To Detail a Dollhouse

Paul K. Saint-Amour

The literary detail is a fuzzy-edged thing. It's easy to name individual details in works of literature. But try naming a literary element that's almost but not quite a detail, or one that's just barely a detail. That's a lot tougher. And it's no easier to point to the absence of detail, because the boundaries of the detail shift with our attention. Focusing intently on a passage you're convinced is undetailed reveals the semantic and grammatical particulars by which it creates the impression of being a detail-free zone, and soon you're staring at a world of details. Attention bestows detail transitively—it *details* an object. And no wonder: the English word *detail* descends from a twelfth-century transitive verb, the French *détailler*, "to cut in pieces, retail, deal with or relate circumstantially" (*OED*). Detail is less an intrinsic property of a thing than a quality we cut into it or cut it down to, pruning it to the scope of our attention, for *tailler*, "to cut," comes from the Latin *talea*, "twig, sprig, cutting, scion."[1] Colloquialisms for becoming mired in detail—getting lost in the weeds, missing the forest for the trees—half remember those horticultural origins. Detail: a cutting taken by the beholder.

If specifying the borders of a detail is difficult, broadly theorizing the detail is even more so. The particularity of individual details makes generalization a challenge. But the fact that detail is produced in part by attention—is repeatedly cut and recut by the beholder from larger branches of experience—easily doubles the difficulty. The contributors to this special issue have mostly avoided broad theories of the detail in

[1] *Retail*, likewise from the French root *tailler*, originally denoted the sale of a small quantity cut from a bulk or gross one, as a cutting from a bolt of cloth. To relate something "in retail" is to provide a detailed account of it. By *circumstantially*, the *OED* implies a fully encompassing account, not indirect forms of evidence.

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favor of circumscribed accounts of what detail does, can do, and might do. In many of these accounts, details both do and undo. For Wendy Allison Lee, details can conscript nonwhite writers into projects of ethnic and cultural self-objectification and self-commodification for consumption by white readers. They can also offer a critique of the liberal multiculturalism that underpins that conscription. Shirley Lau Wong reads the narrator of Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) as seeking, in the urban details he rapturously collects while walking, a refuge from his ethical responsibilities. These include responsibilities to his psychiatric patients, to strangers, and to the childhood friend who accuses him, toward the end of the novel, of raping her when they were adolescents. By insisting that detail may abet injury by narcotizing obligation, Cole's novel points to both a cosmopolitanism and a kind of detail it forbears to represent—ones based on attachment, provisional belonging, and reciprocity. Jennifer Spitzer finds something like that more positive vision realized in Virginia Woolf's novels and essays, whose details trigger shifts in register and scale that can lead to expanded networks of interconnection and to surprising, potentially emancipatory attachments.

In some of the foregoing essays, accounts of what detail does are accompanied by redoings of detail that provocatively stretch its dimensions or cross it with neighboring concepts. Tyler Bradway approaches detail not as a feature of environments or objects (including printed pages) but as an appurtenance of characters. To the reader who worries that this approach conflates details and character *traits*, Bradway would, I suspect, respond that what he calls *character-detail* resists both the biologizing and the depth-psychological connotations of the character trait. Character-detail, he writes, foregrounds "the irreducible superficiality that makes a character distinct and recognizable," its detachability and promiscuous circulation allowing for the relational mode of queer eroticism Bradway (2021) and others have called "queer uptake" (see also Boulware 2017). Dora Zhang's essay begins by positing what happens when the details indicating the races or genders of characters are deliberately suspended in "unmarked texts." Midway through, however, her piece shifts to the collateral details that survive this suspension to become clues from which a reader might infer characters' elided racial or gender identities. As Zhang reads it, Toni Morrison's only short story, "Recitatif" (1983), issues an implicit demand for intersectional reading by pointing

