

Introduction

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In or around 1923, we thought we knew what the short story was. Or, rather, Edward J. O'Brien did, and as editor of the influential *Best American Short Stories* anthology since 1915 his words carried considerable weight in the newly professionalizing field of literary publishing. Taking stock of a genre that had evolved along with the expanding print culture of the nineteenth century, O'Brien was concerned that even as luminous examples of its literary artistry had found fertile ground in America, the modern, industrial conditions that birthed the form had left an indelible mark upon it that impeded its development and marred it in the eyes of readers. For O'Brien, a true "short story" was a rare and precious beast, to be nurtured and distinguished from a mass of American short fiction that was disqualified wholly from the sanctified realm of "art," either because of its unruly form or because of its deployment of hackneyed tropes directed solely to the demands of the marketplace. His definition enacted a tendency present in short story criticism since Edgar Allan Poe first started to describe an emergent commercial style, upon which he relied to pay the bills, which was to characterize the form negatively, by what it was not: the novel, poetry, the folk tale, and so on. So much "fiction that is merely short" was an abomination for O'Brien; it was especially prone, relative to other genres, to the charge of committing nothing less than literary "heresy." In *The Advance of the American Short Story* (1923; revised 1931), O'Brien wrote that "almost every American short story is the product of one or more of four heresies, the heresy of types, the heresy of local color, the heresy of 'plot,' and the heresy of the surprise ending" (1931, 6).

These "four heresies" were not always present in equal measure, but were described by O'Brien as being a) "passion for drawing characters . . . immediately recognizable to every American reader" (to us now, perhaps, a literary heresy of instantaneous relatability); b) "a desire of satisfying . . . liking for what is quaint" (a containable and acceptable mode of

difference); c) “a respect for . . . scheming” and the “codification by solemn lawgivers of certain elements in the somewhat meretricious detective stories of Poe”; and d) the surprise ending that “appears to satisfy the craving for life in a dead atmosphere” (7–9). O’Brien’s “four heresies” remain useful to us now because they articulate many of the stylistic tropes that are often still listed as requirements of the genre by those seeking to teach, institutionalize, or market it. Moreover, they demonstrate that *United States-based* short story criticism (specified to differentiate it from the more vociferous support for the form common in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and elsewhere), even up to the age of a more established Short Story Theory in the 1970s and 1980s, frequently took a somewhat contemptuous tone with its ward.

It is in this dialogical space where taxonomic necessity (a short story must have certain features to be a “short story”) meets contempt for the modern market forces that have shaped the majority of its expressions, producing an American criticism of the genre that has commonly placed its flag affectively. The result is often a confused and unstable critical stance, supporting something it finds a little hard to truly believe in. Indeed, the same might be said of readers, who going by the significantly lower sales figures for short story collections, do not know themselves quite what to think about it. Indeed, it is notable that readers have not derived the same pleasure from the form as from other more prominent genres of cultural expression, such as the novel. How often, for example, do we encounter individuals who neither read, or who actively do not like, the short story? In sum, for all the short story’s manifest brilliance, in the United States it is a genre with a charisma problem. For all the attention given the form by institutions such as the creative writing program, the undergraduate classroom, the literary prize market, and so on, it holds no position equal in esteem to the novel. Indeed, it seems that the institutions that have built up around the short story operate as a life-support machine necessary to its continued existence. Yet these very same institutions also subject the genre to a popular mistrust – the charge that it is somehow enfeebled or rarefied, a hothouse flower of literary forms. This is, of course, in spite of a commonly held truism – the reason indeed that the volume you are reading even exists – that positions Americans as especially skilled practitioners in the genre of the short story over an extended swathe of historical time.

