

Chapter 14

Microfiction

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1. A Brief History of Very Short Fiction

1.1 Now!

“The short story form, in its brevity and condensation, fits our age”, writes Michèle Roberts in her aptly brief introduction to Deborah Levy’s collection *Black Vodka* (2013). It fits “the short attention span of modern readers, the gaps and fragmentedness of modern consciousness”.¹ If this is true of the short story, how much truer might it be of the *very* short story? Is the increasing prominence of microfiction as a contemporary literary genre indicative of the fact that even the short story cannot convey the speed and immediacy of contemporary life, and that only the extremities of narrative scale are able to communicate the relentless intensity of the present, and indeed, the future? If the short story is the genre of today, might the very short story – which is as comfortable on the page as it is on the screen, matching the shifting media and ever-accelerating pace of the present – be the genre of tomorrow?²

Although the capacity of microfiction to communicate the immediacies of the present has seen it increasingly embedded in the infrastructures of academic criticism, the publishing industry, and competitive writing in recent years, miniature narrative genres are by no means new to the literary scene. Even a cursory survey of literary history reveals that a great variety of very short forms have emerged in different periods and cultural contexts,³ each bringing with it a singular set of aesthetic concerns while also exemplifying a shared commitment to the relationship of minimal scale to maximal intensity which allows us to trace a certain generic unity across distinctive species of microfiction.

¹ Michèle Roberts, “Introduction”, Deborah Levy, *Black Vodka* (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2013), pp. vii–viii (p. vii).

² See William Nelles, “Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short”, *Narrative*, 20.1 (2012), 87–104 (88).

³ Both Dybeck and Johnson emphasize the “protean” nature of the very short story (Charles Johnson and Stuart Dybeck in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Robert Shapard and James Thomas (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 1986), pp. 233; 241 respectively).

1.2 Names

Literary genres do not emerge fully formed – as immutable laws, stable structures or established sets of texts – but are the product of an ongoing, relational process marked by disagreement regarding inclusion and exclusion, and the accumulation of differences alongside similarities.⁴ What defines the health of a particular genre at any point is the degree to which it is disputed, and the extent to which its boundaries prove permeable and its conventions responsive to the shifting contexts and demands of literary production and reception. The very short form is thriving in this sense. Ongoing debate around its origins and precursors, its formal and stylistic features, its optimal length, how it might best be named, and its relation to the changing media of publication and dissemination complicate matters further, and preclude any single, authoritative definition.⁵

Accepting that literature constitutes the site of an event – a generative occurrence through which something new emerges into the world – it is worth taking seriously Caputo’s claim that “[n]ames contain events and give them a kind of temporary shelter.”⁶ Far from empty rhetorical posturing, critical debate around names and naming often has considerable historical and ideological implications. The various terms offered to describe contemporary short fictional forms – very short story, short-short story (or often just short-short), shorter and shortest story, skinny fiction, curt fiction, sudden fiction, flash fiction, quick fiction, and microfiction – constitute a polemical field; one which is further intensified by the long and complex histories of antecedents of the contemporary genre which include the aphorism, parable, fragment, digression, paradox, anecdote, joke, riddle, epigram, exemplum, emblem, myth, fable, tale, tableau, vignette, character, sketch, prose poem, miniature, and indeed, short story. This chapter uses the term *microfiction* – which is maximally descriptive but minimally prescriptive – to refer to the overall field of very short fiction, and it uses more specific terms where necessary to pinpoint certain historical practices. A conjunction of the Greek *mikros* (small) and the Latin *fictio* (formation), microfictions are small literary forms, either historical or contemporary, which are suited to representing a wide range of subjects while remaining responsive to the shifting contexts of literary production and reception. It becomes clear in this light how the very short form, “while being contemporary, is also timeless,” in the estimation of Joyce Carol Oates – “[a]s old as the human instinct to combine power and brevity in a structure of

⁴ See John Frow, *Genre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 51-5, 124-5; Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre”, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 228-31 (221-52).

⁵ See Stephen Minor in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 235.

⁶ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 2.

words”,⁷ an “ur-form of narration”,⁸ “deeply rooted in the human psyche and in the history of human communities”.⁹

1.3 Precursors

Broadly endorsing this notion that microfiction constitutes one of several fundamental ways in which literature comes to grips with reality itself, contemporary critics frequently seek to trace these works to archaic sources. While there is general consensus that oral folk forms, such as the tale and parable, or the even more concise proverb and anecdote, are the precursors to contemporary microfiction,¹⁰ there exist a range of views regarding the precise moment at which extreme narrative brevity becomes a technique consciously employed by writers with a specific effect in mind. For some, this point is located as far back as the exemplum and fable of Classical antiquity,¹¹ while others trace it to the medieval genres of the fabliau, nouvelle and lai.¹² The Renaissance certainly brought an intensified interest in the miniature, with the exceptionally fine detail of Hilliard’s tiny portraits reflected in the controlled prose of Thomas Overbury’s *Characters* (1614) and the didactic microcosms of Francis Quarles’s *Emblems* (1635).¹³ The intermittent prominence of a variety of very short forms in diverse contexts – the *Athenaeum* fragments of the Jena Romantics (1798–1800), the vignettes of Chekhov (1880s), the prose poetry of Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914), and the minimalist stories of Carver’s *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) are exemplary of this range – confirms that the complex genealogical network upon which contemporary microfiction draws is both transhistorical and transcultural. The point at which brevity becomes significant in itself, rather than simply as an attribute of a specific work, is tied to the subsumption of these diverse miniature forms under the banner of the short story. The short story comes to prominence between the end of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries, and although a distinct genre – a point argued by Matthews, Friedman and Baxter¹⁴ – it becomes secondary, and to this extent a

⁷ Joyce Carol Oates in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, ed. Shapard and Thomas, p. 246.

⁸ Philip Stevick, Untitled, “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 1986), 242.

⁹ Jerome Stern, “Introduction”, *Micro-Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories* (New York and London: Norton, 1996), pp. 15–9 (p. 17).

¹⁰ Karl-Heinz Stierle, “Story as Exemplum – Exemplum as Story: On the Pragmatics and Poetics of Narrative Text”, *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press), pp. 15–43 (p. 21).

¹¹ Jack Matthews in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 235.

¹² See Nelles, “Microfiction”, 92; 97.

¹³ See Ralph Rugoff, “Homeopathic Strategies”, *At the Threshold of the Visible: Miniscule and Small-Scale Art, 1964–1996*, ed. Ralph Rugoff (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, pp. 11–71 (pp. 55–6); Susan Stewart, “At the Threshold of the Visible”, *ibid.*, pp. 73–85 (pp. 73–4); Robert Kelly in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 241.

