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SHORT
STORY
IN
ENGLISH

WALTER
ALLEN

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in English**

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Foreword

This book was several years in the writing. My views on the American short story were first adumbrated in the Sarah Tryphena Phillips Lecture delivered to the British Academy in 1973 and were developed in the seminars I conducted in my graduate course at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 1974–5. It was there also that I first seriously applied myself to the question of Kipling. I have no doubt that I profited from my discussions with the students who attended. The first version of my survey of the short story in Ireland was a lecture given at a colloquium on Anglo-Irish writing held at York University, Toronto, in the spring of 1974, a later version of which appeared in the literary pages of the *Irish Press*, Dublin.

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Sylvia Townsend Warner: Extracts from 'But At the Stroke of Midnight' from *The Innocent and the Guilty*. Reprinted by permission of the Author's Literary Estate and Chatto & Windus Ltd.

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I

- i The Modern Story: Origins, Background, Affinities
Scott, Dickens, Hardy, Stevenson
- ii Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, James

Everywhere in the world, whenever the short story is discussed, a handful of names crops up, Chekhov and Maupassant always, then Poe and Kipling and Joyce, and probably Katherine Mansfield and Hemingway as well. And this tells us two things. The short story as we think of it today is both an international form and a recent one, essentially a modern form. Poe, the earliest of the writers named, was born in 1809, Maupassant in 1850, Chekhov ten years later. It is against this background that the short story in English in all its manifestations throughout the world must be set.

But merely to make these statements is to be confronted with problems, of which the most obvious is that of definition. What makes a story modern? How does a modern story differ from one of the past? Men have been telling stories for thousands of years; telling stories and listening to them must be as old as language itself. Sometimes, of course, stories are called tales and, as etymology indicates, the tale was an oral form, composed to hold an audience, listeners not readers. Today, the words are interchangeable, and to attempt to make a formal distinction between stories and tales gets us nowhere. The stories or tales early men told one another have not, of course, survived, but we can guess what they were like from those that have come down to us from a much more recent past, from the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, the *Decameron* of Boccaccio and so on. We still read and enjoy these but we do not confuse them with Chekhov's stories or Maupassant's. There seems a fundamental difference between them, one which quite transcends the difference between the spoken word and the written. Chekhov and Maupassant, Kipling and the rest, arouse in us quite other expectations than do Scheherazade and Boccaccio, and this we recognize by prefixing to Chekhov's and Kipling's stories and to those of other writers I have named the word 'modern'.

Such distinctions, of course, cannot be hard and fast ones. It is not difficult to find stories from the past that approximate to modern stories; the Old Testament story of Ruth is an instance.

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And the oral tale is still very much with us, often in as primitive a form as it can ever have been. And I do not mean by this merely that it survives in those parts of the world where conditions are such that oral traditions of story-telling still exist, as in India, tribal Africa, and the Gaelic-speaking west of Ireland. The oral tale is still very much at home everywhere. Indeed, home is the operative word here, for the oral tale may be heard as a matter of course in every family circle, in every pub, wherever people come together in the ordinary traffic of life. We know it principally as the joke. The aim of the joke, any kind of joke, is to astonish us by a revelation of the unexpected or the incongruous or the disconcerting, and if we are astonished enough we show it by laughing.

Very few jokes, written down, would seem much like modern stories. They might very well, though, remind us of many of Boccaccio's tales in skeleton form. This throws light on the relationship of the modern story both to the joke and to tales of earlier times. It is similar to and of a piece with the relationship of the novel, which is about three hundred years old, to the kind of long fiction that preceded it, what we call romance. This is to put it too crudely, for the relationship is complicated by the fact that romance, or the romance, still survives, sometimes as an ingredient in the novel, sometimes in what seems its pure state. An example of the latter is the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, which are very evidently works of fiction but which cannot be called novels. For novels we equate with some degree of realism; we take it for granted that novelists give us more or less plausible representations of men and women as they behave in life. The romance, however, as Northrop Frye puts it, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, does not attempt to create real people and '... that is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks, and why a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in around its fringes'. Here, Frye may very well be thinking not only of writers of medieval romance like Malory but also of later writers usually thought of as novelists, like Hawthorne. One may sum up from the glossary of *Anatomy of Criticism*, which defines the romantic as a 'fictional mode in which the chief characters live in a world of marvels (naive romance) or in which the mode is elegiac or idyllic and hence less subject to social criticism than the mimetic modes'.

The romance, then, is concerned with wonders. Obviously, it is not always easy to distinguish between novels and romances, but, compared with *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, *Wuthering Heights* can be seen as more of a romance than a novel and is better understood in those terms.

Similarly, the short story, before the modern short story came into being, was a manifestation of the romance. Its province was the extraordinary; its aim, if not to astonish, was at least to surprise; its purpose, to entertain. Think of Scheherazade, who entertained the sultan so well, astonished him so successfully that literally she kept her head. Or think of Boccaccio's young ladies and gentlemen beguiling the time while in exile from plague-stricken Florence by telling stories to one another. No doubt the story-teller's wit, his elegance in the presentation of his material, his choice of words, his style generally, were all factors making for the appreciation of his art; but fundamental to everything was the listener's desire to be astonished.

