The realm of the miniature awaits its passionate and scholarly explorer. It is a realm richly furnished with creations that strike deep into the imagination, creations such as intricately carved chessmen, paper circuses and theaters, peach-pit monkeys, pastries in the shape of cathedrals, the little clockwork coach described by Poe at the beginning of "Maelzel's Chess-Player," boxwood rosary beads the size of plums that open to reveal minutely carved scenes from the life of Christ, the enchanting Praxinoscope Theater invented by Emile Reynaud in 1879, the tiny tin and copper kitchen utensils made by the copper founders of medieval Nuremberg to supply the needs of dolls. A thick and sumptuously illustrated volume longs to be written about the history of miniature objects, their types and classes, their uses, their cultural significance, their status as works of art, and a second volume, no less thick, might well consider their imaginative offspring in works of literature, including within its compass such matters as the kingdom of Lilliput, the history of marionettes in fiction, the haunted dollhouse in the story by M. R. James, the adventures of Pigwiggin in Drayton's "Nymphidia," the homunculus in Faust, the miniature populations in The Mysterious Stranger, and the use of the inanimate and animate miniature, from dollhouses and toy theaters to living dolls and Thumbelina, in nineteenth-century children's books. What I wish to do here, however, is only to consider the nature of the miniature itself, and to ask what it is that enchants the imagination in the presence of this second world.

Wherein lies the fascination of the miniature? Smallness alone compels no necessary wonder. A grain of sand, an ant, a raindrop, a bottle cap, may interest or amaze the eye, but they do not arrest the attention with that peculiar intensity elicited by the miniature. They do not cast a spell. The miniature, then, must not be confused with the merely
minute. For the miniature does not exist in isolation: it is by nature a smaller version of something else. The miniature, that is to say, implies a relation, a discrepancy. An object as large as a dollhouse can exert the fascination of the miniature as fully as the minutest teacup in the doll’s smallest cupboard.

But why should discrepancy possess an interest? I believe the answer is this, that discrepancy of size is a form of distortion, and all forms of distortion shock us into attention: the inattentive and jaded eye, passing through a world without interest, helplessly perceives that something in the bland panorama is not as it should be. The eye is irritated into attention. It is compelled to perform an act of recognition. Perhaps for the first time since childhood, it sees. But what I have said is true of all forms of discrepancy, and not only the particular discrepancy that is the miniature. Some understanding of the spell cast by this particular discrepancy may be gained by first considering the nature of the particular discrepancy that is the gigantic.

The gigantic seizes my attention with a force equal to that of the miniature, but it does not affect me in the same way. It awes, it does not charm. The gigantic produces in the beholder a sensation of discomfort, of danger. A flea magnified is the stuff of nightmare. It compels a horrified attention. The bees of Brobdingnag are more terrible than the cannon of Lilliput. Take an object as innocent as a saltshaker, imagine it eighty feet high—and though you may smile, your smile will be uneasy, you will not escape the sense of dread inherent in hugeness. The gigantic beanstalk is as terrifying as the giant. Perhaps the gigantic reminds one of the distorted world of early childhood, a world of immense rooms with soaring walls, hung with high pictures and supplied with windows beginning too high from the floor, rooms filled with enormous dangerous objects reaching higher than one’s head, like the terrifying glass table in Alice with the little key at the top.

The gigantic continually threatens to elude us, to grow too large for possession by the eye. There is something lush, profuse, unstoppable in the very idea of the gigantic.
We gaze up at the Brobdingnagians, and their heads vanish in the clouds; the gigantic grasshopper in the Museum of Science in Boston decomposes into a multiplicity of parts; and even the inch-high magnification of a flea threatens to escape visual possession by being profusely precise.

But let us inquire more closely into the relation between the gigantic object and the object from which it springs. Magnification, or gigantification, appears to effect two important changes: it creates detail unseen before, and it changes the shape of original detail. The object has ceased to be itself, by becoming more of itself. Gulliver, exposed to a Brobdingnagian breast, sees imperfections and discolorations that make him reflect upon the fair skins of English ladies; and when he later sees the naked Brobdingnagian maids of honor, he remarks that their moles are the size of trenchers, and the hairs on the moles thicker than packthreads. Or, to take a different and more familiar example: in any book of insects one can see the eyes of an ant. In more specialized books one can see the hairs on the legs of the ant and the claws at the end of the legs. We see detail unseen before, and the shape and structure of the legs changes with each increase in size. These pictures are so commonplace that the sense of shock may be lost, and one must turn to the popular literature of horror—the monstrous insects depicted in macabre comic books, for instance—to feel for a moment the original force of dread.