¹⁴ See Brander Matthews, “The Philosophy of the Short Story”, *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), 73-5 (73-80); Norman Friedman, “What Makes A Short Story Short?”,

“countergenre,”¹⁵ to the novel. Although there may be “neither logical nor an empirical necessity”¹⁶ for the domination of the short story by the novel, it is nonetheless “a fact of history”¹⁷ which can be explained in part by the ideological currency of the novel as an expression of “expansionism, empire-building” and the formation or *Bildung* of the “heroic individual.”¹⁸ Thus despite being popular for much of the nineteenth century, the short story remains a “vastly underrated art,”¹⁹ and enters the twentieth century as a genre largely ancillary to the expansive aesthetic sensibility of modernity.²⁰

1.4 Modern Microfiction

Microfiction demonstrates well the depth of the rift between high and low cultural forms in modernist aesthetics. Despite, or perhaps on account of, a “notable boom in the ‘short short’ story for magazines from the 1920s through the 1940s”,²¹ very short narrative forms receive scant critical attention. Yet, at the margins of a marginalised genre, excepted from the norms of modern narrative, microfictions possess a disruptive force which frequently places them at the experimental cusp of the avant-garde. Iconic modernist microfictions emerge at significant nodes of narrative innovation: the tense patterns of incremental repetition and angular discontinuity in the miniature sketches of Stein’s “Three Portraits of Painters” (1912) open paths of verbal patterning explored by experimentalists as different as Samuel Beckett and Charles Bernstein; the unadorned, declarative prose of Kafka’s parable, “Before the Law” (1915), reveals a conceptual sophistication which influences writers from Jorge Luis Borges to J. M. Coetzee; the imbrication of sense, affect and imagination in the diminutive but dense verbal icons of Virginia Woolf’s post-impressionistic “Blue and Green” (1921)²² resonate in the tableaux of stylists as varied as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jeanette Winterson; and the robust, plain speaking of Ernest Hemingway’s “A Very Short Story” (1924) informs a range of work from Raymond Carver’s minimalism to Tao Lin’s ultra-hip realism.

Modern Fiction Studies, 4.2 (1958): 104 (103-17); Charles Baxter, “Introduction”, *Sudden Fiction International: 60 Short-Short Stories*, ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 17-9 (17-25).

¹⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, “The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It”, *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), 99 (91-113).

¹⁶ Pratt, “The Short Story”, 109.

¹⁷ Pratt, “The Short Story”, 100.

¹⁸ Baxter, “Introduction”, 18.

¹⁹ Friedman, “What Makes”, 117.

²⁰ Rugoff, “Homeopathic Strategies”, 11.

²¹ Nelles, “Microfiction”, 90.

²² See Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 74–6; Sue Roe, “The Impact of Post-Impressionism”, *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, 1st ed., eds. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 164–90 (pp. 170–3).

1.5 Resurgence

Despite its credibility as an ancient folk form and its modernist experimental currency, microfiction only takes root in the public literary imagination as an independent genre in the wake of the experimentalism of the 1950s and 1960s. Amongst the numerous, magisterial, and strikingly diverse very short works from this period, pulsating with the “spirit of experiment and wordplay,”²³ we might count Borges’ metafictional masterpieces in *Ficciones* (1956), Beckett’s “Texts for Nothing” (1950–1952) which constitute an important minimalist turn in his *oeuvre*, the phenomenological exemplars of Robbe-Grillet’s *Snapshots* (1962), the ludic intertextuality of Robert Coover’s “Seven Exemplary Fictions” (1969), and J. G. Ballard’s virtuosic arrangement of fragments in *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970).

The upsurge of microfictional forms is arguably symptomatic of a more fundamental cultural shift which the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard famously refers to in terms of the disintegration of the historically legitimated grand narrative of human progress into multiple, local, contingent and competing accounts of the world as it is experienced in practical terms.²⁴ Transposing this insight to the literary sphere, the proliferation of new forms is indicative of the diversification of narrative strategies required to come to grips with what McHale terms a shift in *dominant* from the modernist to postmodernist aesthetic.²⁵ The emergence into an increasingly diverse narrative field of autonomous, microfictional forms is thus indicative of a sustained challenge to the progressive logic of *Bildung* – the formation of the autonomous subject, which finds its exemplary vehicle in the *Bildungsroman*.²⁶ A growing number of prominent publications promote very short forms: a 1976 “Minute Stories” special issue of *TriQuarterly* edited by Coover constitutes the first successful attempt to gather together narrative miniatures;²⁷ while *The New Yorker* championed emerging minimalist writers including Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, Mary Robison, Ann Beattie and Tobias Wolff.²⁸

This resurgent interest in short narrative forms in the 1970s and 1980s was by no means limited to the United States. Alongside the continued influence of short works by British and Irish writers such

²³ Robert Shapard, “Introduction”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, pp. xiii–xvi (p. xiv).

²⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), pp. 33–6.

²⁵ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 6–11.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn, pp. 87–88 (83–107).

²⁷ See Shapard, “Introduction”, p. xiv, and Gordon Lish in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 255.

²⁸ Kim A. Herzinger, “Introduction: On the New Fiction”, *Mississippi Review*, 40/41 (1985), 7–22 (7); see also Michael Marton, “Selling Short Stories”, *Mississippi Review*, 40/41 (1985), 58–61.

as Beckett, Ballard and Muriel Spark emerged an exciting younger generation which included such figures as Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro and Angela Carter; the last, in particular, penning numerous and strikingly original miniatures. Indeed, significant works reflecting a spectrum of approaches to the short narrative form are published across the Anglophone world by, amongst many others, Canada's Alice Munro, New Zealand's C. K. Stead, South Africa's Nadine Gordimer, and Australia's David Malouf. The sustained attention devoted to minimalist and microfictional forms by writers, critics, educationalists, and publishers in the United States places it consistently at the vanguard of the evolution of this enigmatic and protean genre. Significant anthologies of very short stories – stories included or excluded by the purely quantitative measure of their word count – begin to appear in the 1980s.²⁹ Irving and Ilana Wiener Howe's *Short Shorts* (1982) set its limit at two thousand five hundred words and gathered an admirable historical and international selection of canonical microfiction, and Robert Shapard's and James Thomas's *Sudden Fiction* (1986), *Sudden Fiction International* (1989), and *New Sudden Fiction* (2007), all with limits of one thousand five hundred words, quickly became standard works in literature and creative writing courses. *Flash Fiction* (1992), *Flash Fiction Forward* (2005) and *Flash Fiction International* (2015) – edited in various combinations by Robert Shapard, James and Denise Thomas, Tom Hazuka and Christopher Merrill – set their upper limit at seven hundred and fifty words, while Jerome Stern's *Micro Fiction* (1996) included only works of three hundred words or less, and both works remain prominent points of access to contemporary microfiction.

