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Inside Out: A Working Theory of the Irish Short Story.

John Kenny

These things are external to the man; style is the man.
- Comte de Buffon, *Discourse on Style*.

There would seem to be a close parallel between the relative generic youth of the short story and the frequency with which it is scolded for its immature ways. Here, for instance, is one of the most entertaining chidings 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, the American critic and practitioner, Howard Nemerov, thus confined the short story to the play-pen of literary history.¹ This is a particularly facetious version of a view of the genre widely held - if sometimes only colloquially - by both readers and writers of short fiction. Simple length is accepted as automatically indicative of a grander, more adult aesthetic ambition in and for the novel; the very shortness of the short story is taken as a potential admission of smaller, more confined artistic intentions. Even during what is considered to be its heyday in Ireland, this was the suspicion voiced by Seán O'Faoláin: 'I suppose no university in Britain thinks the short-story other than a modern toy'.² Fourteen years after O'Faoláin's extended response to the suspected critical diminution of the short story, a second Irishman provided a second and much more influential formal defence while equally mindful of the potential for a negative translation of shortness into a kind of less-ness: 'the conception of the short story as a miniature art is inherently false'.³ Frank O'Connor was in the event rejecting any idea that great short stories can never be longish stories as such, but his equivalent rejection of any critical description of the short story as a miniature and therefore minor form is writ large throughout *The Lonely Voice*.

While the individual chapters on writers in *The Lonely Voice* are rarely read so frequently or closely as the introduction, where O'Connor provided what has turned out to be an eminently portable theory of production for the short story, some crucial points are scattered outside of those opening pages. There is, for instance, the almost throwaway remark in the opening sentence of his study of D.H. Lawrence and A.E. Coppard: 'Though the short story does not seem to me to be an English form ...'.

¹ Quoted in Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London, 1977), 2.

² Seán O'Faoláin, *The Short Story* (London, 1948; repr. Old Greenwich, Connecticut, 1974), 26.

³ Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (1962; repr. London, 1965), 27.

Paralleled with O'Faoláin's comment on the contemporaneous attitude to the short story in the literature departments of British universities, the basic operational implications for Irish writers dependent for decent fame or income on the British publishing industry becomes clear from O'Connor's quick dismissal of the English writer's short-story talents. It has long been a phenomenon, especially in Ireland where we are yet assumed to be especially solicitous of the form, that young or new fiction writers launch their careers with a collection of stories and quickly follow this with a novel that is usually part of a two-book deal with British publishers who, if O'Connor is to be believed, are rarely likely to be natively disposed to nurturing short-story talents in the long term. Very few writers who start out in this way later return to shorter fiction. The short story is presently automatically thought of as the generic domain of apprenticeship, of somewhat unprofitable childish party games before the writer matures into the more serious version of the saleable fiction writer which is the novelist. In terms of sheer material profitability, the international short story, even in the more lucrative domain of American periodicals, no longer has the close mutually supportive relationship with magazines that provided for John Updike's wistful recollection of supporting himself and his family during his twenties by the sale of just six stories per year.⁴

In terms of aesthetic prestige, unprofitableness was equally not the perceived case with the volume generally taken to be the foundation-stone of the modern Irish short story. George Moore's *The Untilled Field* (1903) was laid down, at least in Moore's retrospective self-assessment, as 'a landmark in Anglo-Irish literature, a new departure', a book written in the not inconsiderable hope of 'furnishing the young Irish of the future with models'.⁵ O'Connor was confident that 'Irish literature has gone Moore's way'.⁶ As matters have progressed, however, the young Irish have not always been grateful to Moore for his example. After his first book, *Long Lankin* (1970), a thematically cohesive collection of stories that practised a conscious version of the scrupulous meanness of the Moore-influenced *Dubliners*, John Banville for instance published just two further uncollected stories later in the 1970s and has never returned to the form. Banville's judgment that the short story, though ironically a 'splendid' form with 'a far higher success rate than the novel', was essentially 'an easy form' was emphatic; it would, he was arguing by the age of thirty, be 'foolish to expect to derive from short stories the same satisfaction to be had in the novel'.⁷ And this was from a young writer already devoted to the fiction of Henry James, one of the major figures who passed on to the twentieth century a concept of the short story as a component part of the art of fiction, as 'a form delightful and difficult'.⁸ While Banville's seemingly natural inclinations in prose are the exact opposite of O'Connor's admitted difficulties in writing novels, and while others of the handful of Irish names internationally recognised as masters of fictional prose (John McGahern and William Trevor for instance) are equally known for their abilities in short and long forms, Banville is easily

⁴ John Updike, *More Matter: Essays and Criticism* (New York, 1999), 256.

