Muminalism: Tove Jansson’s Art of the Miniature

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Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness
Gaston Bachelard

Tove Jansson’s Moominland is large. There are deep seas, high mountains, and endless forests. It is a place of momentous catastrophes and long journeys. But Moominland’s dimensions are also relative, and the apparent grandeur of the setting is constituted on the diminutive size of most of the creatures that inhabit it, such as Little My and the “little creature” Sniff. The Moomintrolls themselves are small too – an artist’s signature to begin with and tiny trolls in the first book of the series. In fact, size matters in Moominland, and is indicated throughout the Moomin narratives in various ways. In this presentation I will analyse and discuss a few of these examples of Jansson’s art of the miniature, or “muminalism” to use a Jansson-related neologism. The main aim, however, is to show that Jansson’s predilection for the small, the diminutive, and the decorative is not merely about creating contrast (even if it is that too), but essentially about small-scale world-building. Moominvalley itself, comes across as a miniature re-imagining of her grandfather’s island paradise as described in the first chapter of the autobiographical Sculptor’s Daughter, and is at the centre of this minimizing project. The maps of Moominvalley, as well as her comic strips and use of vignettes, elaborate initial letters, doll-houses – all of these represent condensations of – or points of entry to – her created world. We also witness how Jansson’s created characters, in turn, engage in acts and make use of things that relate in different ways to the aesthetics of the miniature: Moominmamma’s bark boat, Moominpappa’s crystal ball, the hemulen’s magnifying glass and so on.

All art is of course in some measure kleinkunst (even the Kunst/Art that comes with caps on) – in that it provides a smaller, but more graspable world than the real. However, drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s seminal essay on the miniature (chapter 7 in The Poetics of Space) I will claim that Jansson’s “muminalism” is a particularly apt example of what he calls the “miniaturizing imagination.” Bachelard claims that the miniature, instead of implying reduction, is a condensation and enrichment. He goes on to compare the “minuscule” with “a narrow gate” that “opens up an entire world.” Furthermore, Bachelard states that the miniature “causes men to dream,” which I take to mean that the miniature stimulates the imagination, and opens up an imaginative space. He does not discuss children’s literature per se, but as Lisa Sainsbury has shown in Ethics in British Children’s Literature, Bachelard’s theoretical framework provides a good fit to children’s literature. First of all, there is an abundance of examples – from Thimbietot (Selma Lagerlöf) and Thumbelina (H. C. Andersen) to The Borrowers (Mary Norton) and Toy Story. Second, according to Sainsbury, the child reader is uniquely positioned to “engage with the issues raised by miniature life” (190).

Tove Jansson herself was also uniquely suited for the “miniature life,” what with artist parents who gravitated between the monumental and minimal – her father’s sculptures and monuments, and her mother’s book illustrations and stamp engravings. It is not surprising therefore that in almost every aspect of Tove Jansson’s work – with words as well as picture – we see the miniaturist in action. Note the vignettes, the elaborate first letters, and chapter summaries of The Exploits of Moominpappa. Bachelard writes about medieval illuminated manuscripts and the “patience that brings peace to one’s fingers” (159) in filling a single letter with as many details and beauty as possible. The miniaturist master, he says, “must love space to describe it as minutely as though there were world molecules, to enclose an entire spectacle in a molecule of drawing” (159). Jansson is such a master, and not only in her decorative pieces, but of course, just as much or more, in her time-consuming and work-intensive full-page illustrations. I have previously analyzed Jansson’s maps, and shown how they stimulate the imagination and condense the time and place of the book’s storyworld. Another
way of expressing it is to say that these maps display a “love of space” and “spectacle” and are made up entirely of “world molecules.” Or, examine again the miniaturist art of the comics. This is of course something that K. A. Laity and Juhani Tolvanen and I (all present at this conference!) have pointed to before. I would argue that the comic strips in their deceptive simplicity is an extremely demanding form of miniaturist art (she has even written a short story on the topic), but at the same time congenial to Jansson’s temperament and artistic project. Finally, one could refer to Jansson’s early investment in Moomin merchandise, specifically the handmade trolls (see cover of Westin’s biography), on which she placed strict requirements, or her work on the Moomin house with Tuulikki Pietilä. These two latter examples show that Jansson’s miniaturist art was not restricted to words and pictures, but to artifacts and architecture as well.

