

## On Defining Short Stories

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COMPARED to the novel, the short story has had remarkably little criticism devoted to it, and what theory exists reveals few definitive statements about its nature. For the last quarter century, critics have neglected generic questions and turned to the consideration of narration or *récit*. They hedge on definitions, origins, major traits, on just about everything having to do with the short story as a genre. I make this observation without censure, for one is doubtless wise to be circumspect with a genre of unequalled antiquity and adaptability. As Gullason, May, and many others have pointed out, it may be an “underrated art” but it remains remarkably hardy,<sup>1</sup> so much so that Mary Doyle Springer and Elizabeth Bowen have attempted to distinguish a “modern” and “artistic” short story of the last one hundred years from a more antiquated, inartistic predecessor.<sup>2</sup> The case is, however, difficult to make. Not only does one remember, with H. E. Bates, that “the stories of Salome, Ruth, Judith, and Susannah are all examples of an art that was already old, civilized, and highly developed some thousands of years before the vogue of *Pamela*,”<sup>3</sup> Clements and Gibaldi have argued convincingly that recent masterpieces continue in an age-old genre.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, without *parti pris* it is difficult to read certain Milesian tales or stories from the *Arabian Nights*, not to mention more recent masterpieces by such writers as Marguerite de Navarre, Chaucer, or Boccaccio, without being struck by the modernity of these creations from long ago. The subject matter may be different, the devices at variance, but no substantive trait or quality distinguishes them from the products of nineteenth- and twentieth-century practitioners. I do not say there is no difference. I argue rather that, similar to archetypes, which have certain key elements that are combined with other traits specific to a given epoch and are thus reconstituted, the short story genre has a central, identifiable set of characteristics which each age and each author deploys in different ways and with different variables. The result is generically recognizable, allowing for parallel and oppositional play, but specific to the author, age, and culture.

Just as claims for the recent origin of the short story are most difficult to defend, so the majority of us would agree that we cannot be decisive about any suggested birthplace or time. It surely finds its source in the earliest days of civilization. We all know that it is a human trait both to ask "Why?" and to tell stories in idle moments. We simply cannot explain why certain individuals choose to write them down, or why certain epochs have more such individuals than others. We only note that it began occurring rather early.

It might help if we could agree on a definition. Unfortunately, every time critics and theoreticians reach a modicum of agreement, some writer apparently takes it as a challenge and invents a contradiction to disrupt our comfortable meeting of minds. Certain poststructuralists have used the lack of really firm definitions, the absence of universally accepted conventions, the difficulty of firmly establishing an undeviating external reality, to justify denying importance to all but the reader. The texts, like other objectively verifiable truths, become mere pretexts of little ultimate importance. Genre, which has no physical existence, since it consists of a shared concept of a collective, thus nonindividualized reality, has fared even worse. A few recent reconsiderations may signal a change,<sup>5</sup> but for the most part, critics continue to view the matter of fictional genres with indifference. As Harry Steinbauer put it some years ago, "[T]here are tasks of greater substance to engage [members of the scholarly community] than the search for the phantom traits of the ideal novella."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is time to suggest that this position may make interesting theory, but it represents an extreme that is too far removed from the actual mechanics of reading literature. When readers are actually reading, they quite properly act as though conventions, language, texts, civilization itself do exist, and they manage rather well to understand. To do so they achieve sufficient agreement to maintain communication within the surrounding contexts of composition and consumption.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. has pointed to what is perhaps the most significant obstacle to defining genre. "Aristotle was wrong to suppose that human productions can be classified in a definitive way like biological species. . . . [A] true class requires a set of distinguishing features which are inclusive within the class and exclusive outside it; it requires a *differentia specifica*. That, according to Aristotle, is the key to definition and to essence. But, in fact, nobody has ever so defined literature or any important genre within it."<sup>7</sup> All of which is very persuasive. Nonetheless, several issues are raised by Hirsch's position. Most important, despite an all too indiscriminate admiration of science and the scientific, which pervades humanistic studies, bio-

logical typology does not benefit from a *differentia specifica*. The distinctive features are distinctive only in their plural congruence, when they function successfully to isolate—more or less and for the most part—a locus. As any good biologist knows, biological typology is rife with problems; every class has its own variation on the duck-billed platypus.

