INTRODUCTION

The American short story is experiencing a renaissance. "In the last 15 to 20 years," Gary Fisketjon of Knopf Publishing has observed, "some world-class writers have been working in the short story form."[1] Many major publishers have increased their support of short story collections to the point where young writers are no longer automatically encouraged to write novels instead. Meanwhile, American universities now offer 250 undergraduate and graduate creative writing programs specializing in short story and poetry composition,[2] and university-sponsored literary magazines have more than justified Eugene Current-Garcia's claim that "short-story publication appears to have become one of the missions of American higher education."[3] The graduate writing programs have produced an ever-increasing circle of competent and even gifted authors. Just as important, they have been creating a base of short story teachers and *readers*. During this recent period (1983–8), the sales of the yearly *Best American Short Stories* anthology increased from 26,000 to 52,000; the O. Henry collection, the second best-selling yearly anthology, doubled its annual sales rate in 1988 alone.[4]

These recent developments are particularly resonant to any individual familiar with the history of the short story in America. Although it is difficult to support the canonical claim that the genre is a distinctly American art form, it is far easier to document that the conscious birth of the short story as a literary genre was an American product of the mid- and late-nineteenth century. In various contexts, the short story has been derided or celebrated as a major (and distinctly American) transformation of the traditional forms of literary expression – a veritable City-On-A-Hill of a genre. It has been associated with attempts to 'democratize' literature, lauded and attacked as the genre best suited to a mercantile culture, and infused with an astonishing level of extratextual energy and expectation. As Ruth Suckow wrote in 1927, America was not the land of the short story, but the "land of the definition of the short story" – a statement that argues the extent to which the short story has

lived, and continues to thrive, for a multitude of culturally charged reasons.[5]

The purpose of this work is to describe the birth and the construction of the short story as a literary form, and to describe the development of the social contract that has guided the writing, teaching, and publishing of the short story in America. This book is, in the strictest sense, a genre study, placing emphasis upon the work of three short story writers whose individual visions of the form's potential possessed particular significance for later generations of short story writers, or for their contemporaries. Emphasis is similarly placed upon the institutional developments and critical movements that have defined what, exactly, a short story is meant to do and to say. Predominantly, the protagonist of this work is the short story itself, not its greatest practitioners, nor their greatest performances. I sought to understand the day-to-day work that a literary genre performed, and how a literary genre responds to the day-to-day pragmatic demands of the individuals who choose to compose within its borders: what Poe thought about literature when he looked at his checkbook, and how his checkbook became the short story.

There are two reasons, I believe, that the short story deserves an institutional study. First, no genre could more benefit from a study of its day-to-day functions. From the time of Poe, the short story has been designed as a culturally disposable artifact – a thing to be read once and enjoyed (academic attention to the form has created a second set of short stories, those that are meant to be read closely, and repeatedly – but even those texts, I would claim, are still founded on the same precepts). A recent anthology preface that spoke ambivalently of the "throwaway effect" of the contemporary short story attests to the continuity of that particular axiom.[6] Without that principle, neither Poe's tales of ratiocination, nor O. Henry's surprise endings, nor the modern *New Yorker* story's careful epiphanies would bear any literary power.

Just because the short story may be a disposable product, however, does not mean that it is trash. Our ability to appreciate short stories, rather, is hampered by the alienation of time that is essential to most of our presuppositions about what constitutes great art. We do not think of literature as something that may serve a powerful function in some immediate present, but fail to interest later generations of readers. On the contrary, we use that as our definition of what does not constitute literature. The short story, from the point that Poe's ideas gained widespread acceptance, has been present oriented. As such, it suffers in our esteem – regardless of the number of short stories that are canonized and made "time-

less," in spite of all the novels and poems that have proven forgettable despite their eternal ambitions.