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up the nonequivalence and context dependence of hypotheses about race based on the circumstantial evidence that details afford. Caroline Levine observes that whereas the STEM fields treat systems and structures as their privileged objects of study, the humanities and interpretive social sciences "turn to the detail in order to resist and unsettle" structures and normative patterns. Here one might demur that the exception more than the detail is at issue and that the overlap between the two categories is at best partial, plenty of details being so unexceptional as to afford no traction in unsettling large-scale norms. However, humanities scholars may be so used to exceptionalizing details that they assent readily when Levine identifies the "errant detail"—one place where detail and exception overlap—as the primary site of critique, exposure, and utopian possibility in humanities scholarship. That assent would support Levine's claim about how humanities scholarship deprivileges system and norm. It might also prompt us to ask: If the detail as such is difficult to theorize, how much more so is the unerrant detail?

In their introduction Spitzer and Wong ask whether we might "align [an] interest in 'modest' and 'weak' approaches, in 'near phenomena' and in the minor, with a renewed attention to detail." Levine responds that, far from needing renewed attention, the detail has been a foreground object in humanities methodologies for decades, from psychoanalysis, interpretive anthropology, and New Criticism to deconstruction, feminism, New Historicism, disability studies, and critical fabulation as recently framed by Saidiya Hartman (2008). Indeed, the conviction that the errant detail may be leveraged against prevailing systems and norms appears, in Levine's account, to be nothing less than the undeclared *strong* theory of humanities scholarship for the last century. Levine also, though, posits that the detail can defamiliarize systems and structures "because it resists grand programs and universalizing assumptions and theories"—that is, because it is itself weakly theorized. This weak theorization of the detail is a common feature of the essays gathered here, which insist that its identity is relational and circumstantial and which blur it handily with trait, clue, and exception. If Levine is right, the fuzzy boundaries that permit such blurring may have been an essential factor in the detail's long reign as the shadow sovereign of humanities methodologies, its weak theorization allowing it to sit at the

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center of a strong theory of antinormativity and antisystematicity.[2] If so, then a theory of the detail that firmed up its boundaries and clearly articulated its relationship to structures, norms, and systems might allow humanities scholars to approach details in a manner less faith based, more daylit, more intentional. A stronger theory of the detail might weaken, to salutary ends, detail's reflexive privileging by our methodologies.

I'm less ready than Levine is to merge detail with exception, to see detail as a function or effect of structure, or to declare that it's "really just structures all the way down." But I take her point that we need to think better about how detail and whole, exception and structure, are implicated in one another. In what follows, I don't offer anything like a strong theory of the detail or of its entanglement in whole or system. But I do venture a few axioms about literary detail that may serve as a first step toward such a theory. Some of these axioms involve detail's necessary (as opposed to accidental or contingent) relationship to scale. Others involve detail's relationship to fictionality, a relationship the preceding essays collectively foreground by focusing almost exclusively on works of prose fiction. Still others address detail's capacity to serve as a collective point of attachment and thereby to catalyze the formation of new structures.

The contributors to this issue have already collocated detail and scale in lots of productive ways. In their introduction, Spitzer and Wong ask, "What is the scale of the detail, and how does the detail change shape across historical periods and genres?," and also touch on the broader scalar questions that have lately animated methodological debates in literary studies. Spitzer departs from Georg Lukács by reclaiming both detail and scale for the narrative side of the "Narrate or Describe" debate, demonstrating how Woolfian details catalyze

[2] For Elizabeth Anker (2022), the undeclared strong theory in the academic humanities is that paradoxical or counterintuitive formulations tend to be true. Humanists, in Anker's view, have become particularly addicted to the paradox of exclusion, whereby a system's integrity is seen to be constituted, guaranteed, and most fully witnessed by the typically occulted thing that it excludes. Where for Levine the (weakly theorized) errant detail offers humanists the fantasy of a utopian escape from systems, for Anker the (strongly theorized) paradox of exception traps humanists in a dystopian view of all systems as intrinsically and irreparably unjust. In both accounts, hypertrophied attention to the outlier has resulted in a discipline-wide loss of faith in the practical construction, maintenance, and improvement of systems and institutions, and at a time when the humanities can ill afford such a loss of faith.