Interestingly, the making of doll-houses crops up in her writing as well: the miniature lighthouse in *Moominpappa at Sea*, and in the short story “The Doll House” in the collection *Art in Nature*, a story in which a doll-house project becomes an all-consuming passion, threatening to undermine the friendship between two partners. In *Moominpappa at Sea* the model lighthouse and the map of the valley, including the lighthouse island, serve as “apple seeds” to use Bachelard’s terminology. These are the objects that will take hold of your imagination, grow, and become real. We can see this exemplified in the following quotation that what starts as a description of a lighthouse model gradually assumes more and more reality, indicated by the identification of Moominpappa and Moomintroll with the place, and the use of the present tense to tell what they are doing in the lighthouse:

“Look at these iron clamps,” he said. “They’re buried in the rock, and this is how you climb up to the lighthouse. You have to be very careful if the weather’s rough. Your boat is carried in toward the rock on the crest of a wave – then you jump off, get a firm grip, and scramble up while the boat is flung back… when the next wave comes, you’re safe. Then you fight your way against the wind, holding on to this railing. Then you open the door, but it’s heavy. Now it slams behind you. You’re inside the lighthouse. You can hear the roar of the sea in the distance through the thick walls. Outside it’s roaring all round, and the boat is already a long way off.”

“Are we inside, too?” asked Moomintroll.

“Of course,” said Moominpappa. “You’re right up here in the tower. (18-19)

A similar epiphany occurs when Moomintroll focuses on the flyspeck-small dot on “the big map hanging on the wall, the one showing Moominvalley with the coast and its islands” (15). Moomin-mamma has just pointed it out to him, and he starts thinking about it: “And suddenly he saw the sea around the island begin to rise and fall. The island itself was green, with red cliffs. It was the island he had seen in picture books, a desert island, inhabited by pirates” (16-17). Again, a miniature transforms into imagined reality.

The miniature allows for control, or “domination,” to use the bachelardian term. For this purpose the crystal ball is perfect. Bachelard writes: “[t]he dreamer can renew his own world, merely by moving his face. From the miniature of the glass cyst, he can call forth an entire world and oblige it to make ‘the most unwonted contortions’” (157). This example points to another instance from Moominpappa at Sea, where the first chapter is called “The Family in the Crystal Ball,” and where Moominpappa uses his crystal for this exact purpose: to control and conjure forth his private family fantasy.
Their reflections made them seem incredibly small, and the crystal ball made all their movements seem forlorn and aimless. Moominpappa liked this. It was his evening game. It made him feel that they all needed protection, that they were at the bottom of a deep sea that only he knew about. (10)

We shall peek into the crystal ball once more later on, but for now I will turn to another aspect of the miniature, that of size and being seen or identified (for better or worse). In Tove Jansson’s “Moominverse” the world is big and dangerous, and its inhabitants small. Originally, they were even smaller, which is not surprising since On the first page of The Moomins and the Great Flood, when Moomintroll is feeling anxious, his mother comforts him, saying, “I hope we’re so small that we won’t be noticed if something dangerous should come along.” In this first Moomin book, the trolls are only a few inches tall. A snake appears as a “Giant Serpent,” and Moominmamma is almost devoured by a sand lion. They ride on the back of a Marabou stork, sail on a “big round water-lily leaf,” and are able to light their way with “big glowing flowers.” The Moomintrolls may be small, but in relation to “the little creature”, who they befriend on their quest, Moomintroll and Moominmamma appear large. Sniff, too small to have a name in this first Moomin book, returns with a name, more personality, and bigger somehow, in the next Moomin book. His situation is slightly similar to that of the Creep in “Spring Tune” (Tales from Moominvalley) who is “so small that [he hasn’t] got a name” (14), but whose personality and attitude grows significantly after Snufkin gives the Creep the name “Teety-woo.”

The contrast between the big and threatening world and the smallness of all living things is borne out in another short story from Tales from Moominvalley. Here is the Fillyjonk, in “The Fillyjonk Who Believed in Disasters”:

Dear Gaffsie, believe me, we are so very small and insignificant, and so are our tea cakes and carpets and all those things, you know, and still they’re so important, but always they’re threatened by mercilessness. 46

Yes, we are small and insignificant, yet it is interesting that Fillyjonk names the small things that we surround us with, and calls them important. Maybe it is because she is a Fillyjonk, but I believe there is more to it. It is by naming and identifying all these little things in our lives that we build imaginatively our world. Things and details can clutter our lives and imaginations – that is the Fillyjonk-streak in all of us – and we need to be able to let go, Snufkin-like to the things that bind us and grow out of hand. But the small things are important too, something we are reminded about, in this story, where nothing remains of the Fillyjonk’s old home except a smiling chipped China kitten and her carpets.

