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The Short Story

Let's start with the insults. Here is one of the most entertaining bruising ever inflicted on an entire literary genre: "Short stories amount for the most part to parlor tricks, party favors with built-in snappers, gadgets for inducing recognitions and reversals: a small pump serves to build up the pressure, a tiny trigger releases it, there follows a puff and a flash as freedom and necessity combine; finally a celluloid doll drops from the muzzle and descends by parachute to the floor." With his synonymic indication of diminutive stature, Howard Nemerov thus confined the short story to the play-pen of literary history.

In its relatively young generic life thus far, the short story has frequently been similarly scolded. In a single-sentence paragraph in the introductory chapter to his *The Short Story* (1948), Seán O'Faoláin summarised: "I suppose no university in Britain thinks the short-story other than a modern toy". Even those writers who have developed the genre in exciting and singular directions have seemed ambivalent in implication if not in intent. H.G. Wells said he would rather his stories "were found in the bedrooms of convalescents and in dentists' parlours and railway stations than in gentlemen's studies". J.G. Ballard, in the introduction to his collected stories, calls short stories generally the "loose change in the treasury of fiction, easily ignored beside the wealth of novels available, an over-valued currency that often turns out to be counterfeit". The standard relegation in the minds of contemporary readers of fiction is exemplified in the subsuming of important short story collections by Alistair MacLeod, Richard Ford, Mary Lavin and Raymond Carver in Callil and Tóibín's *The Modern Library: The Two Hundred Best Novels in English Since 1950* (1999).

Such a diminution in status reflects, and further produces, a dearth of short-story theories and generic specifications. Too often, what is said about the novel is taken to be said about fiction generally and thus, by subsumption, about the short story. There are numerous books about the novel available to the interested common reader; there is, comparatively, practically nothing similarly available on the short story. O'Faoláin's study and Frank O'Connor's prodigiously quoted *The Lonely Voice* (1962) are central in the popular critical canon, but the more sophisticated analyses of the genre that have come from Germany and Russia, for instance, tend to be so enmeshed in theoretical taxonomies as to be of use only to the specialist. Though a survey history of the origins and development of the short story would seem the basic fillip for relevant explorations, there is startlingly little available even in this basic sense.

The modern short story emerged from a colloquy of early narrative forms and conventions, from folk and fairy tales, from fables and legends, from exempla about saints, from anecdotes and superstitious gossip, from the narrative essay, from the longer stories of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that would contribute to the evolution of the novel. The kinds of titles given to collections of short fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflect the post-Enlightenment anthropological interest in the curio quality of the cultural forms of peripheral and indigenous peoples. Permutations such as *Traits and Stories*, *Fairy and Folk Tales*, *Tales and Sketches* were all familiar to William Carleton, to Washington Irving, to Melville and Hawthorne, to Thomas Hardy.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the possibilities for transforming the residual folkloric elements of stories into an art of the short story were gradually realised. By 1898, Henry James could remark that the short story had become an

object of “almost extravagant dissertation”. Much of this dissertation had been taking place in Russia. The modern short story, Turgenev famously pronounced, came out from under Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’. George Moore, in turn devoted to the Turgenev of *A Sportsman’s Sketches* (1847-51), felt he had been shown that “a mere narrative, I will say a bare narrative, should possess the same intellectual charms as the psychological novel”. And Chekov’s name would emerge as a virtual equivalent for the new artistic attitude to short fiction.

Progress in the genre remained slower elsewhere. “In my youth”, Elizabeth Bowen remembered, “the short story’s position was more anomalous. It had not yet ... been recognized as ‘a form’”. As a literary term, “short story” was not entered in the OED until 1933. In the subsequent decades, however, the short story was conventionalised to such a degree that, in the early seventies, an *Anti-Story Anthology* was published which included short-fiction from the sixties by such international figures as Borges, John Barth, Heinrich Boll, Joyce Carol Oates, Eugenio Montale, Nathalie Sarraute, Julio Cortazar. The aim was to show that story-telling could turn against itself, reject the mimetic-realist tradition, but still mutate into useful and entertaining new forms.

The short story had thus progressed in barely a century from an articulated conception of its artistry to a point where its generic nature was challenged. Curiously, only a handful of theories have been offered that might adequately explain the geographical distribution of a genre that has, over the past few decades, continued to prove resistantly heterogeneous. Versions of Frank O’Connor’s “lonely voice” theory are still given much credence. This theory basically argues that the short story develops as a strong substitute tradition in cultures that lack the concept of normal society or the systems of manners necessary for the growth of the novel – hence the erstwhile dominance of the tradition in Russia and Ireland, countries that experienced significant social change, and, currently, in America where society is in a relatively developing state. An adjunct of the theory sees the short story as a transitional genre between vibrant older oral cultures and newer written cultures – hence, for instance, Liam O’Flaherty and the South Americans.

Perhaps the most enduringly popular theory about the inherent generic nature of the short story is Poe’s argument for the “single sitting” effect where the well-composed story is presumed to be similar to poetry in its achievement of “unity of impression”. The obvious problem with this theory, as William Saroyan remarked, is that some people can sit for much longer than others. A combination of Poe’s idea with elements of O’Connor’s theory, however, may offer a satisfactory view of both the origin and nature of the short story.

The individualist figures (“tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, and spoiled priests”) that O’Connor sees at the heart of the great short stories are essentially romantic icons and, in keeping with Poe’s alignment of the effect of short stories with poetry, this might be exactly the nature of the genre: It is a quintessentially romantic genre that began to emerge in the modern form in and after historical Romanticism. It is no coincidence that the gothic preoccupation with morbid and extreme psychologies was often most convincingly figured in short pieces by E.T.A. Hoffmann, Balzac, Maupassant and Sheridan Le Fanu.

The short story’s traditional limited focus and emphasis on private moments of change are analogous to the romantic lyric just as the novel corresponds to the epic. Joyce’s famous “epiphany” theory about the short story, where a delicate private mood or momentous alteration of perception is the key ingredient, can be read as simply a development of the cherished lyric moment. O’Faoláin paid full testament to

this romantic strain. The short story, he argued, is “an emphatically personal exposition”, a “special distillation of personality, a unique sensibility which has recognised and selected at once a subject that ... is of value to the writer’s temperament and to his alone - his counterpart, his perfect opportunity to project himself”.

His theory on privacy offered, O’Faoláin still believed that the generic specificity of the short story is “a Will o’ the Wisp chased hopefully, and generally in vain, by writers, editors and readers”. Exceptions disprove rules. The romantic individualism at the heart of the short story genre, rather than collective ethnic or regional factors, may be the greatest guarantor of continued diversity. From the vertigo of wondering whether a Carver story is over when a sentence finishes at the bottom of the recto we know, despite his own literary talisman from Chekhov (“...and suddenly everything became clear to him”) that resolutions, recognitions or reversals are not prerequisites for powerful storytelling. We know from Tolstoy, from Chekhov, from James and Saki, from Flannery O’Connor, from Eudora Welty and John McGahern and William Trevor, that traditional formulas produce classics. But we also know from Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, James Kelman and Irvine Welsh that the experimental ethos need not be the transparent camouflage of poor work. We know from Hemingway that shortness is not a problem. We know from Kafka and Borges, and from Beckett’s stories, texts and fizzles that when the entire received idea of story paraphernalia is thrown away, anything is possible. It’s seriously great fun in the play-pen.

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