That said, I do suspect aesthetic genres are more problematic than biological species. In the latter case, only the definition is of human invention. The external referent may alter, but that alteration is at worst very slow. In aesthetics, however, both the classification and the objects under study come from the creative hearth of man and are subject to constant, sometimes revolutionary change. Moreover, since creativity, by definition, implies the devising of something new, no aesthetic definition can be anything but retrospective, and it must be revised and updated to accommodate innovations. The distinction between *novel* and *romance* on the basis of the presence of realistic or fantastic material is no longer helpful, for example, and current definitions of the novel need not, indeed should not, take subject matter into account. The hope of contriving a definition of short story which will remain useful until the end of time will be possible only when the short story dies as a genre. Although that has happened with the epic poem, it has not with the short story, and I shall be content to point to common ground. The indistinct, problematic outer edges of that area may be safely left for individual exploration.

Lexicographers are basically collectors. After gathering as many samples of usage as possible, and discarding the deviations, they compose a definition which comes as close to standard usage as possible. If the norm changes, adaptations or completely new formulations must be devised. Just as the reality referred to by linguistic signs is neither *ab ovo* nor *ad vitam aeternam*, so definitions must shift, change, adjust to reflect the reality circumscribed. Definitions are not God-carved and imposed from above. Rather, they reflect communal agreement. It may be regrettable that this accord is subject to change, has exceptions, and is seldom more than approximate, but it is a well understood and accepted fact of linguistics. It should not keep us from reaching that agreement necessary for almost any human and all social activity. Such accord is certainly a *sine qua non* of reading. On remembering Heinrich Wölfflin's magnificent effort, one might draw comfort from the realization that even topological failures may be helpful in understanding art. Though Wölfflin failed in his intention to define all art, he went far toward delineating "classical" and "baroque," the historical cat-

egories that had been largely exhausted by his time and could thus be looked at retrospectively.<sup>8</sup>

No generic definition of science or literature can hope to do more than draw attention to the dominant aspects of the system which will inevitably include elements to be found elsewhere. As Tynjanov explains with particular reference to literature, "Since a system is not an equal interaction of all elements but places a group of elements in the foreground—the 'dominant'—and thus involves the deformation of the remaining elements, a work enters into literature and takes on its own literary function through this dominant. Thus we correlate poems with the verse category, not with the prose category, not on the basis of all their characteristics, but only of some of them."<sup>9</sup>

The problems that cause difficulty in arriving at definitions of human creations should not cause us to join Léon Roudiez in concluding, "[T]he concept of genre is not as useful as it was in the past."<sup>10</sup> Acceptable definitions are even more needed these days, since most, though not all, of the generically controversial works (I think in particular of creations by Godard and Sollers) were *meant* to disrupt categories. For critics to deny the existence of the genre, novel, for example, deprives a Sollers of the opportunity to attack bourgeois society by undermining one of its conceptual categories. Surely, part of the enjoyment of works which fall on the edge of or between well established generic boundaries comes from their problematic nature as genre.

There comes a time when human cleverness, on the one hand, and stubborn ineptitude, on the other, must be reckoned with. It may be impossible to define a genre, but readers do it all the time, and they use their definitions as guides. That such readers are consequently led astray on occasion does not impede their behavior in the slightest. A reader may not know a lesson of the ancients and of modern psychology: that we see only what we are prepared for; we understand only what is within our ken. Nonetheless—however unconsciously—readers look for what they know. History is replete with the disasters caused by those whose expectations did not correspond with their experience and who nonetheless clung to their misconceptions. As just one example we might remember the bizarre readings that several centuries of readers, who did not know the story of Job, accorded to Boccaccio's tenth tale of the tenth day about Griselda.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps such misdeeds are unimportant. Perhaps. I would rather conclude that there may be wisdom in laying groundwork which aids perception and understanding. Not only does it lead to communication, thus to civilization rather than

the jungle, in art it can lead to the enjoyment of great beauty.

The work of defining a genre succeeds when the definition corresponds to general practice and understanding, when it includes the samples generally included, and excludes those normally left out, when its categories do not erroneously focus on elements which cause misapprehensions. No one element will ever serve as a discretionary touchstone. One hopes that the various traits together will provide a means of discrimination. The fact that both insects and snakes are cold-blooded, for example, does not prevent us from using "cold-blooded" in definitions of both. There will be problem cases which present intentional or unintentional difficulties, but until such exceptions become commonplace, they should be appreciated for the significance raised by their very deviations. They should not be allowed to negate existing definitions and certainly not the possibility of arriving at an accord.

If, then, one is justified in pulling short stories from the vast sea of narrations, the following definition might be advanced: a short story is a *short, literary prose fiction*. At first glance such a formulation seems uncontroversial but, at second remove, one realizes that every one of the definition's four key words covers a library of controversy. The usefulness of the formulation depends on what it truly means and on whether it serves to bring the short story into focus, at least retrospectively, while helping us as well to consider the subsets that are created by particular authors, movements, or periods.