Coming back to O’Brien (who is arguably the most prominent booster for the short story that America has had in the modern age), there is much to be said about the hissing vitriol in his use of the term *heresy* that

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connects the question of form with the political and religious history of America. Our contemporary moment has seen renewed interest in “form” itself as the carriage of “the social” – that is, as material that dissolves what Caroline Levine has called the “traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context.” In opposition to the context-heavy focus of late-twentieth-century New Historicism, formalist analysis “has, once again, turn[ed] out to be as valuable to understanding sociopolitical institutions as it is to reading literature” (Levine 2015, 2). In this context it is worth considering what the affective stance of distrust critics have often taken to the short story reveals about the social, political, and religious conditions that have impacted criticism, thought, and culture over the *longue durée* of the American experience. Michael Collins has written in *The Drama of the American Short Story, 1800–1865* that the social position of the short story, as an expression of the needs of the community over and above the bourgeois individual, imbues the genre with a gestural mode of theatricality that brings it into the orbit of theater itself. It is self-conscious *performativity* – a word that contains both the senses of form and context – that, if anything, makes the short story distinct. To put this another way is to say that the short story, rather than being heretically embodied is, as a genre, self-consciously *formal* in its concerns. This is not to imply it is haughty or prim. Far from it. It is more that the short story is outwardly *about* its own form as much as it is its content. Or that it cannot and will not distinguish between these things as remotely separate, and therefore invites a form of close reading that is socially engaged and textually attentive simultaneously.

As Douglas Tallack (1993) has observed, one of the earliest recorded uses of the term “short story” in an American context was in the posthumously published writings of John Winthrop, the notorious Puritan governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony. In the second edition of one of the accounts of his tenure, *A Short Story of the Rise, Reign, and Ruine of the Antinomians, Familists and Libertines, that Infected the Churches of New England* (1692; second edition), “Short Story” was added to the title so as to mobilize a sense of shortness as a trope through which to speak of something that he hoped would be a short-lived, unstable, abortive heresy: the Antinomian, or Free Grace Controversy of the 1630s. At a key moment in Winthrop’s account of the famous trial, evidence is presented that Anne Hutchinson (the main defendant accused of preaching and following a Covenant of Grace and not a Covenant of Works) and Mary Dyer (soon to convert to Quakerism in England and later to be hanged for heresy) covered up the stillbirth of a child whose form Winthrop suggested

was evidence of the influence of the Devil in Anne Hutchinson's work as a midwife to the communities of Boston and Roxbury. Winthrop writes:

AT *Boston* in *New-England*, upon the 17th day of *Octob.* 1637. the wife of one *William Dyer*, sometimes a Citizen and Millener of *London*, a very proper and comely young Woman, was delivered of a large Woman Child, it was stillborn, about two Months before her time, the Child having life a few hours before the delivery, but so Monstrous and Mis-shapen, as the like hath scarce been heard of: it had no Head, but a Face, which stood so low upon the Breast, as the Ears (which were like an Apes) grew upon the Shoulders . . . [I]t had upon each Foot Three Claws, with Talons like a young Fowl. Upon the Back, above the Belly, it had two great Holes, like Mouths, and in each of them stuck out a piece of Flesh. It had no Forehead, but in the place thereof, above the Eyes, Four Horns, whereof two were above an Inch long, hard and sharp, the other two were somewhat shorter. (Winthrop 1692, 46)

For Winthrop what was devilish, or heretical, was that the child possessed a form that rendered it unable to sustain itself independently. Moreover, following a description of this “monstrous and misshapen,” stunted body, Winthrop turned quickly to the charge of conspiracy, described as a similarly monstrous form of sociality that defended and protected the child and its mother from the wider community's charges of innate evil (46–47). A “natural order” – synonymous here with the presumably rightful and just forms of the Puritan Elders – would have done no such thing.

Winthrop's principal contention was that because “that very day Mistriss *Hutchison* [sic] was cast out of the Church for her Monstrous Errours, and Notorious Falsehood” (47) occurred close to the day of the “monstrous” birth of a child, the two events were inherently connected. Moreover, the form of the child and its stillbirth were equated with the “shortness” of the life of the corrupting heresy of Familism or Antinomianism (its status as a “short story” in the broader life of the Puritan community) and serves as a lesson in the temporariness and artificiality of one form (the form of evil) against the proper and precise form of the Boston Church's teaching and its ecclesiastical hierarchy of Elders. For Winthrop, forms born under the shadow of death and requiring excessive care in their support were evidence of heresy. The “monstrous” was, for Winthrop and other American Puritans, manifest in a lack of independence and also a proximity to a death that, like the Antinomian Controversy, threatened the longevity and ahistorical permanence of the exceptionalist American Puritan project as they saw it. In this way, he helped to instantiate a sense that brevity was, of itself, heresy, much as O'Brien 300 years later would so characterize the short story, even if the latter's

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cleaving to the exceptional (at least in the short stories O'Brien's publishing ventures dug out from the rough) carried a note of Messianic rarity and grace. The child described by Winthrop is notable for having both too much form (an excess that points to the influence of a second party, the Devil) and too little (a lack of artistic insight or control), and points to the "short story" in American literature as both unnatural or artificial, and short-lived and fleeting.