Pressing short narrative forms towards their minimal extreme remains an abiding concern for many writers, and the rapidly evolving media of literature present both challenges and opportunities in this respect. Digital technology in particular effects a radical shift both in the structures of communication and in the speed at which literary miniatures are created, published, accessed and processed. The ongoing shift from page to screen, with its concomitant incorporation of linear and non-linear processes of reading, occasions a radical reconsideration of the ways in which verbal material is organized into literary form. Websites and blogs continue to provide fertile ground for the composition and archiving of miniature works, albeit often of extremely variable quality, as do various mobile communication technologies. Nicholas Royle draws attention to the first mobile app developed to host “[q]uick fictions” which aim “to take us to the very quick of things” in order to discover “the writing of our time.”³⁰ It should not be forgotten, however, that the serialised mobile phone novel – consisting of chapters limited by a fixed number of characters to which readers can subscribe and which are distributed principally by text messaging – had already aimed at achieving a

²⁹ See Nelles, “Microfiction”, 89–90.

³⁰ Nicholas Royle, “Quick Fiction: Some Remarks on Writing Today”, *Mosaic*, 47.1 (2014), 23–39 (27).

similar sense of immediacy and accessibility. Another recent development in this format uses social media platforms and micro-blogging tools such as twitter to explore both serialised forms – Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box” (2012) and David Mitchell’s “The Right Sort” (2014) are the most prominent examples – and single tweets limited to a miniscule one hundred and forty characters.

That the miniature is increasingly seen as a professional genre – taught widely as part of creative and professional writing courses, as well as a category in an increasing number of writing competitions – has also resulted in a rapid increase in both the number of very short stories written and published (often online), and in the didactic material addressing the writing of various types of flash-, quick- and microfiction. Stern’s *Micro Fictions* was the first anthology compiled entirely from competition pieces, with more recent anthologies emerging from Calum Kerr’s and Valerie O’Riordan’s UK *National Flash-Fiction Day*, which has to date culminated in the publication of *Jawbreakers* (2012), *Scraps* (2013) and *Eating My Words* (2014). Although its present commercial success is likely to wane over time, microfiction has proved itself a resilient and adaptable genre, and one likely to find expressive routes in the future.

2. The Aesthetics of Shortness

2.1 Shortness

According to Howe, “[t]he one thing we can be sure of is that the short short [story] is shorter than the short story.”³¹ Yet, on closer inspection, even this truism proves problematic: how might we distinguish the exact point at which *merely* short becomes *very* short? The question of brevity has been taken up in two substantial critical pieces, Norman Friedman’s epochal “What Makes a Short Story Short?” and William Nelles’s more recent “Microfiction: What Makes a Very Short Story Very Short?”. Both are principally concerned with the techniques through which brevity is achieved, rather than with the conceptual problem of shortness itself, although Friedman does offer some speculation in this regard. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that although writers, critics, publishers and readers, disagree widely on what distinguishes short from very short, the tendency in anthologising very short work has been to emphasise the purely quantitative measure of word count.

Along with regularly renaming and redefining the genre, editors have prescribed progressively lower word limits for inclusion, from the 2,500 words of Howe’s short-shorts in 1982, to the 100 words of

³¹ Irving Howe, “Introduction”, *Short Shorts: An Anthology of the Shortest Stories*, eds. Irving Howe and Ilana Wiener (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), pp. ix–xv (p. x).

Kerr's and O'Riordan's microfictions in 2012.³² In the shadows of the totalising economic logic of late capitalism, the qualities of these stories are all too often reduced to fixed quantitative measures – word count, the amount of space a text occupies, or the time it takes to be read – which focus attention on what Friedman contends are the “symptoms rather than the causes”³³ of brevity. While Friedman recognises that certain narrative conditions are hospitable to shortness – principally the representation of “intrinsically small” events, or larger events “reduced in length” by various techniques of reduction³⁴ – shortness itself proves curiously resistant to direct description. To Friedman, what is most significant about shortness is that it involves a principle of parsimony, and hence an economy which cannot be quantified in absolute terms: a short story should not “exceed[...] the needs of [its] effect,”³⁵ but rather contain only those elements required for the story to communicate its singularity.³⁶

2.2 Scale

In short fiction, and even more so in very short fiction, quantity becomes the essential quality of the work in question, and yet one which cannot be expressed in terms of a fixed, quantitative measure. The concept of *scale* provides the most convincing means of grasping quantity as part of an ongoing process of quantification, reinvesting dynamism in narrative situations which are all too easily mistaken as static.³⁷ Scale is a relative measure of both spatial and temporal quantity, a relation of size and duration which applies equally to the literary work itself and to the contexts of its production and reception. As in the case of the visual arts, it is helpful to distinguish between internal and external scale. Internal scale describes the relation of parts to other parts, and of parts to the whole or the form of the work in question and deals with proportion of parts to one another.³⁸ The question of proportion applies to literature at both a formal and representational level: characters, action, and plot must be proportioned so as to constitute a narrative which is either believable or

³² Nelles (“Microfiction”, 89) offers a detailed list of these prescriptions, which is missing only the most recent iteration of Kerr's and O'Riordan's three anthologies which distinguish longer flash fictions from microfiction, the former being restricted to five hundred words and the latter to one hundred (“Introduction”, *Jawbreakers* (National Flash Fiction Day, 2012), Kindle ed., location 212–229).

³³ Norman Friedman, “What Makes A Short Story Short?”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 4.2 (1958), 103–117 (104).

³⁴ Friedman, “What Makes A Short Story Short?”, 117.

³⁵ Friedman, “What Makes A Short Story Short?”, 109.

³⁶ Friedman, “What Makes A Short Story Short?”, 106–107; 110–111.

³⁷ See Nirvana Tanoukhi, “The Scale of World Literature”, *New Literary History*, 39.3 (2008), 599–617 (604).

³⁸ See Frances Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), pp. 74–5; Friedman, “What Makes A Short Story Short?”, 115; Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 47; François Camoin in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, pp. 256–57.

appropriate to a work's aesthetic aims.³⁹ External scale describes the relation of the work in question to other works and forms, to readers and the contexts of reading, and to genre, medium and other markers of literature as a world system.⁴⁰

In microfiction, the internal scale of the work accounts for the manner in which many very short works appear to be “like most ordinary short stories, *only more so*”,⁴¹ in Howe's estimation; differing in “degree but not in kind,”⁴² according to Friedman. Hemingway's “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot” and Greene's “Special Duties” both offer highly condensed accounts of strained marital relationships, yet retain the narrative structures and proportions which make them comparable to longer forms. It is likewise the internal scale, established by the relation of their parts, which must remain relatively stable as these stories diminish in length in order for them to maintain the coherence of their storyworlds – the models of “who did what to and with whom, when, where, why and in what fashion”.⁴³ When such internal scale is disrupted, microfiction ceases to conform to conventional narrative rules: it “begin[s] to exhibit qualitative differences”⁴⁴ which do not derive solely from crossing a quantitative threshold, as Nelles appears to suggest,⁴⁵ but arise because the crossing of this threshold evidences a shift from questions of internal to those of external scale.