The second reason is more complicated, and more valuable. When we think of the value of a literary genre, we think of its member texts. We do not envision any genre as a construction that produces some extrinsic benefit to the community other than the texts themselves. The short story, however, does immense work. The most striking aspect of the modern workshop system, for instance, is the extent to which it ensures the continued health of the short story despite the relative lack of a direct commercial demand for the product. The workshop system, rather, is an alternate economy, enclosed and complete – a network of graduate programs, conferences, and literary magazines that creates and encompasses writers of short stories, readers of short stories, sites of publication, and an economic and philosophical rationale for the network's own existence. It is easy to lament the development of this network, to speak of standardization and the death of the individual voice; but that lament mistakes the reasons why the short story has been so resilient. The workshop system currently provides a remarkable confluence of writerly authority and middle-class respectability – it allows for thousands of individuals to write fiction that deliberately eschews popular values, and to be renumerated for the activity. It institutionalizes the marginal voice.

If there is not always enormous demand for the short story itself, there is enormous demand for this alternate economy. With its admixture of unresolvable aristocratic and democratic values, this vision of artistic activity resonates strongly within American literary history. It is the same vision of the artist in America that Emerson proferred in "The Poet" with his elaborate economies of symbols and value, and his prophecy that the artist who shunned the marketplace would eventually become landlord of the earth.[7] In fact, this vision of artistic activity has lived at the heart of the short story project since the antebellum era. The proliferation of workshops is merely the latest permutation of the same spirit that infused Poe's famous review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, the success of the slick magazine story in the first half of this century, and the work of the New Critics at mid-century.[8] All these phenomena created institutions that kept the short story indirectly or directly profitable, while preserving a partial foothold in the high culture.

Over the past six generations, what we now call the short story has been written in numerous formal shapes – it is odd, even now, that we describe Donald Barthelme and Raymond Carver (or, more cogently, Donald Barthelme and O. Henry) as practitioners of the same genre, when their endeavors bear so few resemblances to one

another. As Joyce Carol Oates has observed recently, "it isn't even true that short stories are necessarily short."[9] Rather, the real and measurable similarities between Barthelme's and Carver's efforts, and the efforts of hundreds of their peers, are largely institutional: They appear in the same magazines, they appeal to the same readership, they fill the same classrooms, they occupy the same cultural turf. The short story is best understood, perhaps, if we regard it less as an immutable and natural category for literary discourse, and view it more as a societal junction, like Wall Street, Washington, or Academia – a place that offers certain forms of cultural capital in certain amounts, and attracts individuals to the extent that they seek that particular algorithm.

As described earlier, this book is devoted to individual and institutional visions of the short story. If Chapters 1, 3, and 5 describe how individuals responded to communal rules and expectations, Chapters 2 and 4 describe how the community itself transformed those individual responses into the foundations of new consensuses on the genre. As I worked through early drafts, it became clear that this symphonic call-and-response between the community and the individual was becoming a central organizing principle and theme. It also became clear that I was creating an interpretive framework for understanding the short story that was partly developed as the result of scholarly research, and partly produced by a personal search to understand the literary legacy that my peers and I have inherited – an attempt to interpret personal history, and to *public*ize it.

Before I entered a graduate literature program, I attended the Johns Hopkins workshop for a year. I gave up a Wall Street job, my critical aspirations, and even my novel, and joined the short story cottage industry. Everything good that was supposed to happen in a creative writing workshop happened to me, in pleasantly diluted doses: I met charismatic teachers, befriended young fellow writers, drank and danced with them, published modestly, learned (somewhat) to self-edit, and got my degree. And yet, despite the fact that I remember so many individual aspects of the experience with warmth, I also remember that, by the end of the year, the fun had gone out of writing. I had simply been too loaded down by institutional structures – not just the rules of writing, but the rules of the game. When I left for a literature program, I left with a feeling of relief – a feeling, strangely enough, that I was finally going to get to do some really creative writing.

