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LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

A Laboratory Fancy

JOHN M. OSKISON

INTRODUCTION
BY ALEX BENSON

Introduction

In his half-century career, John M. Oskison (1874–1947) wrote novels, biographies, journalism, and regionalist short fiction. When, late in this career, Oskison recalled its beginnings, he pictured talking protozoa.

He tells the story twice. In his semiautobiographical novel *The Brothers Three* (1935), the character of Henry serves as the author's proxy; like Oskison, he's a citizen of the Cherokee Nation who grows up on an Indian Territory ranch, studies at Stanford, and pursues literary work in New York.[1] Late in the novel, Henry is asked about the moment when he began to "actually write things." In a college biology class, he explains, bored of observing a "smear" of microbes, he started "imagining them as human" and writing out "their observations on me and the instructors" (327). Oskison's autobiography manuscript corroborates the anecdote about his first story. Here he also adds that, after class, his friend Dane Coolidge read the draft—"my 'Two on a Slide,'" Oskison calls it—and then helped get it printed in the *Sequoia*, Stanford's literary magazine, where Coolidge was an editor. Shortly thereafter, Oskison joined his friend on the magazine's staff ("Tale" 95).

Positioning this publication as his point of entry to both fiction and editorial work, these recollections are accurate in their basic outlines; Oskison did publish an amoeba story in the *Sequoia* in February 1897. Its contents confirm his early investment in issues central to recent scholarship on his work, where debates about his political imagination, hardly resolved, have branched into diverse questions about how his work mediates histories of land, law, gender, and species.[2] But the story (as printed, rather than paraphrased) also develops a more surrealist and satirical sensibility—part bioethical thought experiment, part academic lampoon, part critique of settler expansionism—than readers familiar with Oskison's writing might expect, while contradicting the author's own reminiscences in some significant details.

To begin with, the piece was titled not "Two on a Slide" but "A Laboratory Fancy."[3] With this title perhaps lost to memory by the

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time Oskison reflected on the piece decades later, he found an alternative—quippy, with a hint of decline—that links the biological and the quantitative, evoking not only the microscope slide but also the slide rule: two scales on the rule, two on the slide.[4] But "two" is itself misleading; the sketch does not depict multiple protozoa, as Oskison later wrote, but rather an encounter between one such "animalcule," most often referred to as "the Paramœcium," and a human student.

The student narrates in the first person, having, it is ultimately implied, dozed off at the microscope and dreamed the whole exchange. When the Paramœcium first protests its fatal removal from the mud, the student, dismissive, cites the paradigm of experiential learning. But the defense is specious and desultory. Resuming its jeremiad, the Paramœcium describes a medicine man who lived "before the scientist unpacked his kit among us, indeed, before any of your inquisitive white race were in our land," and who, without interest in evolution or physiology, was "loved by both men and animals." This invokes the familiar, fraught type of the "ecological Indian," no doubt, yet its expression by a brash amoeba provokes several questions. What commonalities are entailed in the "both" of "both men and animals" when the latter category enfolds unicellular life? How do the ethics of animal observation intersect with the experiments of multispecies fiction? Does the connection here between ecocide and genocide, between the Paramœcium's precarity and the necropolitical human histories it evokes, take the form of allegorical comparison or, given that such an allegory might seem to short-circuit once the medicine man enters its frame, of material entanglement?

Were the narrator to answer any of these questions, it would be with a smirk. In this sardonic persona, addressed by the Paramœcium as white, Oskison shifts through various orientations to the sciences of the settler academy—a triumphalist apology in one breath, a parodic complaint in the next.[5] The title involves a related equivocation. "A Laboratory Fancy" surely refers to the poetic fancy *in* the laboratory.[6] But for those who are receptive to the Paramœcium's critique of the violence performed in the name of taxonomy, the phrase may also suggest the lethal fancy *of* the laboratory. The narrator expresses this fancy in a question so rhetorical it does not get a question mark: "Of what import is your life, when I must put a drop of Methyl Green on you pretty soon, and try to discover from your dead body just where the living center of your highly magnified corpse is located." Here the designation of bare life involves a logic that could make sense only in dream.

