Mark McGurl’s plea for an expanded scale of analysis—expanded to acknowledge not only the modest time frame of our biological life but also the mind-boggling vastness of geology and astronomy—cannot be more welcome (see Mark McGurl, “The Posthuman Comedy,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 [Spring 2012]: 533–53). This is a moment in the history of the planet, and the history of the institution of literature, when a plurality of scale might turn out to be a matter of necessity rather than a matter of indifference. One possible outcome of scaling up is of course a quietism, if not nihilism—a resignation ahead of time—brought on by the near certainty of extinction from the standpoint of a cosmic *longue durée*. As McGurl points out, when the sun goes out, a spectacular heat-death implosion slated to happen some 4.5 thousand million years from now, the planet will most certainly go out with it. What we are faced with here is a script as determinate as any, its endpoint not much in doubt. Most of us, and most works of literature, have indeed been blind to this, going about our business blissfully short-sighted, never giving a moment’s thought to the catastrophe projected far into the future, but guaranteed to happen.

Still, that guaranteed ending, because it is so far away, taking so long to get to, is also likely to be multiply articulated at every point in its trajectory, with many loops, forks, and tangents complicating its pathway. While the outcome is not in doubt, the routes to it are likely to be numerous, and the content of any particular slice of time, on that long run of 4.5 thousand million years, is anyone’s guess. The known outcome, in other words, is in
no way retrojected, in no way binding as an inverse funneling mechanism, a linear entailment derived from its preset endpoint. That endpoint neither dictates nor even unduly restricts the range of possibilities emerging at every stage. Nonrecursiveness across scales is crucial here; I am entirely in agreement with McGurl. What is a given on one order of magnitude—say, 4.5 thousand million years—is rarely a given on every other level. It is not automatically carried over as causal ground or operating protocol; it might not even filter through as a percolated effect. The very big here does not predetermine the very small—quite the contrary. The mismatch between these two—the relative autonomy of the micro, a phenomenal register not bound by and not replicating what might be imagined to encompass it—points to a dialectic of negotiability and non-negotiability, with a multitude of phenomena appearing either laterally or below the line, not necessarily foreclosed by the terminal event. What is kept alive here is a plurality of scales, at once nonrepeating and nonrecuperating, held in vital suspense at every point, not eliminated as a possibility. The fact that something disappears at the end doesn’t mean that it never existed; a subjective sense of freedom is not necessarily a delusion.

We are to be forgiven for not bowing too readily to that fated event 4.5 thousand million years from now, for not thinking about it every minute of the day. And yet—such is the nature of dialectic—thinking about it occasionally might not be so bad either. If finitude is indeed a nonnegotiable fact, a fact we cannot change, cannot look away from, it behooves us to pay it some attention, to put our stamp on it in a way that is satisfying to ourselves. Of course, that stamp won’t change the final outcome, but then the final outcome is not all; the large numbers that track its arrival are also the large numbers that usher in an unlimited number of counterpoints along the way.

McGurl’s proposed new genre, the posthuman comedy, is contrapuntal in just this sense, a fool’s paradise from one point of view, a necessary fiction from another. Its wryly deflating spirit is not unlike the wryly deflating arguments set forth by Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway (for Hayles, my mother is a computer, and, for Haraway, my mother is a lot of

Wai Chee Dimock is William Lampson Professor of English and American Studies at Yale University. Her recent books include *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* and a coedited volume *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Her email is wai.chee.dimock@yale.edu
other things). Highlighting, on the one hand, the extent to which the seemingly species-unique form of the human might turn out not to be, these theorists also pay renewed attention, on the other hand, to the fact of embodiment, to physicality as a densely populated manifold that resolves the human organism in the direction of plurality rather than singularity. Each of us turns out to be a “microscopic biota,” human genomes being found only in “about 10 percent of all the cells,” while the other “90 percent . . . are filled with the genomes of bacteria, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm.” “To be one is always to become with many,” Haraway writes.