Unlike the gigantic, the miniature is without dread. Here lies part of its secret charm. We allow ourselves to surrender completely, untroubled by danger. We hold aloof from the gigantic, fascinated but appalled; we yield to the miniature in sensual self-surrender. But not only is the miniature without dread, it also invites possession. And herein lies a deeper secret. For the world is elusive, we do not possess it. Large objects especially elude us. We cannot possess a house the way we can possess a chair, we cannot possess a chair the way we can possess a cup, we cannot see things with true completeness. We can know a house room by room, on the inside, but we cannot take in with the eye all the rooms on a floor. A dollhouse allows
us to possess a house in this way, to see it more completely. The fascination of the miniature is in part the fascination of the mountain view. To be above, to look down, to take into the yearning eye more at a single glance: here we are at the very threshold of the lure of the miniature.

As a child I longed to have an extra pair of eyes at the back of my head. What was that longing but an impatience with human limitation, a reluctance not to see everything, a refusal, in short, not to be God?

I have said that the gigantic increases detail, and it may seem evident that the miniature by its very nature must decrease or suppress detail. But this is by no means the case. The miniature, more closely considered, has a special and rather complex relation to detail. The very fact of smallness demands in us an increased attention; the face is brought close to the object, and in many instances the size of the face and even of the eyes has become gigantic in relation to the object. The eye, blazing down in an act of fierce attention, experiences a hunger for detail. This is a point of utmost importance, for the eye seized by the miniature will quickly tire if it does not perceive thoroughness of execution, richness of detail. As a child I was bitterly disappointed by the little green trees of my miniature barnyard. It was not that they were made of plastic, although I was troubled by the difference between the look of leaves and the look of plastic; rather it was that they were so lacking in detail. They were flat, not bushy, with a mere suggestion of leafage; the trunks were not even brown, but green. What I longed for was not a closer approximation, but a precise tree in miniature, with individual leaves in which minute veins were visible, a tree with twigs and branches, and in those branches a miniature nest woven of miniature twigs and miniature bits of string. My little trees were boring, they deceived me and I did not forgive them, as one never forgives a work of art that is general and vague. I could only play with them by not looking at them closely, by imagining their perfection. Far more satisfying was the balsa wood ship model I watched my father build. There was a little cabin with a window, a miniature brass capstan and a miniature wheel,
miniature lifeboats with miniature seats suspended from miniature davits, and an intricate system of rigging that used black thread. Even my cardboard barnyard with separate stalls and a ladder reaching to the hayloft could not compete in precision.

Thus the miniature *seizes* the attention by the fact of discrepancy, and *holds* it by the quality of precision. The miniature strives toward the ideal of total imitation. The more precise, the more wonder-compelling. For this reason the miniature must never be so small as to blur detail. An inch-long ship can compel wonder and charm but will weary the eye sooner than an elaborate and precise two-foot model, unless by some miracle of construction the inch-long ship should reproduce faithfully all the detail captured by the model. The relation between smallness and the amount of precise detail is the measure of our wonder.

A problem might seem to arise: if the gigantic version of a minute object is smaller than the miniature version of a large object, will not the small gigantic object exercise over us the particular fascination associated with the miniature? Will not the two-inch ant charm us more than the two-foot ship? The problem is resolved by recollecting that the gigantic and the miniature are both discrepancies, and depend for their effect solely on the relation to their originals.

Something of the wonderful precision attained by practitioners of the art of the miniature is suggested by a particularly charming specimen described all too briefly by D’Israeli in his *Curiosities of Literature*. “In the year 1675, the Duke de Maine received a gilt cabinet, about the size of a moderate table. On the door was inscribed, ‘The Apartment of Wit.’ The inside exhibited an alcove and a long gallery. In an armchair was seated the figure of the duke himself composed of wax, the resemblance the most perfect imaginable. On one side stood the Duke de La Rochefoucauld, to whom he presented a paper of verses for his examination. M. de Marcillac, and Bossuet bishop of Meaux, were standing near the armchair. In the alcove Madame de Thianges and Madame de la Fayette sat re-
tired, reading a book. Boileau, the satirist, stood at the
door of the gallery, hindering seven or eight bad poets
from entering. Near Boileau stood Racine, who seemed
to beckon to La Fontaine to come forwards.” One wishes
he had described these miniature waxworks in more de-
tail. Were they provided with fingernails, for instance, and
could one see the half-moons on the fingernails? What was
the book that Madame de Thianges and Madame de la
Fayette were so busily reading? Might one read the verses
presented by the duke to La Rochefoucauld? But the ex-
ample suffices to suggest a degree of precision that would
have delighted my childhood, had it been applied to any
of my toys.