In Moominvalley in November the little creature Toft fantasizes about Moominvalley and the Moomin family, but after he has gone to the now moomin-less valley he finds it harder and harder to see them in his imagination. Instead he finds comfort in a large book on natural history, “a very big book which had no beginning and no end and the pages were all faded and had been nibbled by rats at the edges” (49). In it, he reads about a sea-creature, a minuscule “Nummulite”. Gradually, the developing story-reality of the Nummulite takes over. Toft “tried to describe the Happy Family, but he couldn’t. Then he told himself all about the solitary creature instead, the little Nummulite who had something of Noctiluca about him and liked electricity” (50). The Nummulite was “evidently very tiny and became even tinier when he was frightened” (50). But after a while when Toft imagines it, electric thunderstorms are let loose over Moominvalley and the Nummulite starts growing. It also affects Toft’s temperament, making him angry. Eventually, the Nummulite becomes threatening presence and prowls around the house, groke-like, until Toft confronts it and it is finally absorbed by Moominpappa’s crystal ball. Boel Westin has pointed out the similarity between the names Toft and Tove; it is a likeness that extends to Toft’s and Tove’s outward appearance as well. Westin has also
noted the anagrammatic likeness between the Swedish “Mumin” and “Nummulit”. But it is of course as creators that the similarity between Tove and Toft becomes most apparent and significant. They both create from scratch, from the miniature; they begin with a mysterious word, a name, and from there, a character takes form, becomes real. But eventually, the created Moomin/Nummulite outgrows the fantasy, becomes a threat to itself and to its creator, and needs to be contained. Toft uses the crystal ball – a device made for showing and minimizing – to help the Nummulite, and himself.

“It’s no good,” said Toft. “We can’t hit back. Neither of us will ever learn to hit back. You must believe me.” ---

“Make yourself tiny and hide yourself! You’ll never get through this!”

And suddenly the crystal ball became overshadowed. A dizzy vortex opened in the heavy blue swell and then closed itself again, the Creature of the Potozoa group had made itself tiny and returned to its proper element. Moominpappa’s crystal ball, which gathered everything and took care of everything, had opened up for the bewildered nummulite. (133)

If the crystal ball is a metaphor or symbol for the creative faculty, out of whose depths the merest flicker can grow and be transformed into an entire world, peopled by wonderful creatures, it is at the same time a container and refuge for those fictional realities, which otherwise may grow too large, and can threaten the well-being of its creator. We see here that the process apparently can be reversed. But if Toft can use the crystal ball for this purpose, Tove Jansson uses her art. Moominvalley in November is such a crystal ball, for Jansson – and for us. The Moomins disappear into its blue swell, containing them, helping them hide. We see Moominvalley, we see reflections of the family, but eventually the book gathers them up and “takes care of everything.”

Finally, let is turn to Moominmamma as miniaturist. What comes to mind first is perhaps her Moominvalley fresco landscape in Moominpappa at Sea, the one where she Ta-tzu-like enters the painting. However, I would like to bring up another example. In the first chapter of Moominsummer Madness, Moominmamma is making a model bark boat, a schooner. In a foreshadowing of what is to come a “big, black flake of soot” lands “amidships on the deck” of the schooner, interrupting Moominmamma’s work. She rises and goes to Moomintroll. He has been lying by a pond all the time. He knows that she is making a bark boat for him, and wonders if it will come with a “dinghy so small that you hardly dare take it in your paw” (6). It is an exquisite model ship, but Moominmamma has forgotten to make the dinghy. However, “it balanced beautifully over its own reflection and started away in the port tack as if manned by old salts” (7). Thus, the miniature ship is already imbued with potential. In the very last chapter the ship is miraculously found again: “The back stay had gotten entangled in a bush, but it was undamaged. Even the little hatch was in its place over the hold” (152). In a sense the lucky fate of the seaworthy bark ship replicates that of the Moomintrolls through their tsunami adventure. “It was as if nothing had ever happened and as if no danger could ever threaten them again” (151). Yet something – the adventure – has happened. And Moominmamma in a final act perfects the ship and the story by giving Moomintroll the dinghy. It is as if the entire story has been played out to arrive at this point – where the model schooner and its dinghy can sail away immaculate.
Works Cited