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dramatic changes in narrative scale. Levine expresses her intervention in explicitly scalar terms, urging humanities scholars to overcome their allergy to large-scale structures and to become better acquainted with how structures move across scales. For Zhang, a central problematic of the detail is "how it mediates between part and whole, individual and type, particular and universal," and the unmarked texts of Morrison and Anne F. Garréta hold her attention precisely because they scramble the social codes of this scalar mediation. Lee's essay notes how "minor details" in the metafictions of Ruth Ozeki and Nam Le draw critical attention to the minoritizing operations of ethnic details with which Asian American writers are expected to outfit their work. Self-conscious details, in other words, can expose the painful forms of diminution wrought by self-commodifying details. Although Wong's governing language for ethics is that of priority—especially the figure-versus-ground distinction—rather than scale, the passage in *Open City* that detains her most is one in which the view of New York City from an airplane reminds Cole's narrator, Julius, of the *Panorama of the City of New York*, built for the 1964 World's Fair. In Wong's reading, the model tropes both the priority, for Julius, of representation over the real world (inasmuch as the view of the city reminds him of the model rather than the reverse) and the Olympian distance from which he prefers to view human social ties and obligations.

I want to linger with Wong over this passage, both to register my sympathy with her analysis and to make a few additional observations about detail's necessary relationship to scale. I note, first, that the language of detail is entirely absent while Julius views the city itself from the air. It enters his discourse only when he begins to describe the Queens Museum of Art's scale model, which

> showed, in impressive detail, with almost a million tiny buildings, and with bridges, parks, rivers, and architectural landmarks, the true form of the city. The attention to detail was so meticulous that one could not help but think of Borges' cartographers, who, obsessed with accuracy, had made a map so large and so finely detailed that it matched the empire's scale on a ratio of one to one, a map in which each thing coincided with its spot on the map. The map proved so unwieldy that it was eventually folded up and left to rot in the desert. (Cole 2011: 150)

Julius's reverie over the detailed model city seems to curdle when it makes him think of Borges's parable about a map abandoned because

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it was coextensive with the territory and therefore useless. Wong persuasively reads Cole's reference to the parable as "a cautionary tale about how keen fidelity to detail can quickly slide into obsession," an admonition that Julius is disastrously unable to heed. I would add that his puzzling leap from the 1:1200 scale model of New York to the 1:1 scale map in Borges's "On Exactitude in Science" (1946) also risks the loss of detail altogether. In the parable the imperial cartographers' obsession with accuracy leads them to misrecognize the map's primary utility, which is to aid navigation by miniaturizing the landscape it represents. A 1:1 scale map is a duplicate, not a replica. One might as well use the landscape itself rather than the map that corresponds perfectly to it.[3] Relatedly, one would no more refer to the features on a 1:1 scale map as "details" than to an actual city or landscape as "detailed." Detail implies a difference of scale between the object and its representation, or between the object and its beholder. A person gazing at a 1:12 scale dollhouse might exclaim over its detailed interior. But the doll does not revel in the detail of the dollhouse. Detail is heteroscalar, not homoscalar. What's more, it is heteroscalar in one direction: detail miniaturizes the object that bears or incarnates it. That object, we can add, is artifactual, made rather than found. "There are no miniatures in nature," writes Susan Stewart (1984: 55), the miniature being "a cultural product, the product of an eye performing certain operations, manipulating, and attending in certain ways to, the physical world." The anthropocentric frame within which those operations, manipulations, and attentions take place is scale. And because there is no detail without scalar difference, there are no details in nature.