In retrospect, it occurs to me that the manner in which each of us in that workshop chose to respond to the institution provided an independent paradigm for how young adults respond to socializa-

tion. One friend observed that the entire workshop simply "fluffed away" after graduation: She currently lives like Thoreau on the outskirts of a ranch in Idaho. Another friend chose the opposite path: He became master of the rules of short story success, publishing regularly, acquiring an agent (who, like most good agents, dissuaded him from writing short stories), and ambivalently attending two more workshops. I chose a third response: post facto analysis. Because the rules of the game required that a young writer reside within the short story, I decided to find out how the rules were written. I tried to figure out how history put me at that place.[10]

To the extent that this work discusses the institutionalization of the marginal voice, that focus is the direct result of the workshop. As young writers, the short story and the workshop were the places where we were sent to learn discipline and control. By agreeing to enter a creative writing workshop, we implicitly agreed to write, or learn to write, literature that would be socially sanctioned – if for no other reason than that we ourselves had been approved by, and would be funded by, a socially sanctioned institution, the university itself. Further, by entering a community of writers, and by exchanging ideas with them, we tacitly accepted the idea that our writing could be done in groups. In short, we were not loners. We wanted to be writers where people could see us being writers.

There was another side to this sociality, however. There is a widely spread, probably fictitious anecdote about Flannery O'Connor's stay at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop.[11] The essence of the story, which has been told to me several times with slight variations, is that the then-unknown O'Connor sat politely during classtime while her stories were ravaged by her fellow students. When O'Connor submitted her stories in thesis form, however, she had not changed a word. Her thesis advisor thought she had been lazy, and returned the stories to her on the condition that she consider carefully the suggestions offered by her peers, and revise her stories accordingly. O'Connor did, and re-resubmitted her stories a short time later, without altering a word. These same stories eventually earned O'Connor her fame.

This anecdote is powerful because it expresses the tension that many workshop students feel about their responsibilities to the community they have joined. If we became writers in part to reject the more mainstream career paths that had been allotted to us (we mockingly referred to ourselves as the "runaway children," and made jokes that our faces should be on the backs of milk cartons), then the content of the O'Connor story, and its obvious appeal to wish fulfillment, suggests that we made interesting ideological stuff of the workshop itself. We transformed it into a metonym of the

society that we repudiated by going to the workshop. Because we weren't Company Men and Women, the workshop itself became the rule-making structure against which we rebelled, while continuing to participate: the measure of our almost congenital ambivalence.

By contrast, O'Connor's refusal seemed brilliant: the mark of the utter self-confidence of the artist who does not need workshops. The fact that she continued to attend the workshop while refusing to participate only completes the circle of the metaphor. If O'Connor does not become famous, after all, then she is merely a kook: Her right to refuse, rather, is sanctioned by the fame eventually bestowed upon her. And that is what we wanted. We did not seek to withdraw, nor did we seek a complete exaltation of the alienated individual; we wanted an exaltation of the alienated individual that would be socially approved.

If the workshop provided an inspiration for many of the ideas that frame this book, magazine work has provided an inspiration for its methodology. For the last four years, I have worked for a literary magazine, *Boulevard.* Over those years, I read approximately one thousand short stories. At the same time, I studied for my Ph.D. in American literature. Working for a magazine and studying contemporary literary theory at the same time is, I think, a revelatory experience. When you work for a magazine, you see the text in all its phases – you see it move from anonymous manuscript through the first phases of acceptance, you see it appear in print, and see it evaluated by readers, and perhaps you see it canonized. More significantly, you see other texts fail to reach these steps – texts that often (though not always) differ only very slightly from the texts that make it into the loop. In sum, you see – alive and vital – all those forces that deconstructionists call "the margins" envelop and transform that original anonymous manuscript. More important, you participate. The experience forces you to think about issues of evaluation in an immediate, partisan sense. The literary theory of historicism, in particular – which dwells on the extrinsic factors that affect a text – comes alive in the most visceral sense.

