***The Cruft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention*. By David Letzler. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press. 2017. vii, 303 pp. Cloth, $60.00; e-book, $60.00.**

***The Long and Short of It: From Aphorism to Novel*. By Gary Saul Morson. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press. 2012. xx, 273 pp. Cloth, $80.00; paper, $24.95; e-book available.**

These books consider prose genres at the outer boundaries of both scholarly attention and length. Adopting a reader-centered critical approach, both authors foreground underappreciated texts—Morson takes up the extremely short, Letzler the excessively long—in attempts to encourage critical reappraisal of their materials. Morson's method is classification, subdividing short forms into diverse (and occasionally oppositional) genres: apothegms and dicta, wise sayings, sardonic maxims, and the summons, among others. Letzler's project is much more strident in tone and, though among the authors he covers are a number of contemporary Americans—William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace—who have received no shortage of scrutiny, his goal is to refocus attention within those texts "to passages that most critics have learned to ignore" (29).

It is precisely this process, by which readers have taught themselves to ignore certain text, that interests Letzler. He revels in citing critics who find little use for, say, chapter 32 ("Cetology") in *Moby-Dick* (1851) or the footnotes in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) or Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and then directing his study toward those often-overlooked passages. Letzler's useful term for these passages is *cruft*: "a half-slang / half-technical term from programming circles" often applied to "text that editors find trivial, overwritten, redundant, or unreadable" (5). While such text, with its "distinctive combination of expansiveness and emptiness" (89), may be inelegant, Letzler is persuasive in arguing it is indispensable to "develop our abilities to modulate attention when processing information" (16).

Contra Viktor Shklovsky, the art of the meganovel may actually be this near-indistinguishable oscillation between encouraging and discouraging focus. Letzler's goal is to reorient readers: cruft is key, and overly deterministic criticism of a meganovel's "hierarchical structures" (236) eliminates one of the meganovel's primary functions. "It is not only acceptable but crucial to be occasionally bored by mega-novels" (28), he argues. While that will do little to satisfy critics like James Wood who object to meganovels on aesthetic grounds, Letzler's contribution is to go beyond poststructuralist defenses of textual excess as a mere mimetic response to a culture of information

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overload and explore the pedagogic functions of cruft in reconstituting readers to address the attentional perils of the contemporary moment.

Letzler is an assiduous critic, rarely extending his theses about the mega-novel's demand for attentional modulation (and its subsequent impact on readers) beyond scientific consensus on cognition and consciousness. There are exceptions, however, in his discussions of generic excess. In testing against Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955) the old adage that too much of anything is funny, Letzler is forced to concede there are "few principles that have been established by systematic research in humor" (124), blunting some of his insights about the intersection of cruft and satire. Letzler's reading of novels that traffic in both excessive text and excessive paranoia, such as DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), suffers similarly. "Repelling us from a too-paranoid position," Letzler writes, "the narrative might push us toward a relatively counterparanoid attitude. . . . This sequence of feedback and calibration is the distinctive cognitive process provoked by the allegory-epic mega-novel" (200–1). Despite citing cognitive studies on confirmation bias and inaccurate pattern-recognition, Letzler's critical turn to a reader-centered understanding of cruft's ability to "encourage," "calibrate," or "provoke" paranoia depends largely on the hermeneutics of paranoia proposed by theorists like Paul Ricoeur and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. This does not discount Letzler's contribution to literary critical debates about "paranoid reading," but it does represent a shift in rigor from earlier chapters.

It would be too simple to define the short genres that Morson examines as those that seek to dispense with cruft. In fact, while these forms often require syntactical precision and resist shallow attention, they are also capable of creating recursion, iteration, revision, and erasure without sacrificing concision. Primary among these is the "thought," the rhetoric of which "tends toward diffuseness. . . . We catch the authors as an idea first occurs to them and observe their process of thinking it through" (196). Morson's masters of the form are Blaise Pascal, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, and Friedrich Nietzsche, but because "an arrested thought may belong to our literary heritage" (200), one wishes Morson had extended his argument on "thoughts" to other authors of lineage. Both Morson and Letzler share the problem of lineage, especially as it relates to gender. Just a handful of female authors—Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dorothy Parker, Virginia Woolf (only in her praise for Leo Tolstoy), and Gracie Allen (in a chapter titled "Stupidity Shines")—receives substantive treatment from Morson, while Letzler's chapter on Doris Lessing and Dorothy Richardson is highly partitioned from the rest of his argument, and his defense that "the literary world would probably benefit from a few more excellent mega-novels by female authors" (26) rings hollow.

Issues of historicity in short forms also cast a shadow over Morson's study, as he acknowledges. Rhetorical considerations of audience and occasion mold these materials, and the sheer multiplicity and co-optability of the brief and the pithy threaten that individual texts may be "ascribed to antithetical

genres," become "generically ambivalent," or even approach parody (17–18). This is ultimately what precludes comprehensive study of short literary genres on par with the study of (relatively) less contingent forms like the novel, the lyric, and the epic. Morson's in situ study of short forms' uses within these longer ones from which they are often culled is more rewarding anyway. His examination of the "sardonic maxim" within the novel, for example, reveals it as a universalizing rhetorical device capable of "[insisting] that we include ourselves in the judgment we pass on others" (146). It is a check against the reader's egoism, zealotry, self-deception, and dogmatism—and thereby one of the key mechanisms by which reading makes empathy possible.

All studies framed by genre distinctions run the risk that some of their classifications will not seem meaningful or bear up under scrutiny. Morson is not immune. The difference between Abraham Lincoln's "wry counsel" that it is "better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt" (119) and Benjamin Franklin's "sardonic maxim" that "there are no fools so troublesome as those who have wit" (138), for instance, feels somewhat arbitrary. Much more essential is Morson's inceptive identification and analysis of "witlessisms," the malapropisms and "wise folly" that practically "[define] American humor" (109). Highly dependent on persona—think of Mark Twain's carefully crafted rube: "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it"—witlessisms invite further takes on how best to view their defamiliarizing effects through the lens of American anxieties about social and economic status.

While neither of these books is primarily concerned with situating its materials in the context of American literature, both present arguments with repercussions (and opportunities) for Americanist scholars and prove that short and long forms share affinities—most notably scholarship's reluctance to develop a coherent theoretical framework for dealing with either prolixity or brevity. Shortcomings notwithstanding, the field would do to follow up on their leads.

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