35.

the same. Dispensing with complex modernist time schemes, minimalism manages time by dilating the present, inhabiting it, being there.⁴¹ It enables a kind of formal existentialism—an existentialism, unlike that of Sartre or Albert Camus, of deliberately limited philosophical means.⁴² That's why the title, "I Could See the Smallest Things," seems at once utterly colloquial and too self-reflexive to ignore. It could be speaking to the possibilities of the minimalist short story—the workshop story—as promoted by the controversial writer, editor, and writing teacher Gordon Lish. He in fact came up with the title (the original had been "Want to See Something?") while he was cutting Carver's original manuscript in half.

Less is more, as they say; some of the stories in this collection were in fact damaged by Lish's brutal edits, but not (in my opinion) this one. Everything essential remains. Compressed into minimal discursive space, a mere slice of life, the historyless suburban American present of the story nonetheless gives access enough to the outer darkness to be quite unsettling. Who knows what horror might enter through that open gate? It certainly doesn't seem a promising avenue of escape into the mythically limitless American Dream, still less into the worldly pleasures of transnational circulation. Is this not the message carried by those eldritch little contradictions of form, those slimy minions of Cthulhu who feed on the rose bushes next door? Perhaps, in fact, although they can be hard to see with the naked eye, the spores of horror already have entered this woman's life. They entered on her wedding day, entered at the beginning of time.

41. Note the assertion of temporal presence made in the title of one of the original works of American literary minimalism, Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1923).

42. See Gadi Taub, "On Small, Good Things: Raymond Carver's Modest Existentialism," *Raritan* 22 (Fall 2002): 102–19.