The concept of "fiction" has challenged our best minds and elicited volumes of commentary, perhaps justifying a certain wary caution in dealing with it. For the purposes of discrimination, I pay particular attention to its linguistic referent. Though fiction may be propositionally true, it "deals in untrue specificities, untrue facts," as Thomas J. Roberts would have it,<sup>12</sup> and it explicitly or implicitly warns the reader of this state of affairs. Consequently, the primary creation of fiction—be it pattern, plot, or world—cannot be verified externally. The whole point of the writings of scientists, sociologists, and historians is that they can be verified and double-checked; however well-organized and abstract they may be, they are open to the control of objective validation, both in totality and in detail. Of course, current or historical events may be present in fiction without changing its primary thrust of creating an unverifiable complex in a reader's mind. Likewise, the occurrence of a lie or two, for example in Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1781, 1788), does not fiction make, for Rousseau clearly intended his work to present the general, rather than specific, truth of his character. Conversely, Jesus' parable of the prodigal son exists primarily in that focused image created by

the words of the parable. There will, of course, be extremely problematic instances. One famous example, though in the realm of the novel, is the *Lettres de la religieuse portugaise* (1669). "Sont-elles authentiques?" asks Philippe van Tieghem. "Il semble qu'on n'en puisse pas douter" (Are they authentic? It seems that we cannot doubt it).<sup>13</sup> In fact, of course, many scholars have doubted their authenticity. Are they indeed actual love letters from the nun Maria Alcoforado, or do we owe them to the literary skill of someone like Guilleragues? They seem just too well done, their haunting lyricism too unflawed for nonfiction. But, in truth, we do not know. Furthermore, the potential problem of illusion in conflict with reality does not seriously afflict the short story. This genre, most of us would agree, includes factual history only incidentally; it is fiction. While it is calumnious to doubt the virtuous Marguerite de Navarre's insistence on the truth of her stories, their artistry (in line with what I shall suggest further on) has raised them above mere reality. They are short stories.

The term *fiction* does, however, cover a difficulty of considerable magnitude. Most considerations of the short story insist upon the *story*, for the causally and chronologically constructed narration is generally viewed as central. I have argued at some length elsewhere that Balzac, in story and novel, subordinated narration to description, that he was interested in painting the portrait of an age and a civilization, rather than telling the events in the life of a Gobseck or a Père Goriot. Fiction's tendency toward the dominance of image is anything but rare after the early nineteenth century. It appears in an emphasis on what Joseph Frank has called "spatial form," what I have called "image structure," what others call tone, or mood, or focus, or theme (as in Frank O'Connor's "loneliness").<sup>14</sup> Whoever thinks that the events leading up to the moment when the Prussians leave the mad woman to die alone in the snowy woods are the main thrust of Maupassant's "La Folle" (1882) has missed the point and been drawn to the negligible plot rather than to the central focus on man's brutish pride and his resultant inability to communicate. Likewise for "Menuet" (1883), the touching portrait of two delicate remnants of former days, and for dozens of other tales by Maupassant. For these and an increasing number of stories in the twentieth century, plot—whether Todorov's single change in state or Prince's three or more conjoined events<sup>15</sup>—has the importance that it has in Robbe-Grillet's "La Plage" (1962), where three children walk along a beach leaving imprints in the sand which, the reader understands, will shortly be effaced by the timeless sea's tide. Of course, for many short stories, plot dominates. I could cite hundreds

of examples, from the discovery and punishment of the adulterous monks of the thirty-second tale in the *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (1462) to the progressive revelation of the hero's past as he falls from the Empire State Building to become "une méduse rouge sur l'asphalte de la cinquième avenue" (a red medusa on the asphalt on Fifth Avenue) in Boris Vian's "Le Rappel" (1962). *Fiction* may cover stories that are predominantly narrative or description.