McGurl takes that microscopic biota and replays it on the scale of astronomy and geology. The human organism, pitifully small on its own, but indexically vast as a node of space and time, here lends itself to a genre he calls comedy. Why this, and not tragedy, a far more logical choice? This counterintuitive move is indeed an invitation to think counterintuitively in general. And, here, it might be helpful to take into account not only the formidable longue durée of the physical sciences but also the slightly more modest but no less challenging longue durée of evolutionary biology, especially as it bears on the cognitive and affective theories of William Flesch, Blakey Vermeule, and Lisa Zunshine. If for hundreds and thousands of years the objects of our affection have always been roughly our own size, if the neural mechanisms that enable us to be attached to someone or to feel for someone have evolved in conjunction with our biological life and reflect its more or less nonscalable form, how do we make the sometimes necessary switch from biology to astronomy and geology? How do we wrap our minds around the “big historicism” that renders our lives negligible? What sort of emotional landscape is possible on this scale—posthuman, not in the affirmative sense suggested by Hayles and Haraway, but in the devastating sense that, on any order of magnitude other than our own, human individuation is statistically insignificant, not even a drop in the

1. See N. Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics (Chicago, 1999) and My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts (Chicago, 2005); and Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis, 2008).


bucket? Could there still be comedy, then, as McGurl says, and, if so, what are some of the new properties of the genre?

Oddly, the names that come immediately to mind are two of the most canonical: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, authors virtually posthumous in the ways they have faced up to the annihilating vastness of the cosmos. In the case of Dickinson, that annihilating vastness was part of the institutional and intellectual fabric of Amherst, Massachusetts. Amherst Academy, founded by Dickinson’s grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson in 1814, which Dickinson attended from 1840–47, was “second to none” in its science offerings, with astronomy, geology, chemistry, botany, mathematics, and zoology prominently featured in its curriculum. Amherst College, an outgrowth of Amherst Academy, and again heavily dependent on the Dickinson family for financial support, was likewise a pioneer in the sciences. Edward Hitchcock, who in 1845 became the third president, had founded the American Association of Geologists in 1840 and was its first president. In 1848 this association expanded to include physics and was renamed the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Hitchcock, during his presidency at Amherst College, from 1845 to 1854, lectured frequently at the academy, only three blocks away; his Elementary Geology was used there as a textbook. Mary Lyons, head of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which Dickinson attended from 1847 to 1848, was his special protégée.

Given these institutional ties, we should not be surprised that volcanoes and mountains and fossils would be regularly featured in Dickinson’s poetry, along with references to scanning, surveying, and prospecting. What is surprising, though, is the extent to which the otherwise abstract and disembodied concept of scale is here recorporealized, indeed personified—given not only a body but also a story, turned into a vignette, a self-advertising drama of size. These instances of the very large, and the puniness of the human body in comparison, repeat the quintessential epic encounter with alien orders of magnitude, but under the aegis of science rather than mythology. And, to the extent that the epic is about surviving the gigantic—Gilgamesh surviving Humbaba, Odysseus

5. Amherst College was founded in 1821. Samuel Fowler Dickinson staked most of his fortune on the new college, at a heavy personal cost. By 1833, he was bankrupt. See the Emily Dickinson Museum, “Samuel Fowler Dickinson (1775–1838) and Lucretia Gunn Dickinson (1775–1840),” www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/ed/node/73. Dickinson’s father, Edward Dickinson, studied at Amherst College in its first year, and her brother Austin graduated from the College in 1850. Both Edward and Austin served as Amherst College treasurers.
surviving the Cyclops—Dickinson’s poems might be said to be scaled-down versions of the genre, a lyric restaging of epic:

They leave us with the Infinite,
But He – is not a man –
His fingers are the size of fists –
His fists, the size of men –  

The “Infinite” here seems to be another name for God, the traditional “He.” But if so, this God, rescaled by the new sciences of astronomy and geology, is oddly primitive at the same time, no longer the God in whose image we are made, but Cyclops-like: too big for comfort, too big to be benign.