At this threshold – between shorter and shortest – microfiction becomes overwhelmingly concerned with conveying a sense of immediacy. Much as with minimalist visual art, which interrogates the “intricate relationship between presence and scale,”⁴⁶ the most minimal microfiction achieves its sense of immediacy through a symmetrical manipulation of physical and temporal scale, so that “the duration of the story event described closely corresponds to the length of time required to process the discourses in which those events are presented”.⁴⁷ Rin Simpson's “Inked” takes approximately thirty seconds to read, for example – a realistic temporal scale for the brief, nervous pause it depicts in its one hundred and fifty words, as a tattooist is about to tattoo her first customer. Pressed

³⁹ Friedman, “What Makes A Short Story Short?”, 114–117.

⁴⁰ See Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, pp. 75–8. For important discussions of scale in relation to literary genre and the world literature paradigm, see Tanoukhi, “The Scale of World Literature”, 604–606; 612–14; Wai Chee Dimock, “Genres as Fields of Knowledge”, *PMLA*, 122.5 (2007), 1377–1388 (1382–1383) and Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), pp. 39–43; 328–29.

⁴¹ Howe, “Introduction”, p. x.

⁴² Friedman, “What Makes A Short Story Short?”, 104.

⁴³ David Herman, “Storyworld”, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (London; New York, Routledge, 2005), pp. 569–70 (p. 570)

⁴⁴ Nelles, “Microfiction”, 91.

⁴⁵ See Nelles, “Microfiction”, 88; 91).

⁴⁶ Colpitt, *Minimal Art*, p. 73

⁴⁷ Nelles, “Microfiction”, 93.

further, the shortest microfiction presents itself in terms of singularities which evade easy classification, and which by their extremity come to constitute events in their own right, often evoking an aesthetics of the sublime.

2.3 Minimal sublime

The sublime refers to a specific type of “negative pleasure”⁴⁸ which arises when we encounter phenomena of extreme scale. Initially experiencing a sort of terror in the face of apparently imminent threat,⁴⁹ the capacity of the mind to conceptualise the idea of the infinite, and to assert it above even the most overwhelming sensory experiences, reasserts human agency and autonomy. Pleasure is derived from the sublime “not because [it] arouses fear, but because it calls forth our strength”.⁵⁰ The aesthetics of the sublime provide an imperfect means of presenting that which cannot be represented – the absolute.⁵¹ In this sense, the extremities of scale associated with the aesthetics of the sublime are ciphers for the absolute. Pivotal to the present argument is Susan Stewart’s assertion that “[s]mall things can be sublime as readily as the grand material phenomena of nature and human making”.⁵²

The minimal sublime – the most radical pole of smallness, shortness and brevity evoked in contemplating disappearance, absence, nothingness, and the void – informs an aesthetic movement towards the infinitesimal. Its literary manifestations are numerous and diverse: at one extreme the material experiments of micrographia explore the sublime extreme of minimal scale through tiny writing, principally inscribed or printed in miniature books which press the threshold between the visible and the invisible;⁵³ at the other extreme, we find microfictions such as Beckett’s “Fizzle 5” which examines the liminal point at which concept, experience, language and knowledge threaten to collapse into one another, exemplifying the conditions under which microfiction proves its aptitude to the sublime task of “presenting the unrepresentable,”⁵⁴ to recall Lyotard. The elliptical fragments and aphorisms of Schlegel, Nietzsche and Chekhov often grapple with the minimal sublime, both at the level of form and content. Equally evocative in this respect are self-reflexive and recursive

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis; Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1987), p. 98.

⁴⁹ See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 129; Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 39.

⁵⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 121.

⁵¹ See Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 98–9 (89–107).

⁵² Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 75.

⁵³ See Stewart, *On Longing*, pp. 37–9; 41–3.

⁵⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Presenting the Unrepresentable: The Sublime”, trans. Lisa Liebmann, *Artforum*, 20.8 (1982), pp. 64–9 (p. 64).

miniatures such as John Barth's celebrated "Frame-Tale" which, if read correctly, endlessly loops its single phrase, "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN", Borges's "The Library of Babel," which demonstrates the paradoxical capacity of miniature works effectively to represent infinity alongside the infinitesimal; and Dave Eggers's "There Are Some Things He Should Keep To Himself," the four blank pages of which communicate both the sublime threat of absolute absence – death – and the sublime promise of the infinite and infinite possibility.

The minimal scale of much microfiction is able to *intensify* the immanence of the work, constituting a type of sublime access to a reality which transcends the work even as it points to the very heart of its aesthetic. In successful microfiction *scale* and *intensity* operate in tandem: as the scale of the work decreases, so its intensity increases, reflecting the aesthetic logic of the maxim, *multum in parvo*, or *more in less*, according to which the singularity of the minimal work resides precisely in its capacity for "transcending any limited context of origin and at the same time neatly containing a universe" of potential significance.⁵⁵

3. Towards a Contemporary Typology of Microfiction

3.1 Relation

The question of how readers relate to microfiction, and how microfictional stories relate to one another, is central to understanding its ongoing development. Microfiction is a sociable genre. It is comparatively rare to find a very short story published in isolation. Reasons vary, ranging from Johnson's rather cynical but practical assessment, that "[e]ditors like [microfiction] [...] because it means we can publish several titles in a single issue, thereby creating the illusion of diversity on the contents page",⁵⁶ to Baxter's idealism which, in regarding microfiction as a "fiction-of-proximity", is able to claim that its stories reveal "something about the scale of our lives, not so much that diminishment has occurred but that intimacy and community have increased".⁵⁷ What is crucial in both cases is a sense that at the heart of the microfictional enterprise is the question of relation: of works to one another, of works to readers, and finally of readers to one another, as these works collectively address a reading public which, as Warner recalls, "is by definition an indefinite audience rather than a social constituency that could be numbered or named,"⁵⁸ and hence marked by diverse and divergent views on the nature, limits, merits and effects of the genre.

⁵⁵ Stewart, *On Longing*, 53.

⁵⁶ Johnson in "Afterwords", *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 232.

⁵⁷ Baxter, "Introduction", p. 22.

⁵⁸ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter-publics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 55–6.