⁵ George Moore, Preface, *The Untilled Field*, intro. Terence Brown (London, 1903; repr. Dublin, 1990), xxiii, xix.

⁶ *The Lonely Voice*, 37.

⁷ John Banville, 'A Sense of Proportion', *Hibernia* (30 Jan. 1976), 26.

⁸ Henry James, 'The Story-Teller at Large: Mr Henry Harland. Comedies and Errors' (1898), in *The Critical Muse: selected literary criticism*, ed. and intro. Roger Gard (London, 1987), 333.

our most articulate and uncompromising novelist-critic and his regularly voiced practitioner's aesthetics of fiction are sophisticated even by world standards. As such, his view of the short story as a form vis-à-vis the novel is at least an indication of the current danger for the short story to find itself *in extremis* in the most influential of Irish writing circles.

A combined material and aesthetic diminution in overall status reflects, and further produces, a dearth of short-story theories and generic specifications in Ireland and elsewhere. Too often, what is said about the novel is taken to apply to fiction generally, and thus, by subsumption, to the short story. The standard relegation of the short story in the minds of contemporary editors and readers is exemplified in Carmin Callil and Colm Tóibín's *The Modern Library: The Two Hundred Best Novels in English Since 1950* (1999) which subsumed under its generic banner important story collections by Alistair MacLeod, Raymond Carver and Mary Lavin.

While the variety of types and the volume of individual examples of the short story provide their own warnings against interpretation and reductive classification, I want to suggest here that one of the short story's key inherent elements (inherent in the criticism if not always in the stories themselves) is implicated in the pervasive view of the genre as an immature variety of fiction. For present serviceability, I want primarily to focus on ideas about the short story as a genre, on its *theories*. Lest that word raise an early groan I should point out that what is intended here is not any external imposition of a Procrustean critical template - I am not interested for the moment in typologies or morphologies - but the elicitation of a short story theory mainly from the formal ideas practitioners have had about their own short-story writing, certain generalisations they have made based on their own developing experience of the craft. These working theories are usually explicitly expressed outside of the work proper, but they are also sometimes organically figured as actual themes within certain stories, as in the prime examples from Ireland's two major relevant theorists: Frank O'Connor's 'The Idealist' and Seán O'Faoláin's 'How to Write a Short Story'. Rather than anything survey-like or comprehensive, I intend merely a focus on a basic but crucial dialectic that generally surfaces when we speak of the short story in general and of the Irish short story in particular.

Almost all of the few major theories we have of the short story's emergence and development mention its *lyrical* constitution. The two dominant and still prevalent theories tend to focus on either the stylistic composition of stories, as with Poe's originative theories, or, instead, on the pervasive social conditions that seem to foster the growth of story writing, as in the theories of Henry James and their development in Frank O'Connor, Seán O'Faoláin and, less programmatically but nonetheless crucially, in John McGahern. These separate tendencies in short-story criticism - the one more formalist, the other more sociocultural - can be usefully integrated by a consideration of the respective ways in which they define and develop what they variably call the lyrical element. The important initial distinction here will be between a standard sense of the lyrical as a style of language, where the meanings of words are poetically overdetermined, and a more metaphysical sense of the lyrical as a disposition towards the world regulated by social circumstances that may or may not be communicated in what we conventionally call poetic language. Such a disposition is often taken to be a matter of ethnic inevitability. In his chapter on 'The Irish School' in a survey of the modern short story whose usefulness was somewhat occluded by the stronger working generalisations of O'Faoláin's and O'Connor's subsequent studies, H.E. Bates