It's true that we routinely refer to features of certain nonminiature, human-made objects as details. For example, nonstructural design elements in buildings scaled to human inhabitants are often called architectural details. Yet while a staircase or cornice or revealed joint in a full-scale building is not spatially heteroscalar in the way the same features of a dollhouse would be to a human observer, it represents a concentration of intention and labor, and it solicits an amount of attention by the

[3] That is, in fact, exactly what happens in Borges's source text for the parable, Lewis Carroll's (1894: 169) *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded.* A character named Mein Herr says of his countrymen's 1:1 map: "It has never been spread out, yet. . . . The Farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."

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beholder, out of scale with those of simpler expanses. When it comes to the architectural detail, it's as if an amount of labor and attention commensurate with the whole structure had been lavished on a part, such that the part may, as is routinely said of such details, characterize, define, even stand in for the whole. Thus, as long as our sense of scale includes not only physical space but also labor and attention, detail can be a heteroscalar region of a homoscalar object. Such a proposition implies that detail's legibility is a function of the uneven distribution of labor and attention within a structure, object, or built environment. It raises the question whether an object evenly saturated with the concentrated labor and attention detail requires could really be said to contain or feature detail.

Having taken a detour through several detail-bearing objects and media, we need to return to the question of detail in literature, specifically to the place of detail in fiction. It goes without saying that a work of fiction is neither a dollhouse nor a map nor a scale model of a city nor a building. Still, like each of these, it exists in heteroscalar relationships both to what it represents and to those who behold it. Fiction provides access to a diegetic world through the heteroscalar operations of metonymy, suggesting a whole fictional world by representing a tiny subset of the persons, places, times, and events we imagine it as containing. The represented portions of the diegetic world need to be less extensive in time and space than the actual world for the fiction to be traversable without becoming coextensive with our actual lives. Meanwhile, the physical text through which we access that diegetic world needs to be smaller than our bodies (to permit us to carry it around). And though the uneven distributions of their makers' labor and attention are less legible in works of fiction than in buildings, literary texts, too, are repositories of several kinds of labor and attention that seem altogether out of scale with their compact physical profile.

Despite all this—despite the fact that the simplest work of fiction entails multiple heteroscales—readers also routinely experience a fictional world as if it were scaled to themselves. Like fictionality itself, the heteroscalar nature of fiction is something a reader both knows and suspends at the same time. Detail, I submit, plays a crucial role in enabling this doubled readerly experience of scale. Katherine Mansfield's 1922 short story "The Doll's House" both allegorizes and exemplifies this function of literary detail through its description of young

Kezia Burnell's first look at a dollhouse sent to her family by a friend who has recently stayed with them. Here is Kezia surveying the interior of the house once its front has been unlatched and swung open:

> Red carpet covered all the floors except the kitchen; red plush chairs in the drawing-room, green in the dining-room; tables, beds with real bed-clothes, a cradle, a stove, a dresser with tiny plates and one big jug. But what Kezia liked more than anything, what she liked frightfully, was the lamp. It stood in the middle of the dining-room table, an exquisite little amber lamp with a white globe. It was even filled all ready for lighting, though, of course, you couldn't light it. But there was something inside that looked like oil and moved when you shook it.
>
> The father and mother dolls, who sprawled very stiff as though they had fainted in the drawing-room, and their two little children asleep upstairs, were really too big for the doll's house. They didn't look as though they belonged. But the lamp was perfect. It seemed to smile at Kezia, to say, "I live here." The lamp was real. (384)[4]

Mentally ejecting the ill-scaled dolls from the house, Kezia could hardly be more attuned to scalar disjunction. And she's circumspect enough to know that the realistic dining-room lamp can't be lighted. Yet the detail of the lamp, especially the familiar and convincing movement of liquid inside its oil font, invites Kezia into a homoscalar relation with the miniature house. Where the dolls' stiffness and size disqualify them to live there, the scale and detail of the lamp make it real, make it the house's true denizen. The speech Kezia attributes to it—"I live here"—is also her own. Through it she testifies that the lamp lets her imagine that she is scaled to it and to the house despite knowing that she's vastly more out of scale than the rejected dolls. As with Kezia and the lamp, fictional detail allows the reader to have both a homoscalar and a heteroscalar relation to the fictional world. Of that world it lets us say both "I live here" and "Look at the detail of this dollhouse!"

