

[Short Forms, Then and Now \(GSA, Portland Oct. 2-6, 2019\)](#)

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Short Forms, Then and Now

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*Our expectations of a large form are not the same as of a small form:
depending on the size of the construction, each detail,
each stylistic device, has a different function,
a different force, and a different load is laid upon it.
- Yury Tynyanov, "The Literary Fact"*

A new form of prose is said to be haunting the international writing scene. Some speak of "nanofiction" or "micro-narrative," others of "drabble," "prosetry," "twiction," or—in French—of *texticules*. But despite claims that such "short-shorts" are a new and different species (W. Nelles; N. Royle), short and very short prose texts have been around for almost as long as writing itself. Riddles, fables, parables, exempla, maxims, aphorisms, paradoxa, casus, jokes, calendar stories, anecdotes, *faits divers*, vignettes and list-stories are only a few of the more common names for prose types that share the characteristic of brevity. And from Aesop's fables, Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* (11th-century Japan), Felix Féneon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes* (1906 France), Yoko Tawada's short prose (contemporary Germany), or Eric Jarosinski's Twitter-feed *Nine Quarterly* (contemporary www), short prose texts have always fulfilled essential functions in the most diverse times, places, and media. But what exactly are these functions? What is it that a short text can do that a long text can't?

These questions have been asked with increasing frequency over the last several years. A focus of much of this research has been on small forms as "motors of processes of communication" (*Graduiertenkolleg "Kleine Formen,"* Berlin). Particularly in view of the modern "era of information," small and smallest text types have been studied for their role in the accumulation and transmission of knowledge. A dominant theme has been that of timeliness: they are seen as "an expression and catalyst of a culture of current events and presentness" (M. Gamper and R. Mayer), as catering to an ever-shortening attention span, or, on the contrary, as providing an effective means of coping with or critiquing the acceleration and fragmentation of late capitalist society. In addition to building on these ongoing research initiatives, the planned series of panels on "Short Forms, Then and Now"

proposes to foreground the following three areas as particularly deserving of further study:

1. Short forms, long readings. While short texts have typically been tied to acceleration or a hectic life pace, in fact, they more often have the opposite effect: the pithy or “pregnant” expression invites or even causes readers to slow down, to weigh each word, to reflect on the short text at length. The flip side of the “condensation” that short texts are often credited with (O. Ette) is a de-facto expansion, namely through specific modes of intensive reading. Since antiquity, parables and exempla have been defined as much if not more by the kind of use they are put to as by their length (quotation, “grafting,” commentary); the same is true of the aphorism since the 18th century. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche devotes 70 pages to the interpretation of a single, 18-word aphorism. Arguably, “shortness,” in itself a merely relative concept (how short is short?), becomes a meaningful term only in view of the mode of its reception, of the ratio of reading and use time to text length. Shortness thus needs to be seen in the context of the diverse and discontinuous history of reading and quotation practices, from the memorization of maxims or bible verses through the classical techniques of slow and cursory reading to the current practices of sampling, zapping and scrolling.

2. Short forms in long ones. As has been recently noted, short texts never appear singularly but typically within the frame of long texts, such as magazines of case studies, compilations of aphorisms, or anthologies of microfictions. But as Yuri Tynianov long ago recognized, the opposite is also true: long texts can be read as composed of short ones. When Karl Philipp Moritz isolates the letter of 10 May from the rest of Goethe’s *Werther* and reads it as a “poetisches Gemälde,” he treats this excerpt as a microformat; the same has been done with the short essays in Musil’s *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. Separable episodes, short chapters, vignettes, diary entries, glosses, and quotations figure prominently in novels from Sterne to Arno Schmidt, and all of these “segments” of long forms offer themselves to treatment as short forms. The distinction between short and long may ultimately hinge not on any determination of length, which presupposes set units, than on the principles of *composition and segmentation* that allow the components of long formats to be seen as separate units rather than parts of a whole: compilation, anthologization, and especially serialization. The study of short text types thus stands to profit from and to contribute to research on seriality.

3. The potentially disruptive force of microformats. Form, following a long Western tradition, has consistently been tied to the idea of “powerful controls and containments” (C. Levine). If one were to speak not of form or genre but of “formats” as a phenomenon *between* medium and form, it might be possible to more effectively relate the current discussion of short and small forms to André Jolles’ notion of “simple forms,” which he defines as pre-literary “structures without fixation.” For Jolles, it is above all the fact that these simple forms appear in “different aggregate states” that makes them disruptive and, one could add (perhaps against the grain of the political subtext of his project): potentially revolutionary. And even if one remains within the limits of traditional genre theory, since at least Virgil, long formats such as the epic have been seen as celebrating existing political orders, while short and arguably more open formats such as the epigram, from Martial and Catullus to Goethe’s and Schiller’s *Xenien*, are frequently subversive. One could also take into consideration exceedingly brief prose such as the political or revolutionary slogan (J. Mieszkowski).

The planned series of several panels will provide an opportunity to reflect on these and other functions and aspects of short and very short formats. In addition to gaining new perspectives on

what short forms have (or don't have) in common, we also encourage critiques and revisions of prior discussions of short forms. Possible topics include:

- The rhetorical, epistemological, political, and media effects of brevity
- The poetic, aesthetic, and compositional principles of short forms
- Short forms in authors known for them: Julius Wilhelm Zincgref, Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, Lichtenberg, Goethe, Schlegel, Kleist, Heine, Nietzsche, Polgar, Kafka, Robert Walser, Benjamin, Brecht, Alexander Kluge etc.
- Relating the so-called "New Formalism" (e.g. S. Wolfson, H. Dubrow, C. Levine) to the study of "short forms," "simple forms," "microformats"
- The relationship between "simple forms" (Jolles) and "small" or "short forms"
- Short forms, microprose and the question of genre
- Global, transnational, and transdisciplinary circulation of short forms
- Cross-cultural and cross-historical constellations of short forms
- Microformats in novels and other long forms
- The poetics of collections and anthologies of short texts, or the arrangement and re-arrangement of excerpts
- Practices of grafting short forms
- Prose and brevity: does the idea of "prose" change its meaning when minimized (e.g., to less than a full line of type)?
- Narrated time and time of narration: extremes and imbalances
- The told and the not-told. How is not telling employed as a narrative technique in short and in long texts, in different contexts and epochs?
- Marginality
- The rhetorics of abbreviation, laconism, condensation, lapidariness, etc.

Please send us a title, a brief description, and your "micro-CV" **by January 25**. Include your GSA membership number (if available) with your response. It would also be helpful if you could indicate whether, in addition to giving a paper, you would be available to moderate or serve as a respondent for one of the panels.

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