If the title thus compresses a question about the ethics of fancy, in another *Sequoia* piece, "Heard at Random," Oskison dilates on it. The scene develops a dorm-room debate about poetic anthropomorphism. (Oskison took courses in English and aesthetics as well as biology.) "Sentimental Tommy" is committed to the sublime, while cynical Crawford sees nature as "a heterogeneous mass of things more or less useful to us" (109). This piece appeared in November 1896, three months before Oskison's laboratory fancy. The story he called his first was not.[7]

Maybe he forgot. Maybe he made a retrospective choice of writerly self-fashioning. Either way, we might ask why it was this sketch, rather than another, whose composition Oskison would recount, at a slant, decades later. One possible answer is that an expressive amoeba offered an irresistible trope for the writer's small beginnings. A second is that this was his first publication to explicitly invoke Indigenous politics—while also, with the kind of perspectival obscurity that has occupied scholars of his work, focalizing the narrative through an erratic settler consciousness. A third lies in the story's imaginative contrast with the world of *The Brothers Three*. Dramatizing the commercial fortunes and decline of a ranch much like that of the Oskison family during the decades of allotment and the transition to Oklahoman statehood, the novel is centrally concerned with the commoditization of the nonhuman. Dollar amounts attached to the exchange of land, livestock, and mineral resources feature with staggering frequency across narration and dialogue. In this context, the half-remembered transspecies

fancy, voicing life on the line between flora and fauna, might have provided a telling counterpoint.

Notes

1. Although one reviewer—Oskison's second wife, Hildegarde Hawthorne, throwing any conflict-of-interest qualms to the wind—insists that the novel's characters are "of imagination all compact," they hew fairly closely to life.

2. Within the last decade, essays and book chapters have been published on Oskison, alone or in connection with another author, by Brown; J. Cox; Hudson (whose work on domesticated species in *The Brothers Three* is particularly relevant to this early sketch); Hunnef; Larré; and Piatote. Powell and Mullikin's 2007 edition of Oskison's late novel manuscript (*Singing Bird*) and Larré's 2012 collection of his shorter works (*Tales*) have helped to stimulate such attention.

3. Discrepancies notwithstanding, four continuities confirm that "A Laboratory Fancy" is the text Oskison meant when he referred to "Two on a Slide." The occasion of composition: a lethargic laboratory scene. The central conceit: protozoic caper and critique. The word count: "a liberal thousand words" remembered ("Tale" 95), about 1,500 in fact. The timing: it appears a month before Oskison joins the *Sequoia* staff, matching his later chronology.

4. "The modern slide rule," wrote William Cox in 1894, "consists of four decimally graduated scales, two on the rule and two on the slide" (13). The calculating device may have been an especially ready reference for Oskison due to his many years working in financial journalism. The phrasing of the substituted title could also involve some confusion in Oskison's memory, as not only a writer for but also a reader of the *Sequoia*, with a similar 1896 piece in the magazine by Van Dorn, "Two Molecular Theories," which likewise imagines a microscopic dialogue. Laboratory fancies were a bit of a genre.

5. The construction of this narrative persona looks particularly complex in historical retrospect, given the institutional recognition of Oskison as the university's first Native American graduate; see "History Timelines."

6. On literary inscription in the laboratory, see Latour and Woolgar 45–53.

7. We already knew that it was not his first; his "Trip to Yosemite Valley" appeared in a Vinita newspaper in 1895. Conceivably, though, in recounting his career in fiction, he might have excluded a travel story, whereas these two *Sequoia* pieces share both venue and, roughly, genre.

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A Laboratory Fancy

I had been sitting over my microscope during the whole of the long, drowsy afternoon. The little Paramœcium that I had been watching felt the effects of the warm afternoon sunshine too, for it lay as quiet as an old house-dog with only the flies to bother him. My microscopic friend was not wholly at ease, for it moved its cilia somewhat petulantly when a great lot of bacteria surrounded it.

"Well! my small instructor," I mused half aloud, "I don't see anything about you to waste my valuable time on. Don't you know very well that there is baseball practice in a quarter of an hour, and I can't cut 'lab' any more this week? Why don't you wake up and answer some of the questions asked here on this paper?" and I gave the microscope an impatient shove to one side.

The all-seeing eyes of the instructor were on me as I yawned and gazed blankly out the window. Then I drew the microscope toward me and began adjusting it with some show of interest. I surely thought that I had been sitting too near the jar of alcohol, and the fumes had reached my brain, for, when I looked again at my "subject," it had assumed quite a different attitude. With its microscopic legs crossed, and its partially differentiated mouth loquaciously open, it had leaned easily upon an adjoining atom. I was not surprised when it gave an airy little wave to one of its flippers, and answered in a voice which resembled the squeak of a phonograph. I did not catch its opening remarks, but, as they were in the form of an introduction to what came later, I congratulated myself on being spared, for once, the uneasiness I usually feel for a speaker who begins his speech by reciting a long list of excuses to explain why it will not be so good as it might be, and during the whole time he is saying this he will be chuckling to himself to think how surprised the people will be when they hear how good he really is.

Now my Paramœcium was one that had been hatched in the mud of the lake with the horde of others that had developed their little bodies to their fullest unicellular extent, and had then voluntarily died so that their species might live; and it must not be suspected that it was free from *all* their shortcomings.