Still, even though this outsize God “is not a Man,” He still seems to have some recognizable human features, body parts such as fingers and fists. It is left to Whitman, with no formal schooling, but familiar with such works as Robert Chambers’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), to strip away this anthropomorphism and to confront quantitative largeness head on. In section 44 of “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes: “We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers;/ There are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them.” And, again, in section 45: “A few quadrillions of eras, a few octillions of cubic leagues, do not hazard the span, or make it impatient,/ They are but parts . . . . any thing is but a part.” The astronomical numbers are front and center here, naked, bluntly enumerating. Yet they don’t seem especially alien or oppressive, partly because they are incorporated into the rhythm and syntax of the poetic lines, an organic part of the stylistics rather than an intrusive force barging in from without. Trillions, quadrillions, and octillions are just words, perhaps not even that, just sounds, phonetic units with minimal semantic content, more auditory than numerical. In that way they are restaged as well, not as a personified vignette (as in the case of Dickinson), but as an integral part of the poetic form. The human brain, it seems, has its own way of transcribing the world, a set of strategizing, temporizing, shock-absorbing mechanisms. Nothing is beyond its processing capabilities. An otherwise impossible vastness can thus be taken in, accommodated without too much trouble,


fitted into the compass of something that, objectively speaking, is not even on the same page.

Some such logic must have inspired these lines by Emily Dickinson:

The Brain – is wider than the Sky –
For – put them side by side –
The one the other will contain
With ease – and You – beside –

What is it that enables one thing to contain another thing? What does it mean, in any case, to contain? It could simply be a matter of numerical dimensions; but, as in the case here, it could also be something not so well-defined, not so easily standardizable. There is no general rule for the nesting relation between entities of different sizes. Quantification is probably not the way to go when it comes to our subjectivity, filled as it is with grand passions and petty worries, mental objects whose proportionality can hardly be calibrated by a one-size-fits-all yardstick. Just to go back briefly to that catastrophe 4.5 thousand million years from now: that large-scale event is less a front-loaded trauma than a dimly perceived and gladly forgotten bit of information, tucked away at the back of our heads. This is what the back of a head is for: an all-purpose container, with almost inexhaustible holding capacity, the better to take in the infinite and everything else, mere sideshow to a “You” who, though less than a speck on a cosmic scale, is here much more than that.

A new canon of American literature could be built around this paradox of size, not blind to the longue durée of astronomy and geology, but keeping it at bay, judiciously rescaled to allow our brains to keep on functioning, to keep on doing what evolution has equipped it to do. From the “great shroud of the sea” in Moby-Dick, rolling on as it has for tens of millions of years, to the “half-inch Himalayas” in Agha Shahid Ali’s volume of poems of the same title, micro phenomena, not only have a place on an enlarged canvas, but also represent something like a lyricization of epic—our brain’s way of telescoping in reverse, turning unthinkable orders of magnitude into thinkable ones. Gregory Nagy’s argument about the “lyric possession” of epic is especially pertinent here. Dickinson and Whitman are lyric possessors in just this way, practitioners of a “posthuman comedy” that takes the intransigence of physical dimensions and turns it into

numbers-defying riddles, riddles that tell us, with a straight face, that it is largeness that is limiting, not the other way around:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Size circumscribes – it has no room} \\
\text{For petty furniture –} \\
\text{The Giant tolerates no Gnat} \\
\text{For Ease of Gianture –}^{14}
\end{align*}
\]

There is something to be said for sticking with poets like Dickinson and Whitman, science-literate and science-responsive in ways perhaps more appreciated by cognitive linguists and astronomers than by humanists. It is not for nothing that Emily Dickinson was cited by Steven Pinker in *The Blank Slate* or that Whitman would be recently featured in phys.org, an online science portal, under the headline, “Astronomers Solve Walt Whitman Meteor Mystery.”

Still, I take McGurl’s point. If the posthuman comedy is to be more than just business as usual, it would make sense, at this juncture, both to rework what we already have and to go further afield, seeking out what we hardly know, a new kind of data-gathering commensurate with a new conception of the discipline. Rethinking membership criteria—rethinking the scope and variety of literary forms—might turn out to be one of the unexpected side benefits of scalar plurality. In this context, McGurl’s observations about genre fiction are especially worth considering. As he points out, in its science fiction variant, genre fiction “names those literary forms willing to risk artistic ludicrousness in their representation of the inhumanly large and long” (p. 539). The lines of filiation for this lowly genre have always been the scale-rich sciences: astronomy, geology, biology. And it has other lines of filiation as well. Not just text-based but well represented in film and TV, science fiction has been multimedia for a long time, with a database considerably broader than that afforded by the linguistic medium alone. Mindful of its own lack of prestige, it has also regularly claimed kinship with time-honored classics. The genre is crisscrossed not only by the vast distances of interplanetary travel but also by the more crowded spaces of literary allusions. William S. Burroughs is speaking for more than himself when, in the foreword to *Nova Express*, he refers to the fabric of his writing, to his “cut-up” and “fold-in” methods, as a citational cross-stitching of