An element of surprise is probably fundamental to any work of literature, but it is not now the first thing we ask for; and we assume that even the element of surprise must be in some sense accounted for and certainly that it will not be merely mechanical, the simple product of situation or of the juxtaposition of incongruities. Thomas Hardy said, primarily about the novel: 'A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling . . . Therein lies the problem – to reconcile the average with that uncommonness which alone makes it natural that a tale or experience would dwell in the memory and induce repetition.' In the modern short story we would expect what Hardy calls the uncommonness of the story to come from the special insight of the author or from discoveries made by the characters in the course of the story, not from the situation alone. Here is an example of what I mean.

In his *Sportsman's Sketches*, published in 1851, Turgenev, who was one of the founders of the modern story, has a story called 'Yermolai and the Miller's Wife'. The title suggests a story of sexual intrigue perhaps not very remote from Boccaccio. However, it is not the intrigue itself that interests Turgenev, who may be taken as the narrator of the story. He is out hunting with Yermolai, a serf who has been 'permitted to live where and how

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he likes' since he has been rejected 'as a man unfit for any work'. They seek somewhere to sleep the night, and a miller lets them have a shed a short distance from the mill. The miller's wife brings them food and the narrator realizes that she is 'neither a country wife nor a city dweller but a house serf. She looked about thirty; her gaunt and pale face still bore traces of a remarkable beauty.' Turgenev, half-asleep, decides that Yermolai and the woman, who is called Arina, are perhaps in love. A little later, the narrator realizes who Arina is, for he has heard of her from her former owner, a man called Zverkov. His wife's maids 'don't just live, but simply have heaven on earth'. She had, however, made it a rule not to keep any maids who married. After ten years Arina had asked permission to marry, which was indignantly refused, and six months later she confessed to being pregnant by her lover Petrushka the flunkey. As Zverkov tells Turgenev:

'Naturally, I immediately ordered her hair to be cropped, to dress her in coarse ticking, and to pack her off to the country! My wife was deprived of an excellent maid, there was no help for it; one cannot, under any circumstances, tolerate irregularity in a household. It's best to lop off a diseased limb at once. . . .'

Turgenev learns that Arina has been married two years, having been bought by the miller. As for Petrushka the flunkey, her lover, we learn his fate from Yermolai. 'Why, he was took for a soldier', he tells Turgenev; sold by his master, that is, into the Army. The story ends:

We were silent for a while.

'She doesn't seem to be in good health. What's the matter with her?' I finally asked Yermolai.

'No, you couldn't call her healthy! . . . Well, I guess we'll have a stand tomorrow. It wouldn't be a bad idea if you were to get some sleep now.'

A flock of wild ducks swept over our heads, whistling, and we heard them settling on the river not far from us. By now it had grown altogether dark and the air was becoming chill; a nightingale was sonorously trilling in a grove. We buried down in the hay and dozed off.

To retell Turgenev's story as I have done is, of course, to mangle it, for every word of it, everything that is not expressly

stated but implied contributes to its total effect, which, like that of a poem, is scarcely capable of paraphrase. But what at the moment interests me is to see how what might have been a simple story of sexual intrigue is changed into or becomes the launching-pad for something quite other. It becomes an image of a woman's suffering, of callousness and hypocrisy, above all, of the evil of slavery. And the revelation of all this is contained almost in a single moment of time or at most in an interval between sleep.

The short story then deals with, dramatizes, a single incident and in doing so utterly transforms it. What we might call the basic anecdote is as it were dissolved in the multitude of implications that is apparent to the reader. These implications seem to me to be the hall-mark of the modern short story and its *sine-qua-non*. Yet, in the end, they cannot exist without the anecdote. This may be of the slightest, as far removed as the poet's

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky.

Nevertheless, it is this sense we have of the short story being rooted in a single incident or perception that principally differentiates it from the novel. Certainly length alone does not, for the length of literary form has much more to do with commercial considerations than with theories of literature or aesthetics. But we recognize a short story as such because we feel that we are reading something that is the fruit of a single moment of time, of a single incident, a single perception.

I quoted above two lines from Wordsworth and now I have used the phrases 'a moment of time' and 'a single perception'. We are in a region where strict definition is scarcely possible, but something like these two concepts seem to have been in James Joyce's mind when in the *Stephen Hero* fragment he talks, through Stephen Dedalus, of the 'epiphany', which in Joyce's usage is the adaptation, near-blasphemous, of a theological expression to secular ends. The theory of epiphany, on which Joyce's work, his short stories *Dubliners* and his novel *Ulysses* alike, seems to have been partly based, is nowhere completely stated, and we know of it only from *Stephen Hero*, an earlier version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* existing now

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only in a tantalizingly truncated form. There is, however, enough of it for us to know that it was a novel infinitely less closely wrought and therefore much more conventional than the *Portrait* as we have it now.

In it, we get this:

... By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable expression of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.