attributed a large part of the success of the Irish short story to a 'natural genius for dramatizing life', to a 'naturally poetic' mode of expression.⁹ While this may be partly a version of the familiar subscription to the idea of John Bull's Irishers as more poetically than empirically inclined, there would appear to be reasonable plausibility in Bates's suggestions. O'Connor was especially keen to align the short story with the lyric disposition. 'I write my stories as though they were lyrics', he said: 'I would call myself a spoiled poet'.¹⁰ Seemingly natural native inclinations to the poetic dramatisation of Irish life equally have their crucially conscious side however. The resolution here will be that while the lyrical as a defining term in both senses involves the idea of the free individual - whether alienated or proudly alone; whether as the person within a society or the writer within linguistic-artistic tradition - certain organic alignments of the living individual and social context, and of literary form and content, seem always to prevail. O'Connor's widely credited theory that a preference for the short story comprises an attitude, an ideological pre-disposition, among submerged population groups that subsequently seek a natural formal home for spontaneous expression can be allowed continue its dissemination since we still have little else on the short story to cling to critically. Further flotation can be aided however by a nuancing of the theory both in terms of its contexts and implications.

It is a commonplace that the historical evolution of short fiction is formidably heterogeneous. Despite this, the theory of short fiction that is widely taken to have inaugurated the modern short story, or at least extended reflection on the artistic possibilities of the genre, was very particularized. We tend to have an enduringly generalized conception of Edgar Allan Poe's foundational theory of the genre as the single-sitting effect, where the well-composed story is presumed to be similar to poetry in its achievement of 'unity of impression'. O'Connor additionally encapsulated the author's own act of composition within this theory of sitting and frequently commented that he found the writing of a short story absolutely analogous to the writing of a poem: 'I write my stories, as I've suggested, as a lyric poet would write his poems - I have to grasp all my ideas in one big moment ... novels require meditation and a more plodding day-to-day kind of energy'.¹¹ While there is the obvious problem with the basic premise of this theory that, as William Saroyan once remarked, some people can sit for much longer than others, it is worth reverting to the detail of Poe's arguments to point to his close alignment of poetry with the short story (what he at this stage calls a 'tale').

The important text is Poe's 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*.¹² Here, Poe starts from the position of an already supreme confidence in the short fictional form:

We have always regarded the *Tale* ... as affording the best prose opportunity for display of the highest talent. It has peculiar advantages which the novel does not admit.

⁹ H.E. Bates, *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey* (London, 1941; repr. London, 1943), 148-149.

¹⁰ *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 36, Fall 1990, p. 273.

¹¹ *Twentieth Century Literature*, 273.

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, with selections from his critical writings*, intro. and notes Arthur Hobson Quinn, with Edward H. O'Neill (New York, 1992). All quotations are from pp. 946-950.

It is, of course, a far finer field than the essay. It has even points of superiority over the poem.

In face of the ongoing interest in anthropologically inclined tales, Poe encouraged the transformation of residual folkloric content into an aesthetically self-conscious form. In essence, Poe's single-sitting compositional protocol is an extension of a poetic principle downwards to what he seemed to simultaneously suggest was a lesser and superior kind of writing. The 'unity of effect or impression' that rhymed poetry best achieves can be striven for in short stories; short stories must aspire to the condition of poetry. The implication of Poe's principle is that there is poetry, and there is prose, and 'poetic sentiment' can, in supreme cases, be found in either. Despite an accumulatively slippery distinction between genres, it becomes clear that Poe places the story, in terms of the values he outlines, exactly between poetry on the upper and the novel on the lower elevation. In thus distinguishing between story and novel, he imposes on the short story the Romantic organic imperative:

In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. ... The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel.

In this alignment of the composition and effect of the ideal short story with lyric poetry, Poe was asking the short story generally to grow up as a genre fully conscious of its aesthetic possibilities.

Sometimes unspoken, and sometimes with local inflections, Poe's theory has remained a constant in short story criticism; any discussion of the genre as a serious art characterized by an adult concentration on form and unity echoes his idea of the single lyrical effect. Terms analogous with Poe's appear again and again. One of the best known descriptions of the organic relations between form and content in this lyrical effect is Flannery O'Connor's:

When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is.¹³

In the Irish case, Poe's and Flannery O'Connor's compositional obsession with the inseparability of form and content, if not the actual supremacy of form over content, has applied with equal weight. O'Connor's preferential treatment of architecture as opposed to materials is clear: 'It's the design of the story which to me is most important ... I'm always looking at the design of a story, not the treatment'.¹⁴ Elizabeth Bowen had clearly attended closely to Poe's advice when, introducing her own stories, she emphasised that 'the short story revolves round one crisis only – one might call it, almost, a crisis in itself. There (ideally) ought to be nothing in such a

¹³ Flannery O'Connor, 'Writing Short Stories', *Mystery and Manners: occasional prose*, selec. and ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1969), 96.