The dollhouse, admittedly, is a risky analogue for fiction. It threatens to reduce all modes to a static realism that conceives of the fictional world as a scale model of the real. But Mansfield's story revolves around a dollhouse not to endorse this reduction but to mark it as a misrecognition of both realism and fiction. In this it anticipates Stewart's (1984: 26) claim that "realistic genres do not mirror everyday life; they mirror its

[4] All quotations and page citations of "The Doll's House" are taken from and refer to Mansfield 1981.

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hierarchization of information. They are mimetic in the stance they take toward this organization and hence are mimetic of values, not of the material world." Although it gives ample attention to Kezia's reverie over the miniature lamp, "The Doll's House" does so to track how news about the house travels, and how access to its detailed interior is carefully controlled, in a highly class-stratified group of schoolchildren whose values largely reflect those of their parents—all of them, so far as we know, members of the white settler population in Karori, a suburb of Wellington, New Zealand.[5] As the middle Burnell sister, Kezia must let her older sister tell their schoolmates about the dollhouse first and must defer to her preferences about who may come to see it. Her own belated speech in praise of the tiny lamp is ignored by all the girls on the playground but the Kelvey sisters, who, as the poor daughters of a washerwoman, are shunned by the other children and prohibited by Mrs. Burnell from coming to see the dollhouse. When Kezia sneaks them in, their viewing is quickly ended by Aunt Beryl, who scolds her niece and rudely shoos the Kelveys away. But neither Kezia's encomium to the lamp nor the brief glimpse of the dollhouse has been lost on the younger Kelvey sister, "our Else," whom no one has ever seen smile but who smiles now as she tells her sister softly, "I seen the little lamp" (391).

The modernism of Mansfield's story lies in how it uses free indirect discourse and limited omniscience not as blank techniques but as semaphores keyed to its unsparing account of class condescension. The free indirect discourse through which Aunt Beryl's brief appearance is related exposes her disdain for the working-class sisters and her cruelty's cathartic effect on her mood: "Now that she had frightened those little rats of Kelveys and given Kezia a good scolding, her heart felt lighter" (390–91). Having drawn so close to the perspective of the privileged Beryl, the narrator retreats to a tactful (and possibly aloof) distance from the Kelvey sisters as they recover from the shame of their expulsion from the Burnells' courtyard: "Dreamily they looked over the hay paddocks, past the creek, to the group of wattles where [Burnell neighbor] Logan's cows stood waiting to be milked. What were their thoughts?" (391). This modernism of narrative technique comports perfectly with Stewart's account of realistic genres as mimetic not of the material world but of the hierarchization of information and the values of everyday life. So, for

[5] The story's original title was "At Karori."

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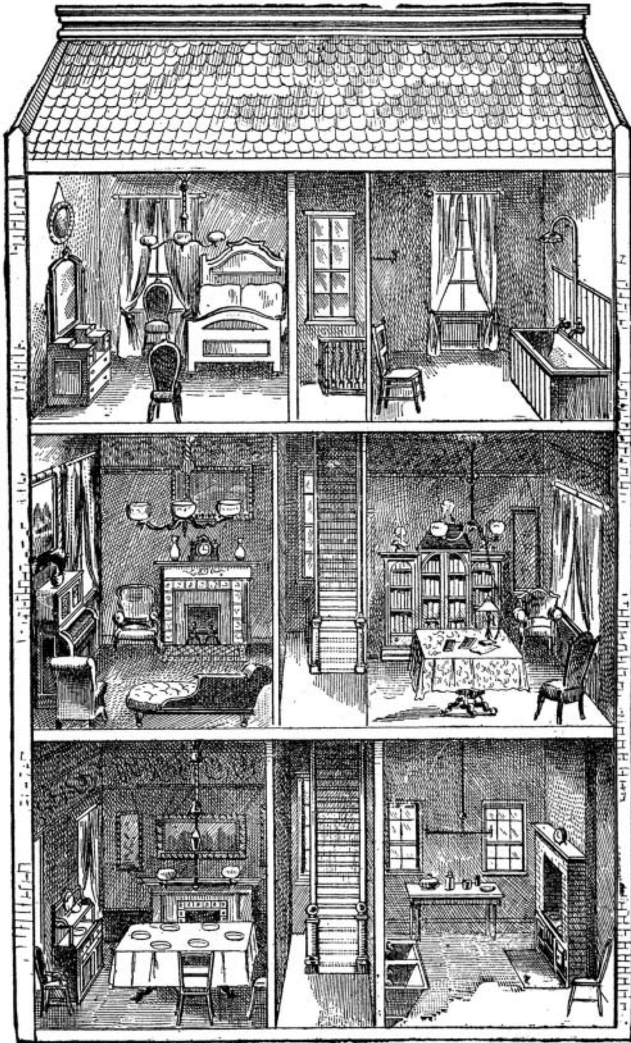