"What kind of questions are on your paper, anyway?" piped the little voice. "I would like very much to know just what people think of me;—about my breathing and digestion are they? Don't they know very well that such things are not important with me, for, if they had never bothered me at all, I would have kept right on breathing, and digesting juicy proteids to the end."

For the moment I thought the Paramœcium right; then I reflected awhile and smiled. Foolish little animalcule, I thought, you are hopelessly behind the times. Why, everybody knows that science will solve all these mysteries that cloud the facts of our living and acting, if we are persevering. Of what import is your life, when I must put a drop of Methyl Green on you pretty soon, and try to discover from your dead body just where the living center of your highly magnified corpse is located. Of course, I might have found out that much by reading my text-book here, but that is not the kind of knowledge wanted nowadays. Original investigation is the order of the day, and those who rebel against this order are classed with that very numerous body of old fogies who are immersed in the scholasticism of the Middle Ages. Good old questions about man's divinity, and no question at all about the utter inferiority of anything lower than man. Oh! that was a time when one could study with every assurance that he was going to do the right thing; for had not his teacher and their teachers arrived at the same conclusion years and years ago? With conscious pride one could swell out his chest, place his hand on his philosophical books and say that what he did not know was not worth the trouble of finding out, a sentiment echoed by many modern investigators who lie awake nights trying to find out

whether or not one side of a little fish is like the other. "But of course you don't know anything about these temporal things," I said aloud to my small friend. "You concern yourself only with the problem of obtaining a living, which is, after all, about all the most of us seek after, each according to his standard and energy."

"There is where you are mistaken," broke in the Paramœcium. "Though I come from the black mud of Lagunita, and am destined to perish in the cause of science, let me tell you that there are many things vastly more important to those interested in my welfare. There are some old legends that have been handed down from the old days when Lagunita was not, and our ancestors frolicked in the mosses and pure sands of the mountain brooks. We were happy in those good old days, the legend runs, and were kings in our way. The brook was very small, and nothing larger than ourselves lived there, and, as a consequence, we demonstrated for our microscopic world that familiar old adage about might making right. Ah! you should have heard my old grandfather tell about how, made strong by the pure mountain air and cold water, a company of good fellows would go charging a band of Bacteria, striking the water furiously with their flippers, and the enemy would go floundering against atoms in their flight, and dash their brains out."

"Dash their brains out? You stupid, one-celled, brainless thing," I broke in, "is it possible that a wide-awake Paramœcium, as I take you to be, can not know that Bacteria have no brains. As to that you have no more than the Bacteria, and really have no right to be showing any signs of one. You should act as a witless creature is supposed to act,—rush blindly about until you strike some obstruction, then back out, and rush into it again until you die for lack of water to sustain you, or until the obstruction is removed. Instead of that you stand there and coolly ask me to put more water on the slide, in the interest of science. You are as consistent as a professor I know, who says that he approves of the fellows finding out his hobbies and working them for all there is in it. Then he calmly proceeds to explain that his greatest hobby is that every fellow shall put in a reasonable (two or three hours) time on every lesson, have all his papers up in the neatest possible manner, and be prepared for an ex. any time."

I have noticed that a fresh quid of tobacco, administered to an old mountaineer at the right time, will open the pores of his memory, and he will tell marvelous tales of other days.

The fresh water that I put on my Paramœcium seemed to have a like effect, and it resumed its story.

"It has come down to us that once in the dim past, before the scientist unpacked his kit among us, indeed, before any of your inquisitive white race were in our land, that one of the great medicine men of the tribe of natives was gifted with remarkable vision. He could see the living heart of the pine trees, and could tell why they sighed; he could understand the sorrows of the brooding owl, that sits silent and disconsolate all day, and dares to show its wounded spirit only at night; which trait some foolish people attribute to its stupidity; he it was who first saw us, and understood us. He did not look at us with contempt, nor sacrifice hundreds of us to find out whether or not light affected us, but studied our wishes. When he discovered that a lot of us were penned up in a small stagnant pool, and wished to get away, he very kindly opened up a ditch from our pool to the running waters of the brook. He did not care about the question of evolution, nor did he seek to study our physiology, and yet it was said that he was universally loved by both men and animals. Great time, that! I only wish I had lived then," and the Paramœcium came as near sighing as any microscopic organism could.

"You should take Pacific Slope history," I said to my small mentor, "and your tales would be vastly interesting, I do not doubt. But you must remember you have to deal with a scientific student now, and I tell you frankly that I don't believe a word you say."

This eminently sensible observation had the effect of rousing me from a long slumber just as the instructor came around to ask me what drawings I had made of that last slide. I was on the point of relating my dream, when I heard that I'd have to stay and make up the time I put in sleeping.