¹⁴ Anthony Whittier, Interview with Frank O'Connor, *The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. and intro. Malcolm Cowley, 1st ser. (London, 1958), 151.

story which can weaken, detract from, or blur the central, single effect'.¹⁵ John McGahern's facility as a social chronicler was enabled by a similar concentration on organic form. 'Material and form are inseparable', he insisted in admiration of Joyce's *Dubliners*: 'So happy is the union of subject and object that they never become statements of any kind, but in their richness and truth are representations of particular lives - and all of life'.¹⁶ Declan Kiberd provides a domestic version of the lyrical theory where the older forms of Gaelic literature (accepted as a vital influence generally on the emergence of the short story in Ireland) feed into contemporary stories in this specific way. Kiberd argues that the Irish short story's 'real generic affinities' are with a 'favoured form of Gaelic tradition, the lyric poem'. This means that, as with the stories from the Irish language Kiberd is introducing, there comes a 'moment of revelation, when the actual surfaces of things take on a wider symbolic meaning, as in a moment of poetry'. Far from the story being an 'easy' form as is sometimes argued, Kiberd argues that 'at its best it has the intensity and lyric power of a symbolist poem'.¹⁷ As Kiberd has more recently shown, this lyrical Gaelic background and the resultant form of writing 'that is poetic, even though it is formally offered as prose' is a major factor in John McGahern.¹⁸

This theory of the modern short story as a genre devoted in its higher manifestations to concentrated lyrical moments, since it is a matter of assiduously applied effects, is the more difficult of our two ideas of the lyrical to accuse of any kind of childishness. A second version of the lyrical, which concentrates on the distillation of experience rather than the distillation of language in the short story, is more problematic and potentially divisive. One of the key artistic tensions of the modern world that emerged just when the short story itself was developing into a new form is at issue here. The dominant sociocultural version of the lyrical theory argues that the short story is a prime generic reflection of the immature existential retreat into the self in the face of an increasingly imperious and complex reality: as the novel is to extroversion, so the short story is to introversion. As O'Connor put it in his generic distinction: 'A novel requires far more logic and far more knowledge of circumstances, whereas a short story can have the sort of detachment from circumstances that lyric poetry has'.¹⁹ *The Lonely Voice*, where O'Connor solidified and handed down a working theory of the short story that remains, despite a paucity of reprints, strangely compelling even to those practitioners or critics who find his stories themselves outmoded, is the acme of the sociocultural approach to short-story theory. O'Connor's renowned theory of the short story defers absolutely to the eponymous idea of the lonely, lyrical voice somehow detached from a surrounding society: 'Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society'.²⁰ And the continued relevance of this basic view of the short story is rarely questioned, in the Irish context

¹⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Stories by Elizabeth Bowen' (1959), in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, selec. and intro. Hermione Lee (London, 1986), 128.

¹⁶ John McGahern, 'Dubliners', *James Joyce: The Artist and The Labyrinth*, ed. Augustine Martin (London, 1990), 71.

¹⁷ Micheál Ó Conghaile et al., *Fourfront: contemporary stories translated from the Irish*, intro. Declan Kiberd (Conamara, 1998), 9.

¹⁸ Declan Kiberd, 'John McGahern's *Amongst Women*', in *Language and Tradition in Ireland: continuities and displacements*, eds. Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (Boston, 2003), 195.

¹⁹ Whittier, 148.

²⁰ *The Lonely Voice*, 19.

or otherwise. The most direct testament to the continued impact of the lonely-voice theory is Richard Ford's introduction to *The Granta Book of the American Short Story* (1992). Ford, whose own stories have been much admired in Ireland in turn, not least by John McGahern, takes *The Lonely Voice* to be 'the most provocative and attentive' work available on the genre and restates a claim, widely held, that O'Connor was, in 1962, writing 'from a country where the short story was *already* the national form'.²¹ While many have refused the short story the luxurious title of 'the national form', O'Connor contrived at all opportunities to claim it as such and, further, to argue that the form best reflected post-independence national introversion and displaced the theatre's claim to be the quintessential national art:

After him [O'Casey], writers like O'Flaherty, O'Faoláin, Mary Lavin, and myself turned from the theatre and adopted fiction—mainly the short story—as our medium. There were, of course, other reasons for this than purely literary ones, like the difficulties O'Casey himself encountered in dealing with a moribund theatre—but there was also, what is always to be understood in the short story, a turning away from the public to the private thing.²²

While O'Connor's individual analyses of short story writers have much to offer, the lengthy introduction to *The Lonely Voice* arguably proves far too limited in its backward look and far too restrictive for any younger writers interested in developing their own working theories of both what the short story has been and what it might still do. That extraordinarily influential introduction should always be read, at least in part, as O'Connor's theories about himself:

I had always wanted to write poetry, but I realized very early on that I didn't have much talent that way. Story telling is a compensation; the nearest thing one can get to the quality of a pure lyric poem. It doesn't deal with problems; it doesn't have any solutions to offer; it just states the human condition.²³

The same can be suggested about the related theories Seán O'Faoláin proposed in *The Short Story* (1948) which informed O'Connor's more incisive and better-phrased judgments. Michael MacLaverty reacted particularly strongly to both O'Faoláin's and O'Connor's theories and went so far as to portray them as falsifying romantics 'out on the cod'.²⁴ The widespread acceptance of the lonely-voice theory would suggest, nevertheless, that the situation of the modern Irish short story was, local motivations aside, somehow symptomatic of the nature of the genre in certain wider contexts. The short story has flourished in those cultures where older, usually oral forms, are met head on with the challenge of new literary forms equipped with the ideology of modernisation. The short story is the genre of the cusp between tradition and modernity, and in this it is intimately related to the social motivation of lyric poetry. Post-Romantic nineteenth-century developments, as with Poe, are central here.

²¹ Richard Ford, Introduction, *The Granta Book of the American Short Story* (1992; London, 1998), vii.

²² Frank O'Connor, selec. and ed., *Modern Irish Short Stories* (London, 1957), xii.

²³ Frank O'Connor, *The Happiness of Getting it Down Right: Letters of Frank O'Connor and William Maxwell 1945-1966*, ed. Michael Steinman (New York, 1996), 14.

²⁴ Michael McLaverty, 'The Novel and the Short Story', *In Quiet Places: The Uncollected Stories, Letters and Critical Prose of Michael McLaverty*, ed. and intro. Sophia Hillan King (Dublin, 1989), 112-113.

The traditional ideal of the lyric, Theodor Adorno has pointed out in an important essay on lyric poetry and society, is to remain 'unaffected by bustle and commotion'; it is a 'sphere of expression whose very essence lies in either not acknowledging the power of socialization or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment, as in Baudelaire or Nietzsche'. The lyrical attitude to experience is the quintessence of the experience of modernity; the demand that the lyrical word should be untainted by the world is itself, says Adorno, social in nature:

It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws.²⁵

The paradox is that the lyrical motivation absolutely accepts the reality of the anti-lyrical: in order for the lyrical to emerge as a justified privacy, the alienating modern must be - even if absolutely immanently - recognized as a gross reality. As Adorno puts it simply: 'the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism'.²⁶ This is in direct agreement with one of O'Connor's most humorously delivered remarks on the unavoidable origins of the Irish lyrical disposition in an idiosyncratic 'national attitude' toward society, at least as it prevails among the educated:

In America as in Czarist Russia one might describe the intellectual's attitude to society as "It may work," in England as "It must work," and in Ireland as "It can't work." A young American of our time or a young Russian of Turgenev's might look forward with a certain amount of cynicism to a measure of success and influence; nothing but bad luck could prevent a young Englishman's achieving it, even today; while a young Irishman can still expect nothing but incomprehension, ridicule, and injustice.²⁷

The validity of the socially antagonistic lyrical voice in Ireland was accepted wholesale in the first half of the twentieth century, the decades immediately following Independence. In his introduction to the literature of the mid-twentieth-century decades in *The Field Day Anthology*, Terence Brown underlines the validity of O'Connor's analysis and repeatedly emphasises the 'defining lyricism' of the Irish short story:

In a submerged population, where the provincial mind senses its own social impotence, definition of selfhood must perforce involve private feeling, romantic imagination and defeat. A lyric form is an aesthetic acquiescence in the general sense of powerlessness, an artistic making-do.