The magazine experience divided my sympathies between the story, the writer, and the magazine. It also compelled me toward the understudied places on the loop of canonization, by sheer force of numbers. For *Boulevard,* I read short stories by prominent authors, by moderately successful, professional writers, by ambitious beginners, and by individuals who seem to have missed the boat entirely – ranchers, computer programmers, and housewives completely unaware of the in-language of workshops and little maga-

zines. My book work acted in concert with these labors. I avoided reading the 'great' short stories of great authors, many of whom I had read already anyway. Instead, I pored through Best Of- collections from the last ten years, and earlier periods. I also read through hundreds of short stories that were not remembered and likely never will be, but nevertheless filled the magazine pages of decades past. I wanted to know why *Boulevard*'s office was flooded by manuscripts, and why so many individuals wanted to write short stories; I wanted to know why I was writing them myself. And that meant understanding what rewards the short story was offering, and at what costs. It meant exploring the day-to-day work of a literary genre, and leaving the evaluation of canonical short stories for others.

It only remains to be said that being a "critic" adds a final ideological spin to the complex of sympathies I have already acknowledged. When you cross from a creative writing program to a literature program, you cross a small Rubicon. Anyone even remotely familiar with English department dynamics is also familiar with the uneasy mix of symbiosis and condescension that exists between literary scholars and their counterparts in the creative writing department (Marjorie Perloff, in a canny phrase, has called them the "A Team" and the "B Team"). It is the latest permutation of an aged tradition of animosity and mutual dependence between writers and critics. As Wallace Stegner has observed, critics often condescend to the intellectual capacities and lack of erudition of the authors with whom they share office space. Author-teachers, inversely, speak of their sense that analysis kills creativity; in blunter moments, they simply call critics frustrated writers.[12] In between these poles there exists much room for mutual respect; there exists more room for ambivalence. As a Ph.D. student and workshop veteran, and as a dissertation writer and writer of short stories, I had a clear stake in finding that interstice of mutual respect.

As suggested earlier, the modern short story is a cultural item that might benefit from a critical intervention – in particular, an intervention conducted by way of a historicist approach. For better or worse, the short story has always been a genre in which the institutional structures have been especially visible – the magazine editors, textbooks, workshops, et al. I have read convincing historicist interpretations of the growth of the short story circa 1920 that attacked the genre simply because a historicist interpretation was possible – because its growth could be linked to the growth of the magazine publishing industry, for instance.[13] The historicist viewpoint, however, harms a text only if the tension we feel between respecting community and respecting individualism is simplified

and codified, rather than being utilized as a focal point from which to enrich our comprehension of what it means to be free. If we simply assume that the best literature is written by the most alienated individuals, then a critic can only be a publicist – and a genre such as the short story must inevitably suffer in our esteem, because of the extent to which it has been a communal production.

It is my belief that the historicist viewpoint tells the story of the genre in the most sympathetic manner possible. To state that the workshop system propounds standardized and academic values, for instance, is to utter the obvious. To make that statement as a criticism, however, is to overlook the enormous benefits that the workshop system provides; it also means ignoring the rather plain fact that participation in a workshop is entirely voluntary. Similarly, when Andre Dubus says (pre-*glasnost*) that "publishing in the *New Yorker* is like publishing in the Soviet Union," he attests to the fact that certain magazines are powerful enough to require even established short story writers to submit to severe editing.[14] He does not, however, say why it is important to publish in the *New Yorker* – or who granted the *New Yorker* the same powers of censorship as a totalitarian state. In sum, we have no right to speak of institutions that we have granted enormous power in the same terms that we would describe repressive institutions with which we have signed no compact. By the same lights, we have no right to assume that the historicist viewpoint is hostile to the individual artist simply because it recognizes the power of such voluntarily constructed regimes. Rather, it is ideally poised to explain how such regimes evolved.