The rapid proliferation of microfiction as a professional genre – one taught in many creative writing courses, codified in numerous textbooks, published in lucrative literary journals and magazines, the subject of international writing competitions and festivals such as the UK's *National Flash Fiction Day*, and imbedded within an ever-proliferating number of online platforms – has meant that a great number of its best works have been written with a specific set of relations – a system – in mind. As with every genre, the microfictional system takes the mutable shape of an emergent set of relations between writers, works and readers.⁵⁹ Such relations often involve revisiting historical forms, as exemplified in Borges's and Carter's use of folklore and fable. Equally prominent are the intertextual relations commonly used by writers of microfiction to "increase the function or interpretive reach of a story".⁶⁰ Consider, for example, Teju Cole's twitter fictions, *Seven Short Stories About Drones*,⁶¹ a series of short tweets, each of which begins with the opening line of a celebrated novel, followed by an incisive phrase carefully conceived to convey the brutal futility of drone warfare.

Particularly significant are the increasingly numerous longer cycles from leading authors which are able to demonstrate both continuity and diversity. Jim Crace's *The Devil's Larder* is one of several compelling microfictional cycles – others include Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Borges' *Book of Imaginary Beasts*, Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, Gray's *Mean Tales*, Butler's *Severance*, and Kemp's *Twentysix* – which weave together distinct miniature narratives by shared threads of motif, theme, style or formal constraint. Indeed, Kemp's is a bold and inventive cycle – unapologetically philosophical, self-consciously writerly, yet also visceral and explicit in its narration of twenty-six homosexual encounters, each of which confronts the capacities and limits of language as it attempts to mediate the overwhelming intensity of the body and erotic experience. These stories exemplify many of the most compelling qualities of contemporary microfiction.

3.2 Event

In Kemp's "L," for instance, the reader encounters a single event beginning *in media res*,⁶² as a transgender prostitute, Ruby, humorously narrates oral sex with "her latest trade" to an attentive audience cruising for sex in a public park.⁶³ Yet this single event is carefully situated in a generic field, allowing minimal verbal patterns to imply a great deal of detail. Rapidly oscillating between quite

⁵⁹ See Frow, *Genre* 124–8; Dimock, "Genres as Fields of Knowledge", 1378–81.

⁶⁰ Nelles, "Microfiction", 96.

⁶¹ Teju Cole, "Seven Short Stories About Drones", *The New Inquiry*, 14 January 2013, <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/dtake/seven-short-stories-about-drones/> [Accessed 2 June 2015].

⁶² See Nelles, "Microfiction", 94–5; Lydia Davis in "Afterwords", *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 230.

⁶³ Jonathan Kemp, "L", *Twentysix* (Brighton; London: Myriad, 2011), p. 57

distinct narrative techniques and styles allows Kemp to incorporate several typical tropes of the miniature. The aphoristic philosophical reveries with which the piece begins and ends – “I must have a body because some obscure object lives in me”, and “[i]t is thus not a question of language or the body, but language *and* the body” – contrast sharply with Ruby’s monologue which takes the form of a joke, replete with the punchline, “the bastard wouldn’t even swallow”, demonstrating the proclivity in much microfiction for twists, surprises and inversions.⁶⁴ Yet the force of this work emerges from a third narrative register. Through minimal but suggestive detail, Kemp carefully balances the sense of contemporaneity and the present, so central to microfiction,⁶⁵ with the historical details of Ruby’s “former life” as Rudy, a life spent with his “Chelsea hooligan mates” and amplified by its symbolically charged “scars where the British Bulldog and Union Jack tattoos have been removed”.⁶⁶ This tension allows the narrator to polarise feminine and masculine, emphasising the moments when “Rudy makes an appearance, and Ruby’s feminine demeanour disappears in a vapour of violence”, all in order to mark the epiphanic event – the “moment when who she wants to be and who she appears to be coincide [...] gloriously”.⁶⁷

Such events are sources of radical novelty and change. They erupt within an existing order in a fundamentally unpredictable manner,⁶⁸ powerful as they are fleeting, and, in their singularity, call to be witnessed, to be represented, even as they remain essentially inassimilable to any system or order. Literature harbours events precisely to the extent that it is hospitable to the emergence of singularities – texts marked by their “resistance to being described in general categories or concepts”⁶⁹ – since, as Attridge recognises, “singularity is not a property but an event” which takes place not only in the generation of the work but in its reception.⁷⁰ Microfiction grapples with the singularity of events in several ways, with many of its best works taking up the sublime challenge of presenting the unrepresentable. Centred on the motif of an empty white room – the *tabula rasa* upon which potential events erupt, and upon which consequences of these events are traced, elliptically and uncertainly – Jeanette Winterson’s “The White Room” (2004) weaves together short meditations on the interpenetration of temporality, affect, memory and phenomenological experience in order to

⁶⁴ Kemp, “L”, pp. 57; 58. See also Nelles, “Microfiction”, 97.

⁶⁵ See Royle, “Quick Fiction”, 27–9.

⁶⁶ Kemp, “L”, p. 57.

⁶⁷ Kemp, “L”, p. 58.

⁶⁸ Alain Badiou, “The Event as Trans-Being”, *Theoretical Writings*, trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 99–104 (pp. 100–101).

⁶⁹ Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 2.

⁷⁰ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 64.

represent the “caught moment opening into a lifetime.”⁷¹ Exemplary of numerous of the most significant aesthetic subtleties of microfiction, “The White Room” exposes the event as a threshold upon which the distinction between poetry and prose, contraction and expansion, determinism and chance, fragility and resilience, and nostalgia and avant-gardism are rendered problematic.⁷²

Events are equally important to microfiction in thematic terms, and numerous works, such as Kemp’s “L” above, address a single exceptional event or epiphanic moment. Ballard’s “Track 12” similarly takes shape around a single event – a murder – which arrives suddenly in a tense atmosphere of barely suppressed hostility. Sheringham – “a professor of biochemistry at the university” – entertains Maxted – “a run-down athlete with a bad degree”,⁷³ who is having an affair with the former’s wife – by playing him a series of microsonic recordings he has made. Through this miniature sonic universe, emblematic of the principle of *multum in parvo* in its amplification of parts of the world ordinarily unheard or concealed, the reader encounters suggestions of the event to come: Maxted is poisoned by Sheringham, and as he dies, is enfolded by the uncanny sound of a recorded and amplified kiss he had shared with Sheringham’s wife.

The representation of liminal events – and particularly of death – is often linked to a pursuit of technical virtuosity. According to Francis, “[w]riters have always challenged themselves to absolute reduction, skeletons. They tempt death”.⁷⁴ Indeed, for Royle, the accelerations of the contemporary miniature – the works he theorises as quick fiction – constitute a curious species of life-writing.⁷⁵ In the headlong race to the impossible experience of death, this writing witnesses the paradoxical appearance of life – “the life-giving drop [...] that will spread an intensity on the page”⁷⁶ – in the disappearance of the *longue durée* of traditional narrative time as it approaches zero. This peculiar phenomenon of appearance in disappearance is clearly evident in the virtuosic microfiction of Lydia Davis, while the work of Blanchot and Beckett consistently address the sublime intensity of the space between life and death – the event which in its unrepresentability always calls to be represented; the intuition of “very little...almost nothing”⁷⁷ in the uneasy utterance of last words, such as those of

⁷¹ Jeanette Winterson, “The White Room”, *Guardian*, 17 July 2004. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jul/17/originalwriting.fiction1> [Accessed 2 June 2015].