Some have wanted to reserve the term *short story* for rather specific subject matter. Murray Sachs feels, for example, that for the "educated" *conte* "has a strong flavor of the unreal or the supernatural. . . . [T]he word *nouvelle* is sometimes confined because of etymology to narratives which have the character of real events (or 'news'), and is felt to be inapplicable to stories of the fantastic or the improbable."<sup>16</sup> Alfred G. Engstrom would disagree with Sachs. For him, "supernatural narrations (fairy tales, legends of demons, saints, gods and the like) and the tales of outright wizardry" are generally to be excluded from the *conte*, thus from the short story.<sup>17</sup> This distinction is, of course, similar to the old separation between the novel and the romance. While I might interject that *nouvelle* seems to be used primarily as a generic term to cover such subcategories as *conte*, tale, anecdote, and so on, and that *conte* maintains a strong association with its oral roots, I think all such discussions miss the point.<sup>18</sup> Ian Reid is right to be disturbed by the distinction, however much he accepts it. As Reid recognizes, "*Exempla* about tediously saintly figures, snippets of legend about marvels and eerie occurrences: such things differ quite patently from those tales that are imaginatively cohesive even when fantastic and elliptical, or from tales that explore a mental and moral dimension by evoking the preternatural, as in Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown' with its symbols of devilry and witchcraft."<sup>19</sup> The key is not whether or not a myth, legend, or mythological story is recounted, it is whether it is done artistically.

Artistry constitutes a given of any definition of aesthetic genres. It need be neither intended nor understood—to take into account Northrop Frye's compelling argument that Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (424?–404? B.C.) could now be appropriately taken, not as history, but as art. Of course, "artistry," as a generic touchstone leaves much to be desired, for one thinks of the poor or failed art that graces certain popular magazines. Still, even such regrettable exemplars show a desire to touch readers aesthetically. One might then include certain stories published in, say, *Sunshine Magazine*, though one would doubtless exclude most tales catalogued in the Stith Thompson index. Few would deny that Perrault's "Le

Petit Poucet" (1697), Flaubert's "La Légende de saint Julien l'Hospitalier" (1877), Anatole France's "Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame" (1892) are excellent short stories. The short story is open to any topic, any material. Whether one admits a particular work—say, one of the legends in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* (1255–56)—to the short story genre is open to discussion, but the deciding factor is usually not the presence or absence of a saint or supernatural events, but rather the artistry in the creation of a reality whose existence depends primarily upon the text in question. It must, in short, be an artistic fiction.

When I earlier suggested that a short story is a "short, *literary* prose fiction," I meant only that the creation must be artistically fashioned, with the apparent intention of making something beautiful. How one determines the existence of such an intention is, of course, debatable, especially in specific instances. For our purposes, however, this is less important than establishing that there must be artistry for the short story to exist. While the problem is not often posed in these terms, short story criticism makes it clear that the story's implicit aesthetic goal is, though perhaps unstated, accepted. Certainly, the particular cast to the creation has been an important consideration for many interested in prescriptive theory. Ludwig Tieck emphasizes the importance of the narrative crux, that moment where things change, as does Ruth J. Kilchenmann, though she makes a bigger point of the plot rising to and falling from that crisis.<sup>20</sup> Others, like Ellery Sedgewick, stress the importance of the ending—"A story is like a horse race. It is the start and finish that count most"<sup>21</sup>—while for Chekhov neither beginning nor end really matters. Brander Matthews attempted to turn Edgar Allan Poe's less than precise comments into a rigid *Ars poetica*, and numerous writers and critics have held up O. Henry's trick endings as a model.<sup>22</sup> Some insist on highly developed character, others on a unique, unilinear plot, others on one device or another. I would rather say simply that the preferred devices and vehicles change through the ages without changing the short story from its primary thrust—whether real or merely perceived—of making an aesthetic unit.

Aesthetic canons change to some degree from individual to individual and to a large degree from age to age and culture to culture. The pre-Renaissance *Novillinos*, for example, were extremely short (one to two pages) and concentrated on the moment of revelation or resolution, on a wise judgment, a noble deed, a clever retort. When Boccaccio expanded the anecdote, exploiting a situation, elaborating on the circumstances leading to the resolution,



the aesthetic value shifts from appreciation of vigorous effects to the skill in revealing the subtleties as they played one against the other. Had Gobineau written his expertly narrated short stories during the eighteenth century, when it was common in short and long fiction to string episodes onto a protagonist's perambulations, they would have been far more successful than they were in the mid-nineteenth century, when intensity and vividness were prized. Still, in all periods, though the values may change, though the concept of artistry may diverge, the effort to make art is easily discernible. Neglecting the specific aesthetic criteria of a specific age for the purposes of conceptualizing the genre as a whole does not, of course, prevent one from concentrating on a particular period and its values or, from another point of view, from doing a history of the genre where changing values and techniques are stressed. As René Wellek pointed out, relating an individual reality to a general value does not necessarily degrade the individual to a mere specimen of a general concept. It may in fact give significance to the individual, by providing a backdrop which adds depth of meaning to the example under consideration.<sup>23</sup>