In the twentieth century another major critic of short form, Walter Benjamin, also made a conflation between the genre's formal brevity and deathliness, albeit with a radically different interpretation of the meaning and value of proximity to an endpoint. Taking "the story" and its experientiality as the natural counterpoint to the novel's presentation of mere information, Benjamin found beauty and political potential in a formal embrace of endings, valorizing "Storytellers" and the stories they told precisely because they lived so much more assuredly in the presence of death. Crucially, in so doing, Benjamin reasoned, Storytellers carried with them an ethos of care for the precarious living world and the socialities required for its preservation. "It has been observable for a number of centuries," Benjamin writes in "The Storyteller," "how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness" – a tendency contemporaneous with the rise of the novel and its focus on "information" over a sense of the "epic." He continues: "[I]n its last stages this process is accelerated . . . [a]nd in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying" (1999, 93).

For Benjamin, rather, "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back" (94). What distinguished "the story" from the novel was precisely that in the conscious presence of death or of endings it invited the social in a way that was politically expedient for the project of the Left, while the bourgeois novelist (and the novel itself) existed in a state of comparative isolation. This was independence, surely, but so too was it a naivete or the lack of a sense of the epic pull of Marxian history toward the collective. Taking "what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others," the Storyteller "makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (87). The counterintuitive but compelling logic of Benjamin's reading is that it is because of brevity, not in spite of it, that the "short story" invites

the “epic,” defined as a sense of the inevitability of death shared with all living things, which therefore extends an invitation to communal visions of care, work, and collective support. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the short story is so often seen as continuous with the work of the artisan. To express it in Benjamin’s own words, “storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone . . . in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work” (107). If the significant fact of the rise of the short story in the creative writing workshop since World War II is taken to mean anything, it is that the short story is a job of work – of form – and that care in its craft is a hard labor, requiring the support of both institutions and collectives of individuals to manifest. Even if the form of the short story seems self-contained, it does not point back formally to the individual, but draws its meaning from the collective.

Over the years, various reparative moves have been made in short story criticism to remedy what has been seen historically as the inherent vice of the genre. Critical contempt for the very precarity of the short story works to dramatize a cultural fear of a terminus point to the American political project. Additionally, the very fact of the work of care required to sustain the form in the world of the marketplace has been challenged repeatedly on the grounds that there is something entirely too artisanal or lower middle class about the efforts taken in its name. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, as particularly evident in the work of influential theorists such as Charles May, Frank O’Connor, and Susan Lohafer, Short Story Theory sought to suture the romantic lyric effects of the surprise ending or reversal to local color’s elevation of the particular and quaint, so the short story might be made to serve a project of Cold War nation-building. A tendency that had long been noted for the American short story to be both realist *and* fantastical at once was seen as evidence *for*, and not *against*, claims to its independence of spirit. Short Story Theory attempted to shore up the formal features of the genre that O’Brien and others so often decried, by resolving it into evidence of a unified, discreet, American *volk* consciousness. As Michael Collins has written elsewhere, the reversals, epiphanies, and voltas common in expressions of the short story in America were taken to be manifestations in the political unconscious of the residual force of the revolutionary ruptures that made *American* experience (with all its cosmopolitan and transnational pluralities) into *US* experience (Collins 2018). In Short Story Theory’s account of the form there were, of course, innumerable exclusions. However, when placed in juxtaposition to the totalitarian aspirations toward uniformity that were claimed

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as the province of Soviet Communist literary form in its guise of socialist realism, the weirdness and quaintness of the American short story was to be interpreted as a trait of especial political virtue: a sort of capitalist moxie. In this moment the very *un*-Americanness of the short story's form as it has been described in the past was reconfigured and reworked so it might be assimilated for the US literary project.