---

space and time, making his novel “a composite of many writers living and
dead.”\textsuperscript{v}

Science fiction is literally a “microscopic biota,” loaded down with the DNA and bacteria and protists from many other writers, all merrily hitching a ride. The gene pool flourishing in any single text is populational rather than individual. With evolutionary biology thrown into the mix, McGurl’s geology-and-astronomy-inspired model now looks a bit like Franco Moretti’s. Beginning with “Conjectures on World Literature,” and developing further in his recent book, \textit{Graphs, Maps, Trees (2005)}, Moretti has also put forth a “big historicism,” emphatically populational. He calls it “distant reading” to distinguish it from its still-current adversary, close reading. Distant reading is needed to make sure that literary studies can be conducted through a wide lens, surveying the sum total of literary production. The templates here are “from three disciplines with which literary studies have had little or no interaction: graphs from quantitative history; maps from geography; and trees from evolutionary theory.”\textsuperscript{viii} These three disciplines are meant to acclimatize us to a system-wide scale of analysis; pry us away from our irrational attachment to individual texts; and get us to see that literature is a field equally hospitable to large numbers, a field that yields aggregates. In all these objectives, Moretti says, there is “much more to be learned from the natural and the social sciences” (\textit{GMT}, p. 2).

Oddly, while the stated emphasis here is on scale enlargement as a heuristic advantage, the actual time frames adopted by Moretti are actually quite short. The phenomena that he wants to survey are, as he readily admits, the “middle layer of literary history,” for instance, the “three waves of epistolary novels from 1760 to 1790, and then gothic novels from 1790 to 1815; and then historical novels from 1815 to the 1840s” (\textit{GMT}, p. 14). Temporal segmentation has to be narrow for Moretti because the form of quantification that interests him is basically census-taking, a head count of literary works conducted every twenty or thirty years. Distant reading, in this way, is yoked to a fairly rigid periodizing model, based on chronological dates and integrated under their auspices. The analytic axis here is cross-sectional and distributional, rationalized by a kind of numerical determinism.

But what guarantee is there that chronological dates can perform the integrating and systemizing functions that Moretti attributes to them? What guarantee is there that a single number—say, the number 1790—can


\textsuperscript{18} Franco Moretti, \textit{Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary Theory} (London, 2005), pp. 1–2; hereafter abbreviated \textit{GMT}. 

be centrally determinative, can be the key magically unlocking all doors to a text produced at that time? Or, differently put, how do we know that the best way to study a work is to aggregate it, looking at it through the lens of all other works produced during the same twenty-year or thirty-year period? The rigidity of temporal segmentation and the dubiousness of its causal claim seem to me one of the less persuasive aspects of the Moretti model.

McGurl here points to an important alternative. Reorienting “distance” from a cross-sectional axis to a longitudinal axis, which is to say, rotating it ninety degrees, he not only interjects a much needed fluidity but also relieves each date of the unsustainable power that Moretti claims on its behalf. Within McGurl’s big historicism, it is no longer necessary to defend the chronological date as an all-purpose determinant, just as it is no longer necessary to keep a strict dividing line between dates that are not numerically proximate. If nothing else, geology and astronomy have taught us that numerical distance is relative; from the standpoint of their longue durée, the year 2012 and the year 2012 BCE are not so far apart. It is not impossible for these two dates to be part of the same continuum, to be adjacent or even to overlap, in ways that are consequential for both. Periodization, in this new paradigm, has to be done far more cautiously, perhaps always on an ad hoc basis, rather than as a simple numerical proposition, reflexive and automatic.

With numerical reflexivity held in abeyance, other kinds of strict injunctions also seem up for some loosening. Moretti’s stern commitment to aggregates rather than individual texts here seems to me amendable, to the point of being a postscript rather than a cardinal principle. While it is true that the traditional close reading—based exclusively on one work and devoted exclusively to interpreting that work—might in fact be antithetical to a large-scale model tracing lines of continuity and patterns of emergence, there is no reason why a concentrated focus on one particular passage, one particular sentence, even a cluster of words, would be incompatible with such a paradigm. In fact, Moretti himself, arguing for a conception of the field as genre-based rather than text-based, has made exactly this point, namely, that the study of literary forms could be micro as well as macro, at home on both ends of the scalar spectrum: on the one hand, a small analytic unit, a sentence, a word, perhaps “not even a full word”; and, on the other hand, a “system of differences at the microscopic level adding up to something that is much larger than any individual text” (GMT, p. 76).