There is a special development of the art of the mini-
ature that requires separate comment, for it has a unique
relation to the gigantic. I refer to the Oriental art of pro-
ducing a miniature so minute that the detail is not per-
ceptible to the naked eye. Here by a splendid paradox the
experience of the miniature is rendered possible only by
means of a magnifying lens: gigantification itself ushers
us into the enchanted realm of the miniature. But an im-
portant distinction must be drawn between the magnifi-
cation of a tiny object that is not a miniature and the mag-
nification of a tiny miniature. In both cases, detail unseen
before is suddenly revealed. But the microscopic mini-
ature can have in it, as part of its proper and intended ef-
fect, no more detail than was put into it by the artist. In
this sense it is exhaustible. It wishes to reveal itself com-
pletely. But the magnification of an object that is not a
miniature need not cease at any point. Indeed the very
nature of normal magnification always implies the possi-
bility of new detail about to be revealed. Thus, as in all
instances of genuine gigantification, we are continually
threatened by the unseen. For if we now see more than
we saw before, must there not be still more hidden from
view? In the special instance of the magnified miniature,
however, we experience the soothing sense that we are
seeing everything that is actually there. The gigantic
threatens unceasing revelation, the miniature holds out
the promise of total revelation.

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A curious and highly unusual case of the miniature is that of the moon. Consider the full moon only, and ignore for the sake of clarity the complication of phases. We experience the moon as a round flat object about the size of a quarter, shining in the sky. We do not experience it directly as anything other than what it appears to be. But we are educated to think of the moon as a gigantic globe-like object, covered with mountains and craters; and as evidence of this remarkable assertion we are even offered photographs of the surface. Therefore when we look up at the moon, our direct experience is contradicted by our education, so that instead of experiencing the moon as a small white disk we experience it as a *miniature version of itself*, though lacking in detail. When we observe the moon through a telescope, our experience is even stranger. The moon is magnified, new detail is seen—but the gigantification remains a miniaturization of what we believe to be the actual moon. In fact, the process of magnification makes the moon approach the ideal of the miniature, since it remains a miniature in relation to the actual moon but has grown rich in detail. At this point it differs from a true miniature only by virtue of the fact that it is a natural rather than an artificial object.

But let us return to the question of precision, which I have said is part of the fascination of the miniature. Now if this is so, I may ask: why should I crave precision, why should I refuse suggestion? And here I feel we are about to cross the threshold into the darkness of the mystery of the miniature. That craving for absolute precision, is it not a craving for the duplication of the world itself, its replication in miniature? Do not my ship model, my barnyard, my little tree, imply a little universe? The gigantic reveals the terror of Nature, lays bare our secret dread. The gigantic ant is a monster; but suddenly I know that the original ant is no less monstrous. A drop of water is terrible. A grain of sand is terrible. There is no difference between a grain of sand and a galaxy. We inhabit a universe so utterly alien that to look steadily at that blaze of darkness would burn out the eyes of the mind. The gigantic reveals to us the monstrous terror in the heart of things.
The universe is too large for us. Death is too large for us. Death hums in every stone. The great walls soar, the windows are too high. But suddenly the walls descend, the windows are little spaces we kneel to peer through. The solar system contracts to an orrery. I am under the spell of the miniature. Galaxies and supernovas turn at the end of my kaleidoscope. I gratify my secret desire: I become a giant. I draw out leviathan with a hook, I play with him as with a bird. I stretch out the north over the empty place, and hang the earth upon nothing. I have compassed the water with bounds, until the day and night come to an end.

The miniature, then, is an attempt to reproduce the universe in graspable form. It represents a desire to possess the world more completely, to banish the unknown and the unseen. We are teased out of the world of terror and death, and under the enchantment of the miniature we are invited to become God.

And yet, after all, there remains a stirring of doubt. For the truth is, I am still not satisfied. Is it perhaps not enough to be God? I think of Alice and the little door. I want to be small, I want to pass through the door into the enchanted garden. And here is the farthest I can see into the mystery of the miniature: its separation from myself, its banishment of me. Hence the sadness, the secret poignance, of dollhouses, model whaling ships, glass animals, little automatons. No, it is not enough to be God, I wish to be my own creature. And is it possible that the deepest fascination of the miniature lies here, in the unfulfilled yearning to be part of that world? For we are in disharmony with the world, we do not fit in anywhere. We are banished forever from the garden on the other side of the door. Under the sway of the miniature I contemplate my isolation, and my contemplation is clean, uncorrupted by the impurity of terror.