To say that short stories are "prose" seems at first glance the least contentious claim possible. Of all the assumptions prevalent in anthologies and critical theory, this is surely the most common. Still, all one need do is bring attention to bear on the issue and one remembers fictional, indeed narrational, works of verse. (Verse is simply written language organized primarily by meter, which makes prose that written language where metrical rhythm exists only incidentally.) Do we really wish to exclude *fabliaux*, those marvelous verse-tales of the Middle Ages, from the short story? Of course, in an age that prides itself on its tolerance, it is difficult to approve of any exclusivity. Unlike the color line in a Birmingham bus depot, however, no harm comes from refusing *fabliaux* the status of short story. To the contrary, it does considerable good, for it emphasizes an essential but neglected characteristic. In the original versions (as opposed to prose translations), one understands how important the rhythm is to these medieval creations. Without it, they are much impoverished. The question is not whether the text contains a marked rhythm, for many fine novels and short stories do, but whether that rhythm constitutes a dominant element. As Victor Erlich explains in regard to the Russian Formalists, "[T]he differentia of verse [is] not in the mere presence of an element—in this case, a regular or semi-regular ordering of the sound-pattern—but in its status. In 'practical' language it was argued, in ordinary speech or in scientific discourse, rhythm is a secondary phenomenon—a physiological ex-

pedient or a by-product of syntax; in poetry it is a primary and 'self-valuable' quality."<sup>24</sup> As with the other issues I have discussed, there will be cases where judicious application of the touchstone remains difficult or impossible. I think of Dylan Thomas's "stories" or "fictions" or whatever, whose lush and rhythmical verbal palate "was not easily confined to literary categories and prescribed lengths," as was stated in an anonymous "Note" to *Adventures in the Skin Trade and Other Stories*.<sup>25</sup> Some might even wish to raise the issue of Edwin Arlington Robinson's poetry. For myself, though "Richard Cory" or "Miniver Cheevy" or "Old King Cole" would doubtless add luster of a certain sort to the short story, it would change the cast of the particular luminescence we all recognize. But the matter is open to disagreement. As said before, definitions in aesthetic matters are never definitive; they are guidelines *or* baffles that may at any point be abandoned by either readers or writers.

Which leaves the most difficult touchstone, "short." No one disputes the necessity of brevity to the short story, though there has been considerable discussion about the precise meaning of the trait. German critics retained the word *Novelle* for fictions of intermediate length and coined a new one for the very short: *Kurzgeschichte*. Should one instead follow E. M. Forster and separate short stories from novels at fifty thousand words,<sup>26</sup> it is easy to quibble with that figure, for it would include as short stories such works, generally considered novels, as *L'Immoraliste*, *L'Etranger*, and many others. While, as said before, inclusion or exclusion from a genre does not affect the quality of a work, it may encourage readers to read with inappropriate expectations. Arbitrariness is not in itself wrong. Even in the physical realm, at some point distinctions must be made. Everyone, for example, would agree that red is the color produced by rather long light waves (thirty-three thousand could be fitted into an inch); nonetheless, it is not easy to tell exactly where red becomes orange and orange yellow. The graduations are infinite, though perhaps not as numerous as in literature. Whatever categories be established, they should at least seem reasonable, and Forster's fifty thousand words is simply too long.

Perhaps because of the discomfiture caused by an arbitrary figure, be it eight thousand words or fifty thousand, most critics have felt more at home with Poe's claim that one should be able to read a short story at one sitting. The problem with the distinction is obvious, though William Saroyan is credited with pointing it out: some people can sit for longer periods than others.<sup>27</sup> There is a good deal to be said for Poe's criterion, however. Most importantly, it emphasizes the absolute impossibility of extreme arbitrariness, without denying

the necessity of shortness, however it be defined. Brevity is affected by particular conditions, by individual idiosyncracies, and, as Paul Zumthor has said, by culture.<sup>28</sup> What is long for an American would be doubtless be very short for a Zulu. What seems short on an ocean cruise is impossibly long on a lunch break. As should be evident, however, I am not attempting to impose rigid rules. Excellent short stories of less than one thousand words exist (I think, for example, of Maupassant's "Le Lit" [1882]), as do those of over thirty thousand words (like Gautier's "La Jettatura" [1856]). Rather, I wish to take up the provocative suggestion that brevity imposes particular forms: "[C]'est que la brièveté n'est jamais aléatoire, mais qu'elle constitue un modèle formalisant (Brevity is never aleatory, but rather it constitutes a formalizing model).<sup>29</sup> I would not be quite so quick to categorize the way this formalizing function is actualized, but it seems to me that this insight, in combination with the other generic markers already discussed, goes far in allowing the definition I propose to be discrete.