But how exactly do these two orders of magnitude “add up”? Through what relaying mechanisms does it happen, and is it the only thing that
could happen? Isn’t it possible that the macro and the micro might be connected in some other way, not by an addibility or fungibility across scales, but by something considerably less than that or perhaps even the reverse of that—a layer of mediation we have yet to theorize, going back and forth between the micro and the macro, maintaining a nonrigid but also nontrivial distinction between the two?

Here, it might be helpful to be literal minded about the concept of mediation: grounding it, that is, in the different media, the different inscriptional, representational, and transmissional vehicles by which words are channeled into the world. A conception of the field based on genre as an abstract classifying principle also needs the concept of media as an actualizing embodiment, a carrier that is historically diverse and historically evolving, a carrier that activates it and instantiates it. Of the two terms, media is the one with a more tangible and demonstrable record. From the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia and the papyrus of ancient Egypt to the LCD screens on computers and cell phones, the change in media is what we can see at a glance. What we can see less readily, what takes some exploring, is the possibly symbiotic relation between genre and media and the extent to which a combined focus on the two might yield a scale-variable field, micro in its local articulations and macro in its causal coordinates. A crucial relay here is the practice of citation, a time-honored, low-tech practice, lifting individual words from one place and transplanting them elsewhere, a change in form, function, and operative environment that does create a field salient on multiple platforms and in multiple permutations.

Science fiction, with a sharp generic profile, a rich multimedia history, and a long citational practice, is an especially good test case. I am thinking, not only of the upfront invocation of Dante Aligheri in the science fiction novel Inferno by the Hugo Award-winning team Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, but also of much smaller ventures, often just a couple of words, easy to overlook, but not to be missed either: Hawthorne Abend sen, the name of the author who wrote the counterfactual novel The Grass hopper Lies Heavy in Philip K. Dick’s The Man in the High Castle, itself also counterfactual, the aftermath of World War II told with winners and losers reversed. The macro/micro symbiosis can be remarkable even on a strictly text-based platform and even within the confines of a single genre, the novel. However, much is gained by going beyond these two. In what follows, I try to do this, taking a stab at a nonlinguistic (or not strictly

linguistic) medium, television, one that some might not consider literary at all, while looking at the citational practice of science fiction in this not obviously promising arena. The generic kinships being claimed, the lengths of time being activated, and the medium-specific attributes of the literary form that emerge all point to a paradigm in which a nonrecursive relation across scales might turn out to be the single most important energizing principle.

What I have in mind is the 102nd episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, entitled “Darmok,” well known among literary scholars for its invocation of the epic of *Gilgamesh*. Aired on 30 September 1991, the stardate for this episode is 45047.2. The *Enterprise* is on its way to make contact with a strange, “incomprehensible” race known as the Children of Tama, who for weeks have been sending signals to Federation space. As it nears the planet El-Adrel, the *Enterprise* meets up with a Tamarian ship. The Universal Translator is able to translate individual words spoken by the Tamarians, but what comes out is this: “Rai and Jiri at Lungha. Rai of Lowani. Lowani under two moons. Jiri of Ubaya. Ubaya of crossed roads at Lungha. Lungha, her sky grey. Rai and Jiri at Lungha.”

The Tamarian language, it seems, is a language made up entirely of memorized stories, episodes from the past cited in analogy to current situations. Declarative statements are alien to it. Instead, the Tamarians communicate by way of these situational metaphors, usually by citing the names of two people at a location where they had a significant encounter. Unless one knows the stories embedded in these proper names, simply translating the words signifies nothing. The Universal Translator is not much help for that reason. As the android second officer, Data, points out, he has encountered 1,754 nonhuman species during his tenure with Starfleet; this is the first time when no decipherable meaning is coming across. Meanwhile, Captain Picard’s own straightforward request—asking the Tamarians if they would consider a mutual nonaggression pact and possibly trade agreement and cultural exchange—also goes nowhere.