These moments of epiphany are, as theory, akin to Ezra Pound's notion of the image. They can also be matched with similar moments of insight in Wordsworth's poetry, in *The Prelude* particularly. In addition, it may be worth while pointing out that many of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* can be construed as short stories in verse, modern short stories at that. 'We Are Seven' is a good example.

I seem trembling on the verge of saying that the modern short-story writer is a lyric poet in prose; and indeed, the effect on the reader of many modern short stories, those of Chekhov conspicuously, is nearer to that of lyric poetry than to that of the novel or of older stories. But earlier, as a prototype of a short story which is always with us, one basically oral and non-literary, I instanced the joke, the story whose end is to astonish us. And I remember the stories of H. G. Wells, counterparts, except in brevity, of his scientific romances. I remember, too, stories which are strongly anecdotal but are none the less modern short stories. Kipling has many examples of this kind of story. So it seems reasonable to suggest that the modern short story can span the whole gamut from the astonishing – Wells – to that based on the almost mystical notion of the epiphany. In other words, any definition of the short story must be tentative, allowing for many apparent contradictions and some genuine ones.

I have suggested that the relation of the modern story to the older parallels that of the novel to the romance. In other words, we assume in the short story, as in the novel, that probability and realism, truth to psychology and to history, are pre-conditions of its being. In fact, as a form it was a later development in prose

fiction than the novel, and it arrives more or less simultaneously in disparate literatures, and in English unequivocally in the nineteenth century. Many strands have gone to its making, a notable one being the impulse that made for journalism. In the early eighteenth century, we can see the *Spectator* Papers of Addison and Steele on the edge, as it were, of being short stories in the characterizations of Sir Roger de Coverley, Sir Andrew Freeport, and the rest, and we see something like this later in the century in some of Dr Johnson's *Idler* essays, in the account of Ned Druggett the shopkeeper, for instance. Here, the interest in characterization is much more finely focused than it was in the *Microcosmographie* of John Earle a century earlier.

For me, the first modern short story in English is by Walter Scott, whose fiction marks one of the great watersheds of literature. He was at once a writer of romance in the old style and of novels in the new. He adored the magical, the supernatural, the irrational, all that was sanctified by age and custom. But at the same time he was an extraordinarily acute observer of the behaviour of men in society and of men in specific areas of society. In the development of the novel this was of the greatest importance. In English writing George Eliot and Thomas Hardy both come very considerably out of Scott: his Scotland made Hardy's Wessex possible. Outside England, he taught novelists how to dramatize the life of their country in terms of character and institution and stands, therefore, as the great exemplar behind Balzac in France, Manzoni in Italy, Pushkin and Turgenev in Russia, Cooper and Hawthorne in America. It is fitting that the first modern English short story should be his.

It is 'The Two Drovers', which appeared in *Chronicles of the Canongate* in 1827. Not much more than 5,000 words in length, it is the nearest Scott ever came to writing tragedy, which in this instance arises from the clash of national traditions and temperaments. The two drovers are Robin Oig, a Scots Highlander, and Harry Wakefield, an Englishman from Yorkshire. Friends, they drive their herds together from Scotland south across the border. On the trek they have a misunderstanding about where they should pasture their cattle and they are forced, almost by public opinion as represented by the views of their fellow-drovers, to fight. Harry, having knocked Robin down, holds out his hand to

him in friendship. Robin rejects it; it is against his code to fight with his fist, his weapon is the dirk, and having been knocked down, he feels his honour has been besmirched. Next day, he challenges Harry to fight him in the Highland manner and in doing so, stabs and kills him. He surrenders to the police and is tried, sentenced to death, and executed at Carlisle. We are told:

He met his fate with great firmness, and acknowledged the justice of his sentence. But he repelled indignantly the observations of those who accused him of attacking an unarmed man. 'I give a life for the life I took,' he said, 'and what can I do more?'

V. S. Pritchett has written in *The Living Novel* that 'the sense and fair play of Wakefield, who cannot believe that enmity will survive a little amateur boxing, are meaningless to the Highlander. Each is reasonable – but in a different way. The clash when it comes is tragic; again two kinds of virtue are irreconcilable.' The clash of tradition and temperament is given a precise focus in Scott. The basic anecdote is transcended, and at the end we have learned something important about national character which has been dramatized in speech and gesture.

Two years after 'The Two Drovers' appeared, Prosper Mérimée wrote 'Mateo Falcone'. Within two years, a comparable story had been written in another language, and it is extremely unlikely that the Frenchman had not read Scott. 'Mateo Falcone' too is a story about honour in which personal honour mirrors a national conception of honour: Falcone, the Corsican peasant, shoots his ten-year-old son because the boy has betrayed the laws of hospitality and for an official reward has handed over a fugitive from justice to the police. It is a savage and unforgettable story, written with an economy of words which Scott was incapable of.

Despite Scott's example, in England the short story as we now know it was a late flowering compared with the story in the United States, France, and Russia. In the United States in 1842, reviewing Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe offered a definition of the short story that is still valid. He approves 'the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal'.