This volume is an attempt to ask what happens if, rather than taking O'Brien's line and denouncing the form in the main as so much heresy (with the aim of digging out just one rich, canonical jewel among so many), we say instead that this precarity, this multiplicity, this proneness to a certain indistinction – this queerness of form – is a feature not a bug. It helps reveal the story's context and purpose at a more local, social level (what it does, and not what it "is" in some rigid, ontological sense), and yet also lets it speak to the epic sensibility as Benjamin described it – a knowledge and embrace of the forms of care that emerge in the conscious presence of death.

That the short story evokes through its performative unification of form and content an ethos of care and sociality marks it as a genre perhaps especially useful to us in accounting for the conditions of early twenty-first-century life, in which the combined forces of residual nationalist and global political forms (embodied in the haggard persistence of neoliberal capital in the face of required change), ecological crisis (and the urgent awareness of the human-wrought destruction it triggers), the so-called crisis of the humanities, and recent phases of pandemic illness and mortality force us into renewed awareness both of death and of the need for a wider ethos of care and compassion. If the principal political project of our time is to unite redistributive economics and the vision of postcapitalist futurities to an ecological sensibility that preserves life on Earth by means of attention to care, then it follows that critical focus on the form of the short story – whose special pedigree lies in the fact of its precarity and its formal awareness of death – should be a principal project of our literary criticism. In doing this, we hope to respond to what the contemporary philosopher and literary critic Martin Hägglund has noted in his attempt to unite political progressivism with the demands of the climate crisis: "[N]othing can be at stake in life – that no purpose can matter – without running the risk of death. Life can only matter in light of death" (2019, 181). It is in "the light of death" that the form of the American short story helps to illuminate our way forward and makes its claim upon our focused attention.

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At the heart of Henry James's preface to the New York edition of *The Ambassadors* (1903) – a work James considered his best, proof that “the Novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms” (James 1984, 1321) – lies an arresting encounter with the short story. “[P]lanted or ‘sunk,’ stiffly and saliently, in the center of the current” of his novel, “almost perhaps to the obstruction of traffic,” lies an “independent particle,” based on an anecdote that James is told by word of mouth (1304). This authentic “story” involves the scene in a Paris garden in which the novel's hero, Lambert Strether, offers advice to a younger acquaintance: “Live all you can,” says the older to the younger man, “it's a mistake not to.” Like Walter Benjamin's idea of the storyteller offering counsel and embodying communal care in light of the presence of death, the moral of Strether's story is to live as fully and freely as possible because time is running out. It is tempting to view James's situation-based “story” as the germ that simply dissolves into the greater form of the novel, yet James returns the role of the storyteller later in his preface, expanding on its possibilities:

There is always, of course, for the story-teller, the irresistible determinant and the incalculable advantage of his interest in the story *as such*; it is ever, obviously, overwhelmingly, the prime and precious thing (as other than this I have never been able to see it); as to which what makes for it, with whatever headlong energy, may be said to pale before the energy with which it simply makes for itself. It rejoices, none the less, at its best, to seem to offer itself in a light, to seem to know, and with the very last knowledge, what it's about – liable as it yet is at moments to be caught by us with its tongue in its cheek and absolutely no warrant but its splendid impudence. Let us grant then that the impudence is always there – there, so to speak, for grace and effect and *allure*; there, above all, because the Story is just the spoiled child of art, and because, as we are always disappointed when the pampered don't “play up,” we like it, to that extent, to look all its character. (1310–11)

Rather than a self-contained genre, the story is described by James as an energy, wild and extreme, an unorthodox and errant force that inhabits his novel as a self-consciousness of form itself, which can easily become ironic and impudent in its decadent effect. Like the monstrous child that John Winthrop describes as embodying both brevity and the heresy of independence, James's “spoiled child of art” – the short story – has too much form (James earlier describes it as having a “concrete” existence that leaves one to decide “where to put one's hand on it”), but then, like a child, it is also