Edgar Allan Poe's insistence on "one pre-established design" has been roundly condemned as having led to an abuse of formulas and formula writing. Nonetheless, the limitations of Poe's imitators do not impugn the wisdom of Poe's original intuition:

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbrining of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. 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. . . . Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided.<sup>30</sup>

Chekhov's famous dictum—that if one introduces a revolver or a shotgun in the early part of a story, it must go off before the end—similarly stresses the short story's need for economy. Because of its brevity, the short story remains as foreign to loosely motivated detail as it does to amplification. For precisely the same reasons that we become annoyed when even a good lecture goes beyond the allotted time, so readers begin to fidget when a "short" story begins to drag on, when one suspects that the main point is being dissipated or lost. Where many of the most telling effects of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* come from the rediscovery only possible after having

forgotten, readers of short stories have everything present. They may of course be inattentive but writers cannot count on it. Authors of short fiction especially must assume that their readers will pay attention and, most importantly, will remember what they read. If that is true, it would follow that readers will have less patience with repetition, which in one form or another is fundamental to most of the devices used to give form to all literature. I do not wish to suggest that there will be no repetition, only that it must be done with great discretion to avoid setting up the kinds of rhythm that turn prose into poetry, on the one hand, or, on the other, effects that seem overly obvious and thus heavy-handed or pedestrian.

For similar reasons, the short story is usually single- rather than multivalent. Both Dopplegänger and subplot do occur, though in nowhere near the frequency of longer fiction. There is indeed a marked tendency toward unity. Complexity comes more frequently from depth of implication than from obvious repetition or multiplicity. Even where doubling occurs, there is a particular simplicity about it which distinguishes it from the novel. Take for example, Maupassant's "Ce Cochon de Morin" (1882), where the humor depends on watching Morin's charges be dismissed only because his friend is more successful at *cochonnerie*. One's attention is constantly directed to the poetic injustice of it all, and the doubling is kept singular in effect. Maupassant's success with the short story, while his novels never quite measured up, can perhaps be attributed to his inability to handle the large number of strands involved in really fine novels. The manifest failure of *Bel Ami* (1885) comes not from the shallowness of the main character's characterization, it seems to me, but from the lack of total coherence. Each of the chapters makes a fine, occasionally a brilliant, short story, but the multiple effects which in a novel tie the chapters to the whole never quite succeed in glueing the segments of Maupassant's novel together. The work appears to be a sequence of beads strung on a reappearing name. The plurality which serves in the case of the novel to emphasize, nuance, or countervail runs the risk of appearing redundant and distracting, if not disruptive, in the short story.

Equally because of the need for brevity, the short story tends toward the general. Even when detail is rife, readers expect the vocabulary to bear more than its usual significance and are, I suspect, more prone than with the novel to universalize. Not only does every word carry a full weight of meaning, short stories also make frequent use of ellipsis. Readers expect to generalize, to read in depth and between the lines. With due regard for Robbe-Grillet's insistence on neutral creations that permit the reader to invent his own

meaning, “La Plage” would not have anywhere near the power it has if the children were crossing a park to answer their mother’s or nature’s call. Instead, because of the sand and sea, we view the ephemeral children before a timeless—because cyclical—universe.

The epigrammatic *pointe* was long considered desirable, even essential, to the short story. At its worst, it consisted of the “surprise” ending, for example in Maupassant’s “Le Mariage du lieutenant Laré” (1878), where the revelation has no real significance and does not encourage the reader to rethink what he has read. At its best, however, as in Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s “L’Enjeu” (1888) or Anatole France’s “Le Procureur de Judée” (1892), the conclusion throws a startling new light on the preceding fiction and accords profundity to what had seemed more limited. Despite the frequency of stories which draw to a conclusion where exclamation points seem appropriate, not all stories do. Just as Ronsard developed sonnets which manage successfully to turn around a center, rather than lead to an epigram, so many stories end when the portrait, or the tone, or the concept has been completed. As just one of many examples, one might think of Borges’s “La Lotería en Babilonia” (1944), where the conclusion arrives when the potential of the permutations is evident.