⁷² See Stuart Dybek in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 241; Kelly, *ibid.*, pp. 239–40; Fred Chappell, *ibid.*, p. 227; Davis, *ibid.*, p. 230; Nelles, “Microfiction”, 90; Baxter, “Introduction”, 20–21; 23.

⁷³ J. G. Ballard, “Track 12”, *The Complete Stories of J. G. Ballard* (New York; London: Norton, 2009), pp. 68–71 (p. 69).

⁷⁴ H. E. Francis in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 231.

⁷⁵ Royle, “Quick Fiction”, 29.

⁷⁶ Joy Williams in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 257.

⁷⁷ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 180.

Patrick White's late miniature, "The Screaming Potato". Here microfiction affirms its singularity, retrieving the force of novelty from events past by giving oblique representation to the inarticulable intensity of the event to come.

Miniature

If, as Stewart suggests, "the miniature is the notation of the moment and the moment's consequences,"⁷⁸ its aesthetic fate would seem closely tied to that of the event. However, where the event constitutes a point of intensified dynamism, the miniature seeks stasis – "a world of arrested time [...] to create a tension or dialectic between inside and outside, between private and public [...] [and] between the space of the subject and the space of the social".⁷⁹ By abstracting the essential and subtracting the inessential, the miniature intensifies the representational capacity of literature through its diminution of scale, measuring the distance between its contracted form and the expanded narrative vision from which it is drawn. The miniature remains perhaps the most pervasive microfictional type. Its techniques are closely tied to the emergence and development of the art tale in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as distinct from its folk predecessors,⁸⁰ and also to a transhistorical range of experiments with micrographic forms of tiny writing.

Miniatures which involve a diminution in their external scale tend to take a concrete form, exhibited most overtly in the production of physically tiny micrographia – miniature books and tiny writing – which are "emblematic of craft and discipline",⁸¹ and to this extent invested with a symbolic force and ritual significance which recalls the ancient religious association of inscription and power.⁸² This power transforms the micrographic work into a microcosm – a world in miniature – in which the "infinite time [...] of the world [is] collapsed within a minimum of physical space."⁸³ The intensity of the microcosmic miniature is intimately connected to the medium through which it is given its shape. The "limits of bodily skill in writing"⁸⁴ are significantly extended by the increased precision of technologies of printing, itself radicalised by the rise of digital technology. Here the material distinction of short and long texts is minimal, and both are habitually transposed into the virtual world of cyberspace which blurs any clear distinction between macrocosm and microcosm, infinite

⁷⁸ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 46.

⁷⁹ Stewart, *On Longing*, pp. 67–8.

⁸⁰ See Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 9–11.

⁸¹ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 38.

⁸² See Berjouhi Bowler, *The word as image* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), pp. 7–9; Marc Botha, *The Persistence of Minimalism*, Doctoral Thesis, Durham University (2011), pp. 267–71.

⁸³ Stewart, *On Longing*, 39.

⁸⁴ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 37.

and infinitesimal. Yet, micrographic experimentation thrives in this medium. Christine Wilks's *Underbelly* (2010), for example, is a self-contained multimedia anthology of microfictional fragments which explore the untold history of women in mining, dragging the reader interactively through the subterranean microcosm of a nineteenth-century Yorkshire coal mine.

Miniatures which involve a diminution in their internal scale resemble longer narrative forms with respect to their parts and proportions, relying on careful omissions, contractions and condensations to convey a great deal of implicit information. They demonstrate that “[w]hat is minimal [...] is the *means*, not the end.”⁸⁵ Drawing on notable precursors such as Chekhov and Hemingway, the miniature finds its most consistent exponents in the minimalist and postminimalist writers – Raymond Carver, Mary Robison, Amy Hempel, Ann Beattie, Donald Barthelme, Tobias Wolff, Richard Ford, Bobbie Ann Mason, Lydia Davis, Jayne Anne Phillips, Bret Easton Ellis and Dave Eggers, amongst many others – who construct remarkable “containers of compressed meaning.”⁸⁶ While longer narrative forms rely on establishing complex and detailed patterns to convey their sense, the miniature deploys a “field of familiar signs”⁸⁷ – generic characters and situations, historically and culturally specific events or objects – which act as ciphers for large amounts of implicit information which has been carefully condensed.⁸⁸

Many of the stories in Crace's *The Devil's Larder* draw on a nostalgic attachment to familiar images and practical wisdom, revivifying familiar patterns of the folktale, parable and anecdote. The cycle interrogates food in all its material manifestations, together with its associated spheres of hunger, craving, satiety and excess, a spectrum of culinary customs, habits, and rituals, and their role as bearers of individual, social and cultural memory. In a rather caustic account of contemporary health fads, Crace's “37” recounts the eating habits of a “regimented, well-organized, reliable” man who centres his diet around a variety of “foods to see off death”, a ritual saturated with irony inasmuch as he follows this diet “without a break, until the day he die[s]”.⁸⁹ The small scale of microfiction is thus adept at representing both the everyday and the epiphanic, and both are capable of functioning as

⁸⁵ John Perreault, “Minimal Abstracts”, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 256–62 (p. 260).

⁸⁶ Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story – Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1999), p. 11.

⁸⁷ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 44.

⁸⁸ See Baxter, “Introduction”, p. 25; Nelles, “Microfiction”, 93; Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story – Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1999), p. 4; Howe, “Introduction”, p. x.

⁸⁹ Jim Crace, “37”, *The Devil's Larder* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 112.

“emblem[s] of the universal”⁹⁰ and to this extent demonstrating that “what might be seen as a microcosmic tendency is macrocosmic as well.”⁹¹ Miniature stories do not dispense with detail, but rather displace it, and the reality they depict exists at an equal or greater intensity to those of longer forms, obliquely reiterating Friedman’s point that it is the sufficiency of the brevity of a miniature story to its effect which defines its excellence.

Deborah Levy’s “Roma” provides a similarly potent vehicle through which to examine the contemporary miniature. The story opens with the first of a series of dreams set in Rome in which a nameless protagonist confronts “[h]er husband who is going to betray her.”⁹² The microcosm of the dream is nested within the microcosm of the story, which traces the very ordinary events of a couple’s brief holiday and their return to a snowy UK for Christmas. Both microcosms are rendered in taut, evocatively stark prose, the uneasy angularity of which amplifies the tension between these two miniature worlds – the dynamic continuum of the everyday punctuated and rendered problematic by the static, self-contained tableau of the dream.⁹³ It is unclear, finally, whether the dream represents a realm of desire or of fear, and it is this measured ambiguity which characterises the miniature worlds of tales, tableaux, vignettes and sketches, enabling them to establish the “distance between the context at hand and the narrated context”⁹⁴ through which it becomes possible to begin mapping the correspondences between narrative structure and the real.

