

All Things Are Too Small: Essays in Praise of Excess by Becca Rothfeld, 2024

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(1) “All things are too small,” begins a poem by the thirteenth-century Dutch Mystic Hadewijch of Brabant. She goes on – “to hold me” – but she did not have to. All things are too small, not just to hold me, but to hold anything. Cups are too small, which is why they demand such relentless refilling. Bodies are too small to encompass more than a sole inhabitant, except in rare cases of mysticism or possession (or the more familiar but perhaps no less astounding case of pregnancy). Books can be big – most of the best ones are – yet even the most encyclopedic affairs are too small to encompass the whole of the world’s wild machinery. Moby-Dick can’t reach its arms around a whale – although Melville aims, as James Woods writes, to touch around every last word. I once saw a man in a restaurant finish his pasta, order the same dish again, eat it, then order and finish it a third time. His was the sanest response to his predicament, but he wouldn’t have had to grasp at such exorbitance if any plate available were big enough.

(2) Plates, cups, books, bodies, and all the rest are too small, not contingently, but constitutionally. There is no way around the sense, lodged hard in the throat, that the greatest human longings exceed any possible fulfillment. To want something with sufficient fervor is to want it beyond the possibility of ever getting enough of it. Is it this longing, phenomenologically keen enough to strike some of us as fact, that has led religious thinkers to posit the existence of eternity, the logic being that we seem to need it? Desire is as good a guide to the truth as anything else, but until eternity arrives, we will have to find somewhere to fit our appetites. One way to proceed is to shrink them – first by making concessions to smallness, then by framing contraction as wisdom or virtue. This is the minimalist tack, and these days, it is on the rise. At every turn, we are inundated with exhortations to smallness: short sentences stitched into short books, professional declutterers who tell us to trash our possessions, meditation “practices” that promise to clear the mind of thought and other detritus, and nostalgic campaigns for sexual restraint. These adventures in parsimony each make their own particular mistakes, 26. There is nothing admirable in laboring to love a world as unlike heaven as possible. All things are too small, but some things are less small than others. Even if paucity is inevitable, we can still fight emptiness with fullness. Better to order the third plate of pasta. Better to graze each word once.