For Zumthor, short texts are particularly oriented toward the present. He justifies his position by referring to the particular weight that language takes when the real time of the reading or performance is short. He goes on to consider another trait: “[L]a cohésion d’un texte de quelque longueur se perçoit progressivement, au fur et à mesure de la lecture: un moment survient où les indices en apparaissent, puis s’organisent dans l’imagination du lecteur en système idéal de règles de combinaison, hypothèse interprétative, confirmée ou infirmée par la suite. La cohésion du message bref est d’autre nature, au moins tendanciellement: elle est donnée d’emblée, empiriquement, sensoriellement, comme une certitude globale dont les conséquences éventuelles se déduisent au cours de la brève lecture ou de la brève audition” ([T]he cohesion of a text of some length is perceived progressively as the reading proceeds: a moment comes when the indications of this cohesiveness appear, then are organized in the reader’s imagination as an ideal system of rules of combination, an interpretive hypothesis, confirmed or invalidated by what follows. The cohesion of a brief message is of another nature, at least tendentially: it is given at the beginning, empirically, sensorially, as a global certitude whose eventual consequences are deduced in the course of the brief reading or brief audition).<sup>31</sup> In short, brief works appear to overpower the narration; the sequence, whether chron-

ological or causal, has less impact than the unit of perception or meaning that one grasps as a whole. In a sense, this is often true. The short story, in particular, has a noticeable affinity for the epigrammatic, the formulistic, the epitome, the essential truth or idea or image which rises above time and negates whatever chronological progression the work possesses. Even in stories where change is of the essence, say, for example, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936), one remembers Macomber's apotheosis as a "man" in confrontation with his wife as a failure, rather than the development leading up to the final scene. That, however, is not always the case. In a work like Maupassant's "Le Horla" (1887), it is the crescendo of fear rather than the fear itself which draws us, or, for one last example, in Camus's "La Pierre qui pousse" (1957), we center on d'Arrast as he progressively finds kingdom in exile.

I could continue discussing the ways brevity marks and indeed forms the short story without exhausting the subject. Authors' inventiveness seems unlimited. The point, however, is not an enumeration of the particular procedures and devices which might be listed under brachylogy, but to suggest the importance of that quality which distinguishes a short story from mere prose fiction. I would suggest that brevity constitutes the most significant trait of this particular genre. In large measure, it determines the devices used and the effects achieved. Certainly brevity constitutes the short story's greatest limitation. For a short story to succeed, the author must overcome the restraints of limited length and communicate not a segment, a tattered fragment, but a world.

In suggesting that one might view the short story as an artistically designed short prose fiction, I have been only secondarily interested in providing a definition. It is rather the defense of such a definition which might be helpful. The discussion of the constituent elements of a short story, while falling far short of a touchstone good in all cases and for all time, may help readers have productive rather than destructive expectations when they pick up a representative example. However impressed one might be by those who would avoid the problem of literary genres by denying them, it is indisputable that most readers are firmly conscious of genre and use their preconception to guide their reading. The more adequate that preconception, the more chance there is of an adequate reading which recognizes the true significance of the story, whether it be in line with or in revolt against that particular cluster of traits which I have treated here and which most of us, I suspect, recognize as a short story.