The only thing that everyone can sense is that there seems to be some disagreement between the Tamarian captain, Dathon, and his first officer, hinging on another of those memorized stories: “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.” Before they know it, the Tamarian ship has beamed both their own captain and Captain Picard onto the planet El-Adrel. There, the phrase “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra” is repeated a few more times, but remains incomprehensible to Picard. He begins to have a dim understand-

ing only when an ominous roar sounds not too far away and rocks come tumbling down. There is something big closing in on them, some gigantic creature, visible only in fits and flashes. But it is definitely there, and the only way to survive is for the two captains to fight it jointly (fig. 1).

Unfortunately, the Enterprise tries (unsuccessfully, as it turns out) to beam Picard away just when the gigantic creature goes on the attack, leaving Dathon alone and battered. When Picard comes running back, Dathon speaks the same word that he had spoken before—“Shaka”—when Picard had previously failed to make a fire. That word seems to define the two of them, rather than the hopeful invocation of “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.” And yet, as Picard hovers over the dying Dathon, the meaning of that phrase suddenly dawns on him, and it also dawns on him that their current situation, “You and me at El-Adrel,” is in fact a reenactment of the past episode, “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.” There is a difference, of course. Darmok and Jalad had survived because they had fought jointly; on this occasion one of them must die. But even this story is not without precedent. It is Picard’s turn to cite that precedent, which he is able to do using the Tamarian syntax: Gilgamesh and Enkidu at Uruk. These two companions, from the oldest known epic on the planet Earth, have also gone to battle with a gigantic creature; but one of them, Enkidu, will not survive.

Dathon dies just as the gigantic creature on El-Adrel attacks again. This time, the Enterprise is able to get their captain back. Using his new knowledge of the Tamarian language, Picard is able to cite all the stories mentioned by Dathon, convincing the Tamarian first officer that his eyes are indeed open. Not only has he learned a new language, he has also given the Tamarians a new phrase, a new story—“Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel”—which they will memorize and invoke from now on. The last scene shows Picard reading an ancient-looking volume, the Homeric Hymns, “one of
the root metaphors of our own culture,” just to have more stories ready for the next encounter with the Tamarians.

How to classify this *Star Trek* episode? It is television, to be sure, and science fiction, to be sure. It also happens to wear its epic genealogy on its sleeve, although, interestingly, it is the older Mesopotamian epic that is being cited here, Homer appearing literally as an afterthought. In this self-conscious practice, *Star Trek* has everything in common with the learning-displaying variants of the genre, beginning with Virgil and given dramatic play in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. If these two are any indication, perhaps citation savvy has been a constitutive part of epic from the very first. In the case of “Darmok,” taking the genre into the twentieth century and carrying it over into a mass-market medium, citation savvy has to be a given, part of its inherited and programmed effect.

And, yet, it must be said as well that it is probably not the citation alone that makes this episode a cult classic. The Wikipedia entry on “Darmok” does indeed mention *Gilgamesh*, but the reviews on IMDb make no reference to it. Instead, the most commonly expressed sentiment seems to be this:

While fans will no doubt pick any number of classic episodes from *The Next Generation*, this particular one is my all-time favorite of any of the Trek series. . . . Paul Winfield is super here as an alien that can speak only in a metaphor-like language where symbolism is everything. At first perplexed and untrusting, Picard warms to this captain and even tells his own story in metaphor to the pleased captain. Also, they must team up to face-off against a Predator-like beast. . . . The final moments of this episode are just heart-rending and touching and will stay with you for a long time. Season 5 is probably my favorite of the series and this episode is the best, but not the only reason why.