Fragment

The fragment proves particularly apposite to the task of addressing the essential contingency of reality. Fragments offer a radical and compelling alternative to the encompassing logic of systems. Reaching across history, the fragment as literary form occupies a position both terminal and foundational, its words at once the scattered remnants of fractured wholes, and points of inception for new configurations of thought.⁹⁵ The fragment disrupts any straightforward distinction between philosophy and literature, and although always of a limited scale, it is nonetheless characterised by an “essential incompleteness”⁹⁶ which indicates “that it should forever be becoming and never be

⁹⁰ Howe, “Introduction”, p. xi.

⁹¹ Stewart, *On Longing*, 63.

⁹² Deborah Levy, “Roma,” *Black Vodka* (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2013), p. 109.

⁹³ See Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 54.

⁹⁴ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 48.

⁹⁵ See Heather McHugh, “Broken English: What We Make of Fragments”, *Broken English: Poetry and Partiality* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), pp. 68–86 (p. 70).

⁹⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State U of New York P, 1988), p. 42.

perfected”.⁹⁷ In this sense, it is a genre always “tending” – one way towards the finite, the other towards the infinite.⁹⁸

In this respect we might counterpose the fragmentary lessness of Beckett’s late novella, *Worstward Ho* (1983), arrived at through an immense deconstructive labour, to the fragmentary parataxis of Robison’s *Why Did I Ever?* (2001), a novel wrought from extensive reconstructive labour as its author battled a decade of writer’s block. Indeed, there is great variety in fragmentary writing: Stein’s *Blood On The Dining Room Floor* (1933/1982) is a murder mystery, Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) a cycle of fragments, while Richard Brautigan’s *I Watched The World Glide Effortlessly By* (1956), John Cage’s *Empty Words* (1975), and Steve McCaffery’s *Panopticon* (1984) defy easy generic description altogether. Yet, it is the detached fragment, which, “like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself”,⁹⁹ which best captures the transhistorical eclecticism of microfiction.

Indeed, March-Russell holds that the short story generally conforms to a logic of fragmentation, a “breaking or separating off from an imposed limit”.¹⁰⁰ What very short forms reveal is that this fragmentation is not merely a relation of part to whole, but also of part as whole. This was certainly the aim of the Jena Romantics, whose self-reflexive fragments aim to expose the capacity for singular works to instantiate a universal logic. The varied fragmentary and aphoristic works of, amongst others, Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, Anton Chekhov, August Strindberg, Oscar Wilde, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot and Fernando Pessoa expose a wider conception of fragment,¹⁰¹ capable of grounding parables and proverbs, epigrams and epigraphs, digressions and allegories, anecdotes and jokes.

Chekhov frequently explored fragments, ranging from brief dialogues such as “An Unsuccessful Visit” (1882), through the aphoristic miniatures of “Heights” (1883), to the tiny pairs of “Questions and Answers” (1883), but fairly consistent in their tone: always amusing – sometimes benignly, but at others through an acerbic sarcasm; often didactic – he dispenses a great deal of advice, and here his writing is self-conscious in its contemporaneity. The remarkably diverse work of Lydia Davis explores

⁹⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragment 116, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 32.

⁹⁸ Heather McHugh, “Broken English”, p. 69.

⁹⁹ Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragment 206, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁰ March-Russell, *The Short Story*, p. 167.

¹⁰¹ See Gitte Mose, “Danish Short Shorts in the 1990s and the Jena-Romantic Fragments”, *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, eds. Pet Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H. Skei (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 81–95 (p. 87).

a range of fragmentary forms, including the question-and-answer format of “Jury Duty” (2001), the eclectic sequence, “Marie Curie, So Honourable Woman” (2001) and the wittily self-reflexive “Honouring the Subjunctive” (2001) which reads, “It invariably precedes, even if it do not altogether supersede, the determination of what is absolutely desirably and just.”¹⁰² Alasdair Gray concludes his *Lean Tales* with a witty and progressively contracting series of fragments which terminate in the autopoietic gem, “Having beguiled with fiction until I had none left I resorted to facts which also ran out.”¹⁰³ Don Patterson has published three volumes of aphorisms, which include timely provocations – “You’ve made a *blog*...Clever boy! Next: flushing”¹⁰⁴ – alongside tiny but meaningful meditations on freedom and autonomy – “Fate’s book, but my italics.”¹⁰⁵

In its insistence upon the capacity of singular works to convey universal truths, the fragment instantiates a threshold upon which clear distinctions of part and whole, closure and openness, and microcosm and macrocosm are undermined.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, as the Jena Romantics well understood, the fragment emerges at a “point [...] continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction”.¹⁰⁷ The sublime point intuits the radical contingency at the heart of every literary event; its eminent reinterpretability, which recognises the social and ethical dimension of the fragment: that “what is important is to introduce into writing, through the fragment, the plurality that in each of us is virtual, in all of us real.”¹⁰⁸

Medium

Literature is tied to the world, whether by its representational vocation or the effects it produces. Yet literature is also intimately connected to the medium through which it is expressed – to language and writing, of course, but moreover to the means by which language and writing are patterned, preserved, rendered communicable, or, in short, mediated. Yet, it would be an error to regard the literary medium either as separate to, or superimposed upon, work or world, or, indeed as separate to our involvement in both. As McLuhan famously recognises, every medium is essentially an “extension of ourselves,”¹⁰⁹ reflecting not only the desire but the means of becoming more

¹⁰² Lydia Davis, “Honoring the Subjunctive”, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (London and New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 377.

¹⁰³ James Kelman, Agnes Owens and Alasdair Gray, *Lean Tales* (London, Vintage, 1995), p. 282.

¹⁰⁴ Don Patterson, *The Blind Eye: A Book of Late Advice* (London: Faber, 2007), p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ Patterson, *The Blind Eye*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁶ See Maurice Blanchot, “The Athenaeum”, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 351–359 (p. 356).

¹⁰⁷ Schlegel, Athenaeum Fragment 51, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁸ Blanchot, “The Athenaeum”, p. 358.

¹⁰⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London and New York: Routledge, 1964), 7.

immediately present in the world. Every innovation with respect to medium introduces a shift in the scale and intensity by which we are entangled with both work and world.¹¹⁰

It is this shared emphasis on scale and intensity which makes tracing a parallel logic through the evolution of microfiction to changes in the media of literary expression a fruitful exercise.