Figure 1. Dollhouse in Bercy 1894: 55.

that matter, does the dollhouse, whose hinged front and cutaway view (fig. 1) are at once entirely conventional and an outrage against the static verisimilitude of the scale model. Mansfield draws a great deal of attention to this feature of the dollhouse in the story's first scene:

> The hook at the side was stuck fast. Pat [the Burnells' handyman] prised it open with his penknife, and the whole house front swung back, and— there you were, gazing at one and the same moment into the drawing-

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> room and the dining-room, the kitchen and the two bedrooms. That is the way for a house to open! Why don't all houses open like that? How much more exciting than peering through the slit of a door into a mean little hall with a hat-stand and two umbrellas. That is—isn't it?—what you long to know about a house when you put your hand on the knocker. Perhaps it is the way God opens houses at the dead of night when He is taking a quiet turn with an angel. (383–84)

Thanks to that hinged wall, domestic life stands exposed in all the verticality, hierarchy, and unlikely adjacencies that an actual house conceals behind doors, floors, walls, and staircases. Having laid this fact out in cross section, Mansfield swears a second kind of methodological fealty to dollhouse mimesis. Opening descriptively only to end in a fantasy of divine trespass, the paragraph itself practically enacts the subordination of accurate material representation to a mimesis of values.

With the dollhouse metonymizing her socially exposing realism-modernism, Mansfield might be expected to turn her back on the detail as tainted by its association with the wrong dollhouse, the wrong realism. Yet it's the physical detail of the little lamp and the textual details that convey the two girls' contemplations of it—Kezia's throwing her voice into the miniature object, our Else's indulgence in a rare smile at the thought of it—that constitute their shared ground in aesthetic experience. It's a ground in which a different class relation than the one prescribed by Kezia's family and enforced by her teachers and peers might take root; a ground in which Kezia, our Else, and maybe countless others might say, "We live here." Mansfield's story does not cast the picture of that collectivity or of the large-scale structures that might sustain it, unless we take Kezia's and our Else's shared attachment to the dollhouse lamp as modeling, in miniature, a public's attachment to a fictional world by way of an aesthetic detail. Nor does the story quite adhere to what Levine identifies as the masterplot of humanities scholarship, wherein an errant or exceptional detail serves as the site for resisting or unsettling a dominant norm or structure. Instead, "The Doll's House" does something we have encountered elsewhere in this issue—in Spitzer's discussion of the Manx cat in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in Lee's analysis of the *perhaps* in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976), and in the in-betweenness of queer character-detail in Bradway's reading of A. K. Summers's *Pregnant Butch* (2014). Like these accounts, Mansfield's story turns on a detail that partakes, irreducibly, of structure and aperture, rule

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and exception. Precisely because it is enmeshed so fully in an existing social structure, the dollhouse lamp may also serve as an assembly point where fugitives from that structure might gather to begin a new one.

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