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significantly *unformed* and thus in need of discipline, care, and education. As we have seen – and will see again and again in this volume – the short story’s emphasis on craft, its consciousness of form, lends itself to meta-fiction, of which James was of course the master. Hence James’s best-known (and very long) short story, “The Turn of the Screw” (1898), features another “spoiled” child who is thrown out of school, and who generates narrative care and interest (and hence motivates the story itself) through a combination of his diminutive size and his errant quality – is he abused, possessed, haunted, perverse, or “queer”? If the story ends when our narrator catches and holds the child at the point of his death, then we might be forgiven in reading it as James’s own grappling with a literary form – the short story – that refused to behave within the constraints of scale. The short story might be small but it always acted big; it always played up.

The chapters in this volume aim to educate the reader by bringing care and discipline to a literary form whose errancy and precarious position in literary history lies in its contradictory capacity to be both highly conventional and overdetermined, on the one hand, and, on the other, to be so protean, mobile, and experimental as to seem virtually untheorizable.

In response to this dynamic, the book is divided into four parts. Part I explores across history how the various contexts in which the short story is encountered (by readers and by writers) have shaped its form and determined its content. Chapter 1, by Oliver Scheiding, disrupts the conventional wisdom running through short story criticism: that the short story has a discrete origin point, say in the work of Washington Irving or Edgar Allan Poe, and is hence implicated in an exceptionalist narrative about US culture and society in the nineteenth century. Instead, Scheiding traces the emergence of the short story by analyzing a network of related texts, congregating in the eighteenth century, that grappled with a sense of wonder in the face of supernatural events and other forms of sensational, abnormal, and marginalized experience associated with various “New World” encounters. Readers will discover from this chapter the sources of the short story’s powers of movement – here between local and metropolitan contexts, and between fictional, nonfictional, and religious genres – and its capacity to embody transgressive experiences. In Chapter 2, Jared Gardner continues to trace the emergence of the short story in a precarious transatlantic print market, and announces a thematic that continues through the volume: the close connection between the short story and educational institutions of various kinds. For Gardner, short narrative is less mobile than embedded within and distributed throughout

an emergent magazine culture in which lines remain blurred between short tales and other genres. As a form primed to grab readerly attention, and hypersensitive to its commercial environment, the short story came to embody new forms of pleasure as a fad in the burgeoning late-nineteenth-century magazine market dominated – as Brad Evans explores in Chapter 3 – by women readers and, increasingly, by women writers. Again employing a networked understanding of literary culture, in which popular short stories move among the advertisements and illustrations of their media environment, Evans poses an important question: How do we understand the form of the short story in relation to the whimsical pleasures, delightful excesses, and infinite variety of consumer culture? If Evans uncovers an alternative canon of short stories at the end of the nineteenth century, then Alexander Manshel investigates the dwindling of the short story canon in the twentieth century in Chapter 4, during a time when various collections, anthologies, awards, and syllabi sought to save the short story from the ephemerality and disposability that Evans identifies. As a protean genre, the short story is easily associated with the pluralistic diversity of American society. But when we look at the institutions that confer prestige on the short story, we discover a surprising lack of diversity in the genre, a homogeneity (at least in comparison with the novel) impacting both aesthetic style and authorial identity. Loren Glass continues this line of thinking in Chapter 5 by exploring in greater detail the close relationship between short story production and the creative writing classroom in the post-1945 period. Even if the short story has enjoyed a recent resurgence among minority and international writers, Glass uncovers how the workshop dynamic normalizes the style of the short story and its themes, which reflect the precarious economic situations of the college-educated creative class. The sixth and final chapter of this first section, by Simone Murray, explores how short fiction born digitally on the Internet in the twenty-first century generates new literary forms, even as it returns to the media mobility and the capacity to capture strange experience that has defined encounters with short fiction since at least the eighteenth century.

If the novel has tended to dominate the literary history of prose fiction as the principal genre of modernity, then Part II of this Companion contends that the short story requires a pluralistic, smaller-scale concept of literary “Histories” to bring it into view. Cody Marrs’s Chapter 7 argues that the short story’s modernity can be found in its representation of the violence, dehumanization, and collapsed ideals of modern warfare. The short story’s attunement to shock and traumatic experience make it a form primed to