The peculiarity of the Tamarian language; Picard’s belated attempt to speak it; the gigantic creature and the need to fight it together; the death of

22. It is generally agreed that Virgil seems to have divided the *Aeneid* into two sections based on Homer; the first six books employing the *Odyssey* as a model, and the last six more connected to the *Iliad*. See, for instance, Richard Jenkyns, *Classical Epic: Homer and Virgil* (1992; London, 2007). Joseph Farrell argues that the Homeric allusions were most extensive in the *Georgics*. See Joseph Farrell, *Vergil’s Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic: The Art of Allusion in Literary History* (New York, 1991). The centrality of Virgil to Dante is of course a critical commonplace. See, for instance, Robert Hollander, *Dante: A Life in Works* (New Haven, Conn., 2001).

one companion and the survival of the other—these are the issues that seem to resonate with present-day viewers. *Gilgamesh* is being indexed on all these points, even beyond its explicit naming, if only because the primitive fears of the ancient epic—fear of alien magnitudes and fear of dying—not only have not ceded their primacy but have grown more urgent. Rather than being ossified and moribund, as M. M. Bakhtin says, the affective burden of the epic has remained the most durable burden known to the human species, surviving from prehistoric times into our own simply because we have not evolved very far from those charged origins. Four or five thousand years is a very short time measured against the history of the universe or even the history of the planet Earth. From the standpoint of that *longue durée*, the human species as it exists now is not so different from the human species as it existed when *Gilgamesh* was written, not enough for those primitive fears to cease to matter.

More recent citations of *Gilgamesh*—Yusef Komunyakaa and Chad Gracia’s 2006 play adaptation (fig. 2) and Blake Bowden’s 2007 recasting of Uruk as Iraq (fig. 3)—put those primitive fears front and center. “Darmok” has a somewhat different emphasis. While it is true that Dathon does indeed die, the overwhelming focus of this *Star Trek* episode is on survival: the fact that no harm has come to Picard and that no harm has come from the encounter between the *Enterprise* and the Tamarians. That outcome is not surprising, given that this is the second episode in the fifth season of a highly successful TV series. Still, it is squarely within the epic tradition in this and in its practice of citation and memorization, the invoking of small clusters of words over and over again. Here indeed is a vital meeting place between the long duration of the cosmos and the much shorter duration of human civilization. It is the human brain, both on its own and through various collective mechanisms of storage and retrieval, that allows some such clusters of words to begin a long trek that, with luck, might not end till the long trek of the planet itself comes to an end.

The trick, of course, is the smallness. Anything longer than a sentence is a challenge to most of us. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, with their modular, formulaic epithets (“wine-dark sea,” “rosy-fingered dawn”), made use of just this unchallenging briefness as mnemonic aid and spur to improvisa-

25. Komunyakaa’s and Gracia’s play was performed at the 92nd Street Y in New York, at the Chicago Humanities Festival, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and also in New Orleans, Komunyakaa’s hometown for many years. It was also published as a book; see Chad Gracia and Yusef Komunyakaa, *Gilgamesh: A Verse Play* (Middletown, Conn., 2006). Blake Bowden’s play was performed locally in Cincinnati.
The epic, it seems, downsizes regularly just to stay afloat, just to be remembered; it is a low-cost, low-maintenance, low-requirement genre. “Microcization” is built into it: routine, entirely conventional, and entirely dependable, with a proven track record that speaks for itself. In the case of “Darmok,” the micro moment is in fact, not formulaic, but substantive. But there it is—five words, “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra,” repeated over and over again in this episode and repeated over and over again on T-shirts, buttons, postcards, mugs, cartoons, political posters, iPad cases (figs. 4–10).

Reproduction of this sort is of course the privilege of a successful TV series: it is an institutional artifact, a commercial artifact. Even so, and even

26. The “formulaic” theory was first proposed by Milman Parry in the 1920s to explain how the Homeric epics could have been passed down through so many generations strictly through word of mouth. According to him, a phrase like “eos rhododaktylos” (rosy-fingered dawn) or “oinops pontos” (wine-dark sea) occupies a certain metrical pattern that fits, in modular fashion, into the six-colon Greek hexameter and aids the bard in extempore composition. Moreover, modular phrases of this type were open to internal substitutions, allowing for grammatical and narrative flexibility: “podas okus axilleus” (swift-footed Achilles) is metrically equivalent to “koruthaioles ektor” (glancing-helmed Hector). See Milman Parry, The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford, 1971). See also Albert B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).
here, in this supremely unprimitive medium, market driven and citation savvy, what we see quite clearly is nonetheless our primitive capacity for reverse telescoping, the containment of the very large. It is these reversed proportions that make the catastrophic briefness of human life not quite catastrophic, saving us from the brute fact of large numbers, rendering back to us a numerically demoted but otherwise undiminished sense of ourselves. We could call this the posthuman comedy. We could also call it low epic.