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## Big Novels/Big Data

Jessica Pressman

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# Institutions of Scale

Stephen J. Burn

“To produce a mighty book,” Herman Melville explained in *Moby-Dick* (1851), “you must choose a mighty theme.” But to write a *big* book also required learning, so Melville’s author “swam through libraries” as his book grew “as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and...the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs.” Some of the best recent criticism related to big books has helped us reconceptualise the formal and technical devices employed by the learned contemporary novels that follow in the wake of Melville’s leviathan: Rick Altman’s model of the multiple-focus narrative in his *Theory of Narrative* (2008), and Paul Dawson’s nuanced consideration of omniscient narration in Jonathan Franzen (in his *Return of the Omniscient Narrator* [2013]) stand out in this respect for me. But what I think scholars of the form have yet to explore is the influence of the institutions where the learning that Melville described took place.

Melville may have sounded like one of the earliest creative writing instructors in the US when he laid out the elements of the “mighty book,” but the best accounts of the influence of creative writing programs (such as Mark McGurl’s justly celebrated *The Program Era* [2009]) tell only half the institutional story. Somewhere in the middle ground between McGurl’s program writers and the emergence of what Judith Ryan calls “the novel after theory” is the story of the influence of the literary critical (rather than strictly theoretical) industries that canonized the big book, in its varied forms, as the high watermark for modern novelistic

achievement. University educated novelists who were schooled in a literary canon formed in the wake of, say, Northrop Frye’s description of encyclopaedic authors who built their creative lives around one “supreme effort,” or Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg’s comparable definition of the “greatest narratives” as those in which “the most is attempted,” came of age in an atmosphere in which *Ulysses* (1922), in particular, was—in its size, architecture, and technical range—the dominant template. Telling this story, in its first instance, is a way of tracing how the institutional construction

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of modernism shaped the bigness of nascent postmodernism (and essays such as Harry Levin’s “What Was Modernism?” are quite explicit about the fact that defining the earlier movement is a way of measuring contemporary developments). But this story, in turn, leads to a description of the way that critical studies of postmodern scale shaped the next generation. Consider, for instance, Franzen’s use of the term “systems novel” in his essays, or the partially annotated copy of Tom LeClair’s *In the Loop* (1987) in the David Foster Wallace archive.

But while changing critical cultures might be mapped more extensively, the program is

undeniably a factor for the shape of the millennial big book, in particular. When the later MFA-carrying generations write big books, they tend to build for bigness out of smallness: that is, their narrative’s fundamental building blocks most closely resemble the workshop-friendly short story that they were likely taught. Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), Vollmann’s *The Atlas* (1996), Powers’s *Gain* (1998), Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001), Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), and Yamashita’s *I Hotel* (2010)—to take just a few examples—build their often long, coiled narratives out of comparatively short narrative units in a fashion that simultaneously stresses the discrete quality of the individual narrative components (and notably many of these smaller units were first published in magazines) and the interconnection between those components much more directly than the “molecular structure” that Frederick R. Karl diagnosed in earlier expansive postmodern novels. As these later books grow in size, they do so according to the additive processes of the story cycle, rather than the linear development of the traditional novel. The new bigness depends upon the small.

*Stephen J. Burn, Reader in English Literature at the University of Glasgow, is the author or editor of five books about American fiction.*

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# Big Novels/Big Data

Jessica Pressman

What is the state of the novel in the age of big data? Sometimes, it’s just a question of scale. Novels have much to say about human experience in the midst of a medial shift from the contained codex to the never-ending World Wide Web. Increasingly, it seems, they speak not just in words on the page but through the sheer number of pages they contain. New work by such writers as William T. Vollmann and Karen Tei Yamashita take up lots of space on the shelf, but none quite expresses the commitment to bigness as Mark Z. Danielewski’s ambitious promise to publish an epic twenty-seven volume serial narrative wherein each book is itself a tome. As the earlier reviews indicate, the first and second books in Danielewski’s new *Familiar* series

clock in at over 800 pages—with a third volume of equal immensity due later this year.

In short, the trend towards bigness in bookish bulk is about building the novel to scale in an age of big data. But big novels are, of course, nothing new. From the eighteenth and nineteenth-century tome to the heavy hitters of the twentieth-century experimental novel—a lineage including Fielding, Melville, Faulkner, and Stein as much as Joyce, Pynchon, Silko and Wallace—the novel takes up space. Confronted with this older legacy, twenty-first century maximalism must respond to a critical question: is the contemporary trend towards bigness

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an ironic or expected outcome of the print novel in the moment of the book’s supposed obsolescence due to digital technologies?

I would venture to say, yes. The novel has always been a material artifact but this fact is evermore apparent and of increased aesthetic interest in the face of seemingly disembodied digital data. That is, the big book counts its heft as part of its signification, occupying literal space on the bookshelf where its physicality plays an equally vital role in its meaning-making.

Literary criticism is also going big. Inspired by computational practices of textual analysis and digital visualization tools, literary critics are

exploring “distant reading” (see Franco Moretti) and moving from close reading small objects (a poem, a passage, a theme) to analyzing big data sets of all sorts of literary corpora (the titles of all novels published during a certain time period). It’s an interesting time for literary analysis, when ideas about what counts as reading and how we do it are shifting along with our reading devices and tools.

In this moment, the bigness of the print-based and bookbound novel registers particular significance. Both in cahoots with big data and also rebelling against it, the big novel accordingly mimics information overload even as it seems to contain the entire world (and, often, the World Wide Web) within it. Resolute in its bigness, such books proclaim that the novel is here...and it’s not going anywhere.

*Jessica Pressman is Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University, where she also directs SDSU’s Digital Humanities Initiative (dh.sdsu.edu). She is the author of Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media (2014), co-author, with Mark C. Marino and Jeremy Douglass, of Reading Project: A Collaborative Analysis of William Poundstone’s Project for Tachistoscope (2015), and co-editor, with N. Katherine Hayles, of Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in a Postprint Era (2013).*

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