## NOTES

- 1 See Charles E. May, "Introduction: A Survey of Short Story Criticism in America," in his *Short Story Theories* (Athens, Ohio, 1976), pp. 3–12; and Thomas A. Gullason, "The Short Story: An Underrated Art," in May, pp. 13–31.
- 2 Mary Doyle Springer, *Forms of the Modern Novella* (Chicago, 1976), p. 17; Elizabeth Bowen, "The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories," in May, pp. 152–58.
- 3 H. E. Bates, *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey* (Boston, 1972), p. 13.
- 4 See Robert J. Clements and Joseph Gibaldi, *Anatomy of the Novella: The European Tale Collection from Boccaccio and Chaucer to Cervantes* (New York, 1977); see also, e.g., Warren S. Walker, "From Raconteur to Writer: Oral Roots and Printed Leaves of Short Fiction," in *The Teller and the Tale: Aspects of the Short Story*, Proceedings, Comparative Literature Symposium, 23–25 Jan. 1980 (Lubbock, Tex., 1982), p. 14.
- 5 See, e.g., Gérard Genette, "Genres, 'types,' modes," *Poétique*, 32 (1977), 389–421; Jean-Marie Schaeffer, "Du texte au genre," *Poétique*, 53 (1983), 3–18; Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London, 1982).
- 6 Harry Steinhauer, "Towards a Definition of the Novella," *Seminar*, 6 (1970), 174.
- 7 E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago, 1976), pp. 120–21.
- 8 See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, tr. from the 7th ed. (1929) by M. D. Hottinger (New York, n.d.).
- 9 Jurij Tynjanov, "On Literary Evolution" (1927), tr. C. A. Luplow, in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 72–73.
- 10 Léon S. Roudiez, *French Fiction Today: A New Direction* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1972), p. 6.
- 11 See Enrico de'Negri, "The Legendary Style of the *Decameron*," *Romanic Review*, 43 (1952), 166–89. The positive effects of reader focus according to generic understanding has been forcefully made by Dubrow, pp. 1–4, 8–44.
- 12 Thomas J. Roberts, *When Is Something Fiction?* (Carbondale, Ill., 1972), p. 11. See also, René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949), pp. 15–16, 221–22; Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York, 1958), pp. 419–37; and Michel Butor, *Répertoire* (Paris, 1960), pp. 7–8.
- 13 Philippe Van Tieghem, "Les Prosateurs du XVIIe siècle," in *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris, 1958), III, 429.
- 14 See Joseph Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (1963; rpt. Bloomington, Ind., 1968); Allan H. Pasco, "Descriptive Narration in Balzac's *Gobseck*," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 56 (1980), 99–108. For "tone" see Robert Pinget, "Pseudo-Principes d'esthétique," in *Nouveau roman: Hier, aujourd'hui*, ed. Jean Ricardou and Françoise van Rossum-Guyon, (Paris, 1972), II, 311–24. For "mood," see Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 51–52, or Eileen Baldeshwiler, "The Lyric Short Story: The Sketch of a History" (1969), in May, pp. 202–13. For "focus," see Mordecai Marcus, "What is an Initiation Story?" (1960), in May, pp. 189–201. For "theme," see Frank O'Connor [Michael O'Donovan], *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (Cleveland, 1963).
- 15 See Tzvetan Todorov, "La Grammaire du récit," *Langages*, 12 (1968), 96; and Gerald Prince, *A Grammar of Stories* (The Hague, 1973), p. 31.
- 16 Murray Sachs, "Introduction," in *The French Short Story in the Nineteenth Century: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Murray Sachs (New York, 1969), p. 13.
- 17 Alfred G. Engstrom, "The Formal Short Story in France and Its Development Before 1850," *Studies in Philology*, 42 (1945), 631.
- 18 I have by no means exhausted the controversies surrounding "conte" and

“nouvelle.” One other position, which has had considerable mileage, might be mentioned: “Meanwhile [in the first half of the nineteenth century], the word *conte* was assuming a meaning that differentiated it from *nouvelle*, the former accepted as more concentrated, with one major episode, the latter more complex and consisting of several scenes” (Albert J. George, *Short Fiction in France 1800–1850* [Syracuse, N.Y., 1964], p. 234). The example of the *conte de fées* or fairy tale immediately points to the problems with such a distinction, for these tales are often remarkably complex.

19 Ian Reid, *The Short Story*, *The Critical Idiom*, no. 37 (London, 1977), pp. 8–9.

20 Reid, pp. 12–13.

21 Ellery Sedgewick, “The Telling of Tales,” in *Novel and Story: A Book of Modern Readings*, ed. Ellery Sedgewick (Boston, 1939), p. 6; quoted in Bates, p. 17.

22 May, pp. 4–5.

23 See René Wellek, “Literary History,” *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods*, ed. Norman Foerster, et al. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1941), p. 124.

24 Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1969), p. 213.

25 Anonymous editor, *Adventures in the Skin Trade and Other Stories*, by Dylan Thomas (New York, 1956), p. vii.

26 See E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (1927; rpt. New York, 1954), pp. 5–6.

27 Reid, p. 9.

28 See Paul Zumthor, “La Brièveté comme forme,” in *Formation, codification et rayonnement d'un genre médiéval: la nouvelle*, Actes du Colloque International de Montréal, McGill University, 14–16 octobre 1982, ed. Michelangelo Picone, et al. (Montréal, 1983), p. 4.

29 I quote Zumthor—“Brièveté,” p. 3—though, of course the idea that form is content and in their relationship the one is governed by the other is implicit in Aristotle. Nor is the thought that brevity may structure short stories new: see, e.g., Edward D. Sullivan, *Maupassant: The Short Stories* (London, 1962). Zumthor’s contribution resides in his attempt to go beyond the “form equals content” truism and to show *how*, specifically, the quality of being short affects the form at every level. See, also, Zumthor’s *Essai de poétique médiéval* (Paris, 1972), pp. 339–404. I attempt to carry the analysis somewhat further.

30 Edgar Allan Poe, rev. of *Twice-Told Tales*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Graham’s Magazine*, 20 (1842), 298–300; rpt. in May, pp. 47–48.

31 Zumthor, p. 6.