Working through O'Faoláin's similar views, Brown continues in the same vein:

So the characteristic Irish short story deals in an oppressive, authoritarian environment, where law, politics and the iron regimen of economic life determine existence. The tale itself achieves a moment of lyric definition, an epiphany, in which protagonist, narrator,

²⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society' (1957), *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, vol. 1 (New York, 1991), 37, 39-40.

²⁶ Adorno, 45.

²⁷ *The Lonely Voice*, 20.

author and reader all share, as if momentarily transcending the bleak condition of life to which the story itself is attentive.²⁸

While the Irish case is thus ample illustration of general theories on the lyric, with an awkward and unformed society proving discomfiting for the fiction writer, the practitioner-theorists who emerged in this period widened the social specificity of their situation into a general theory of the short story that has remained widely influential even where the exact same social conditions do not necessarily pertain. While O'Connor's theory about submerged population groups has continued potential validity in the social sense in that marginalisations of various kinds are cruelly imposed on, and sometimes carefully nurtured by, various demographic groups, the enduring influence of the theory surely also has something to do with the way in which it helps cultivate the popular Romantic image of the writer that we especially cater to in Ireland. Despite his best suspicions at the time of the overly subjective nature of modern art, O'Faoláin's propounded ideal of the short story was unrelentingly privatized and lyrical-minded:

What one searches for and what one enjoys in a short story is a special distillation of personality, a unique sensibility which has recognized 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.²⁹

If the Irish case is symptomatic, what seems to happen in a case where the writer feels driven into existential privacy by an alienating society is that Poe's kind of idea of the short story as an autonomously perfectible lyrical form is seen as a natural reaction. Thus both versions of the lyrical theory merge. The tension that can result is famously prominent in Joyce, whose emphases on poetic stylisation and on the cherished lyric moment of epiphany operate curiously alongside his realist instincts in *Dubliners*. An extreme version of this combined social and formal lyrical attitude is captured in one of Liam O'Flaherty's self-reflexive dialogues in *Shame the Devil* (1934), and it is perhaps no accident here that O'Flaherty was heavily influenced by Nietzsche's rugged high Romanticism in the conception of his stories:

I'd cut off your hands and feet in order to write a phrase. I'd have you annihilated for the sake of creating something really perfect. What you call the holiest thing in life is holy when it is the food of the imagination. When it ceases to feed the imagination it ceases to be holy.³⁰

Regardless of background, this attitude has been particularly ingrained in our short story writers. Elizabeth Bowen, even in career retrospect, continued the pattern:

Man has to live how he can: overlooked and dwarfed he makes himself his own theatre. Is the drama inside heroic or pathological? Outward acts have often an inside magnitude. The short story, with its shorter span than the novel's, with its freedom from forced complexity, its possible lucidness, is able, like the poetic drama, to measure man by his aspirations and

²⁸ Terence Brown, Introduction, 'The Counter Revival: Provincialism and Censorship 1930-1965', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 3 (Derry, 1991), 93.

²⁹ O'Faoláin, 30.

³⁰ Liam O'Flaherty, *Shame the Devil* (London, 1934), 101.

dreams and place him alone on that stage which, inwardly, every man is conscious of occupying alone.³¹

Poe would have been proud of such obliterations of the external in favour of the aggressively perfectionist private imagination.

The potential working endgame in this dialectic of the lyrical disposition, both in its compositional and social senses, is unsurprisingly provided by the case of Samuel Beckett. Beckett's short fiction, for reasons of obvious generic uncertainty, has received relatively little attention, particularly among students of the Irish short story, even though the hitherto ignored Irish import of his work has at this stage been generally well established. Given his status as the stylistically supreme chronicler of self-conscious existential privacy, Beckett's stories are crucial to any contemplation of the limits of the lyrical. Though Beckett had famously little to say by way of extended generalisations on his own or anybody else's fiction, short or otherwise, one of his pieces, titled 'neither' (1979), is especially relevant here. Originally a libretto piece which Beckett considered to be the very essence of his self, 'neither' contains only eighty-six words and was originally and subsequently published with line breaks that seemed to suggest that it was intended as a poem. When Beckett's British editor, John Calder, included 'neither' in preparations for Beckett's *Collected Poems* however, Beckett took it out of the collection arguing that it was a story, not a poem. Here is the complete story:

To and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither
as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close,
once turned away from gently part again
beckoned back and forth and turned away
heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam or the other
unheard footfalls only sound
till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other
then no sound
then gently light unfading on that unheeded neither
unspeakable home³²

³¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Stories* (London, 1980), 16.

³² Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, ed., intro. and notes S.E. Gontarski (New York, 1995), 258. For an account of the quirky publishing history of 'neither' see pp. xii and 284. For variant accounts of the story's operatic origins, see Anthony Cronin, *Beckett: The Last Modernist* (New York, 1997), 583; and James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London, 1997), 630-632.

Just as we have yet really to come to generic terms with the ways in which Beckett pushed at the bounds of the short-story form, we still have to appreciate fully the lyrical heritage of the genre as a whole. Equally importantly, we must recognize the extent to which critical thinking about the genre has frequently limited itself to one dismissive version or another of the broad lyrical theory we have touched on here. The problem, really, centres on whether we continue, in the great anti-literary, anti-fiction sweep of our age, with its overweening confidence that prosaic historicist method and social bad conscience are the intellectual keys to the communally real, to equate lyricism with a kind of introverted irresponsible childishness. Far from being given to childish tricks and devices, far from being turned immaturely away from the world, Beckett's distillations of the short story are, metaphysically and stylistically, one of the highest points of development so far in the genre. The limits of the lyrical, in both the senses we have been dealing with, is Beckett's theme in 'neither': as a form, this work seems to have reached the final fine line between poetry and story, and its story is, in perhaps Beckett's own most distilled version, exactly about the tension between the inner and the outer, between impenetrable self and unself, between society and the lyrical disposition as figured in distilled language.

Beckett may thematically and figuratively have put an end to it on paper, but the lyrical theory of the short story remains remarkably tenacious and refuses to be confined to its points and periods of origin. Influence has come from all sides. A key volume for any Irish reader under fifty, Augustine Martin's short-story school anthology, *Exploring English I* (1967), was the first introduction for most of us here to O'Connor and other masters of the form. Devised within earshot of *The Lonely Voice*, Martin's introduction to the anthology largely propagated the Poe and O'Connor theories, naturally watered down for young minds.³³ More recently, seeing parallels between his Ireland and Alistair MacLeod's Nova Scotia, John McGahern takes up the O'Connor line again. While the novel is the most social art form, and is closely linked to 'an idea of society, a shared leisure, and a system of manners', McGahern argues that the short story 'does not generally flourish in such a society but comes into its own like song or prayer or superstition in poorer more fragmented communities where individualism and tradition and family and localities and chance or luck are dominant'.³⁴ It is ironic that the individualistic thrust that is the essence of the lyrical in both the senses we have dealt with here has become the homogenising basis of the favoured theory of national short-story tradition. McGahern, realising this, has crucially argued in his essay on *Dubliners* that 'remarkable work in the short story has come continually out of Ireland, but it is likely that its very strength is due to the absence of a strong central tradition'.³⁵

However childish the individualising lyrical disposition may be, some root aspects may be worth holding on to if received theories about the national characteristics and uniformities of the short story are not to stymie continued remarkable work. While O'Connor took the socially reforming function of honest writing seriously, one of his most revealingly levelling anecdotes against himself simultaneously encourages a deliberate elemental return to the essential freedom of the lyrical and suggests a major reason why his own stories are currently not taken as seriously as they might.

³³ Augustine Martin, ed. and intro. *Exploring English I: An Anthology of Short Stories for Intermediate Certificate* (Dublin, 1967), 1-13.

³⁴ John McGahern, Introduction, *Island: Collected Stories*, by Alistair MacLeod (London, 2002), xiii-xiv.

³⁵ 'Dubliners', 63.

O'Connor is at a major Harvard conference on the novel, sitting onstage alongside Anthony West, and an unnamed writer begins to speak about the serious responsibilities of the novelist. O'Connor begins to get hysterical:

It's never happened to me before in public; I was giggling, I couldn't stop myself. And, 'All right,' I said at the end of it, 'if there are any of my students here I'd like them to remember that writing is fun.' That's the reason you do it, because you enjoy it. You don't read it because of the serious moral responsibility to read, and you don't write it because it's a serious moral responsibility. You do it for exactly the same reason that you paint pictures or play with the kids. It's a creative activity.³⁶

Thus did one writer work it out. For himself.

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³⁶ Whittier, 155.