Similarly, the historicist approach is ideally poised to unearth the short story from cultural expectations that have become hard facts. In preparing this work, I was consistently struck by the extent to which the rhetorical patterns and systems of value that evolved in the nineteenth century to discuss and judge the short story have remained predominant, with slight variations, throughout the twentieth – and the extent to which this continuity is not recognized in contemporary discussions. This circumstance is most evident in the treatment of the short story as an apprentice genre. Since the nineteenth century, the short story has been simultaneously lauded and denigrated by critics and authors invoking a pair of contradictory and yet complementary assumptions: first, that the short story was a practice field best suited for beginning authors, or authors whose ability to compose a sophisticated narrative was otherwise impaired; second, that the short story required greater discipline and skill than longer forms. Although it may be possible for individual short stories to exhibit the signs of great

authorial discipline or immature simplicity, of course, it is not possible for the entire genre to represent both sides of the formulas: The length of the short story itself simply does not determine whether the individual short story is harder or easier to write than a longer fiction. What is noteworthy, however, is that both assumptions about the short story converge in the classroom, by providing powerful justifications for the use of the short story in either creative writing workshops or in formalist-oriented literature courses.

This circumstance might be less relevant, if one of those aforementioned rhetorical patterns did not persistently dwell on describing the short story as a 'brash, new form,' or as a form that was continually undergoing renewal. But the fact is, the short story does have a tradition. When an anthology such as Peregrine Smith's *Sudden Fiction* (1986) celebrates itself as the declaration of an "explosive new literary form" – the short-short story – it is impossible for the student of the short story's development to forget that critics and editors fifty years ago were equally excited about a spin-off of the short story that they too called the "short-short story."[15] For that matter, it is impossible to ignore the degree to which *Sudden Fiction*'s claim to have founded a newer, quicker art form resembles claims about the short story itself proferred by Poe in his famous review of Hawthorne, by Brander Matthews in his influential "Philosophy of the Short Story" (1885),[16] by the authors of short story textbooks throughout the 1920s, and by every rising generation of short story writers. The packaging of the short story to the American public and to its young practitioners has been entirely contingent upon a voluntary pan-cultural amnesia – an amnesia that allows short story writers to repeat the fascinations of past generations while telling themselves that they are breaking barriers. This book has been written in rebellion against that voluntary amnesia, and as a reminder that the short story has a substantial heritage.

1

POE'S MAGAZINE

> Naming is how the world enlarges itself. We might try the same with the thing at hand, calling it *poe*, for instance. "Me, I write poes," one could say.
>
> Russell Banks, "Toward a New Form," *Sudden Fiction*, ed. Shapard and Thomas (1986) 245.

Any history of the development of the short story in America must begin with Edgar Allan Poe's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842. This is not because Poe necessarily invented the short story; but rather, because later generations of short story writers, editors, and students invented Poe as the founder of the genre. From perhaps 1885 to 1950, Poe's words were "universally quoted" and imitated with what H. S. Canby once called a "servility which would have amazed that sturdy fighter."[1] His review, in turn, was retrospectively canonized as the birthdate of the short story in America. And although this literary-historical reconstruction spent itself by mid-century, it was nevertheless so powerful that Poe's words remain easily the most pervasive in the history of the genre. He was, and continues to be, both the patron saint and the neighborhood bully of the American short story.

As Canby suggests, Poe's words have been so persuasive to later generations of short story writers that his case represents a rather extraordinary example of literary influence. It is tempting to say that later generations used Poe, or constructed a version of his literary philosophy that was convenient to their purposes. But the most intriguing fact about Poe's presence is the degree to which his words have not been distorted, but taken with a dead seriousness that has had the effect of distortion. Ruth Suckow spoke in 1927 of "poor hounded Poe," who would have found "even his monstrous craving for power . . . daunted by the spectacle of the awful success of his own struggle." More recently, Charles E. May has written that the development of the short story in this country was profoundly affected by the fact that Brander Matthews, in his "Philosophy of the Short Story" (1885), simply took seriously Poe's somewhat