Inextricable from technological transformation, the development of the literary medium has been for the most part progressive, emphasising greater durability, accessibility and portability. It begins with inscription on stone and clay, continues through the paper and vellum of scrolls and manuscripts, is revolutionised by the genesis of printing and the rise of the age of the book, and radically compressed and accelerated by the dawn of digital technology. Microfictional forms have tended to embrace experimental forms and media in order to gain an increasingly immediate access to the world, and to expose an irremissible sense of presence at the heart of the work. This is exemplified in the clear, but largely unremarked, parallel progression of microfictional forms and the technological advancement of literary media. Perhaps because visual perception offers our most immediate access to the world, these forms have tended to take their cue from visual techniques – from sketch, to snapshot, to flash fiction.

The balance of impression and expression achieved in the sketches of visual artists aiming to capture the dynamism of experience, sometimes for its own sake and at others in preparation for more elaborate work, is matched by the immediacy of verbal sketches by such masters as Charles Dickens, Hemingway and Woolf. The latter's "Blue and Green" – written in 1921 and discussed above – aims for an immediate access to the complexities of sensory experience, creating a liminal region in which word and world bleed into one another in recollecting and projecting into language an impressionist melange of sensation and affect. Another fine, albeit very different type of sketch, is Ian Hamilton Finlay's "Break for Tea" (1952) which although brief and descriptive – it describes two fishermen drinking tea around a small fire as mist gathers and rain begins to fall – is also highly evocative of a mood which allows Finlay to interrogate the nuanced relationship between location and the local, to measure customary behaviour against the singularity of the moment sketched.

A great deal has been written of the disruptive effect of photography on the traditional economies of mimesis: on its capacity to convey the tense "co-presence"¹¹¹ of the externality of the social and public, and the intimacy of the private and personal, famously given shape in Barthes's distinction

¹¹⁰ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 8–9.

¹¹¹ See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 42.

between *studium* and *punctum*;¹¹² on its paradoxical ability to communicate the dynamic immediacy of existence while simultaneously abstracting this to a static point, indicative of “the image as a cipher of a history written in forms and as an obtuse reality”¹¹³ which somehow resists perception. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty maintains, access to the world always arrives through a dynamic process of perception,¹¹⁴ and it is precisely this perceptual dynamism with which Robbe-Grillet grapples in his early short fiction, *Snapshots* (1962). The three interconnected microfictions of “In the Corridors of the Underground” significantly extend the logic of the sketch by focusing attention on specific objects or events of perception – a giant advertisement on a wall and an escalator journey, for instance – in order to draw attention to the capacity of the literary medium to grasp stasis and movement simultaneously and immediately, which is the precise capacity of the snapshot. The intensity of these small-scale works reflects a literary drive towards a “reality [which] would no longer be permanently situated elsewhere, but *here and now*,”¹¹⁵ and the immanence of the snapshot is important to the work of a range of writers including Gabriel Josipovici, Beckett, Patrick White, John Barth, Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver.

A flash is a moment of immediate insight and of immanent access – a point of appearance, but also of disappearance. Not merely a question of intensified access, however, flash fiction is also a genre of transition. In the genealogy of mediatised microfictions, flash fiction follows the sketch and snapshot, taking shape in the wake of the digital revolution that begins in the 1950s and centres on the “translation of all existing media into numerical data accessible through computers.”¹¹⁶ Although many flash fictions have neither a thematic nor a material connection to digital technology, they nonetheless reflect the epochal shift marked by the rise of digital culture, and exhibit an intuitive connection to new media thinking: the “convergence of two separate historical trajectories: computing and media technologies”, gives rise to “graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts that have become computable”.¹¹⁷

If the advent of new media technologies offers unprecedented opportunities for the democratisation of knowledge, and indeed of the literary system in general, it also precipitates a predictable yet significant cultural anxiety regarding the future of literature and its institutional forms. These are

¹¹² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26–7, 42–3.

¹¹³ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 11–2.

¹¹⁴ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: 2002), pp. 77–83.

¹¹⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, “On Some Outdated Notions”, *Snapshots and Towards a Novel*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), pp. 351–59 (p. 68).

¹¹⁶ Lev Manovich, *The Languages of New Media* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2001), p. 20.

¹¹⁷ Manovich, *Languages of New Media*, p. 20.

most emblematically captured in debates around attention: Carr holds that we are witnessing an erosion of the deep reading through which the communicative function of writing becomes tied to increased attention and even complex understanding; Hayles is more cautious, so that while she acknowledges that digital and hypermedia alter aspects of reading and information retention, she argues persuasively that such alteration should not simplistically be conflated with degradation.¹¹⁸ Similar anxieties manifest with respect to the transformation of the literary field – not only by the ubiquity of digital technology and the rise of electronic literature, but particularly by the effects of digital communication technologies such as cellular phones, tablets, and laptops, along with the modes of communication associated with social media platforms and tools such as text messaging, twitter, facebook, and blogging.

Flash fiction – both in printed and digital form – proves particularly adept at responding to the need for simultaneous intensification and acceleration marked by new media. As Bellamy suggests, while readers possess “shorter attentions spans than previously, they are also well-equipped to process information quickly”,¹¹⁹ and arguably the media of microfiction are perfectly adapted to the task of evoking a sublime intensity where our access to the work and to the world is identical. This task is by no means straightforward since, as Royle recognises, “[i]f we live in the age of the short attention span, we are by the same token caught up in a history or histories of speed.”¹²⁰ The vocation of microfiction resides not merely in matching the speed of the everyday, but in “what H  l  ne Cixous [...] calls ‘find[ing] the slowness inside the speed’”.¹²¹ Although microfiction is in some sense an opportunistic genre increasingly framed by commercial and utilitarian concerns, this vocation remains at its heart inasmuch as its best works reflect a deep commitment to responding proactively to the pace of the contemporary condition. The effectiveness of this response hinges in large part on discovering a scale of expression appropriate to our contemporary sense of life, and it is to this scale that microfiction remains oriented. Finally, the “fundamental quality [of microfiction] [...] is life” itself,¹²² and in exploring the minimal scale but maximal intensity of these works we discover a means to “see fast [but] dwell long”.¹²³ It is precisely in this sense, to return to the opening formulation of this chapter, that microfiction “fits our age”.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ See Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows*: (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2010), pp. 63–5; 90–1; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 2012), pp. 62–8.

¹¹⁹ Joe David Bellamy in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 238.

¹²⁰ Royle, “Quick Fiction”, 30.

¹²¹ Royle, “Quick Fiction”, 29.

¹²² Shapard, “Introduction”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. xvi; see also Royle, “Quick Fiction”, 27.

¹²³ Kelly in “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, eds. Shapard and Thomas, p. 241.

¹²⁴ Roberts, “Introduction”, p. vii.

