Introduction

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In establishing the credentials of the short story, especially as a modern written form significantly boosted by magazine culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is often felt necessary to make comparisons between the novel and the short story, comparisons that have tended to put the short story in the shade of the novel, a form assumed to be more technically sophisticated. The comparison can work in the other direction, however, to highlight the distinctive nature of shorter forms of fiction.

One of the evident problems with academic criticism of the novel in recent decades has been the overemphasis on topical or thematic interest at the expense of style or technique. The overemphasis is understandable, given the particular phase of intellectual history: critics have sought to eradicate the shortcomings inherent in successive critical movements – such as the New Criticism and structuralism – movements with a formalist focus that encouraged the neglect of contextual and historical questions. Successive critical approaches gaining purchase from the 1980s – Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, ecocriticism – have served to swing the pendulum back towards questions of content, so that the contexts that generated topical points of foci for the novel necessarily became central to the key debates. This does not necessarily signify a neglect of formal and stylistic matters; but there has been a felt need for critics of the novel to still the swing of the pendulum, and to address questions of form and style within a properly mapped historical and contextual setting.

Where the short story is concerned, this apparent tension between attention to form and attention to content/context presents a rather different problem. This volume tries to excavate the 'pre-history' of the modern short story in its early chapters; even so, it must be acknowledged that, as a modern printed form, the short story is a relatively new phenomenon (compared with the longer history of the novel), which makes the specific nature of its different (and compressed) historical phases harder to trace. This problem

is compounded by the relative dearth of critical interest in the short story, and by the clear emphasis in the extant criticism on formal attributes. This has helped create the impression that there is something 'timeless' about short fiction, but also something formulaic in its recurring stylistic features. The task for the short story critic, then, to pursue the metaphor of the pendulum, is to cause it to swing in the opposite direction from the swing now discernible in novel criticism. The prior critical emphasis on form signals the fact that a genuine History of short fiction remains to be written. This identifies the gap that this volume helps to fill.

This volume takes its place alongside companion Cambridge Histories of the English novel and English poetry. Like those volumes, it serves to interrogate the 'English' literary culture it also attempts to define. To begin with, the important influence of European writing is registered in several of the essays. There is also a 'four nations' approach to the thorny problem of nationalism, with separate chapters devoted to the short story in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. These discussions demonstrate the ways in which different national traditions permeate 'English' literary culture and also signpost the road to transnationalism. The impact of colonial experience on short fiction is addressed, and the effects of the end of Empire treated at length in chapters that examine the development of postcolonial story traditions around the world, as well as in Britain.

The chapters are grouped according to the following principles: Chapters 1–9 identify the important historical phases up until the end of the Second World War; Chapters 10–14 address the 'four nations' agenda, whilst also identifying the distinctive features of individual national traditions; Chapters 15 and 16 are concerned with the rural/urban division, an important concern in the development of the short story in England; Chapters 17–22 identify the full richness of stories written from the periphery, by writers from a range of marginalized groups and ethnicities; Chapters 23–9 address the exhaustive range of genre fiction in which the short story has excelled; and Chapters 30–5 focus on the formal properties of short fiction and the ways in which modes of transmission have influenced its reputation and development.

The primary function of the chapter divisions is to identify important practitioners and trends; but they also give scope for some 'bringing to bear' of theoretical perspectives on short fiction, which is, indisputably, an under-theorized form. Yet there is also, I hope, something fresh in the overall conception of this volume, with its ambition to establish the literary history of a topic that has not previously received attention on this scale.

As a consequence, we sidestep those current debates that call into question the credibility of literary history per se. Fredric Jameson has expressed the view that 'increasing reflexivity' in both critical and creative realms, both of which are now influenced more and more by theoretical concepts, renders literary history ideational, merely, and impossible to carry out in its traditional mode.[1] The status of the short story makes it invulnerable to this new anxiety, to a large extent: it has escaped capture in fully-fledged literary histories, despite numerous attempts to classify its separate components in critical compendia, and has therefore not reached anything like the same degree of critical self-reflexiveness as has the novel.

Despite the fluidity of the publishing world since the nineteenth century, the short story is sometimes perceived to be an essentially static form. This impression has been reinforced by a clear emphasis on formal properties in short story theory, and this has had several negative effects for the reputation of the story as a literary form. Most damaging is the view that the short story can be a formulaic literary genre, with devices – such as the single effect, the moment of revelation, or the surprise ending – sometimes seeming too predictable or uninventive.[2] This compounds the idea that the short story is a minor form, or a training ground for the more serious business of novel writing. Taken as a whole, this History is a correction to these impressions. The exhaustive contextualization of different modes and trends will disprove that persisting notion that there is something static (and so ahistorical) about the formal properties of short fiction. This History, acknowledging and foregrounding the formal and aesthetic specificities of short fiction, is also concerned to trace their evolution.

The work is also an implicit statement about the claims of short fiction among the different literary modes, a challenge to its status as the poor relation, but also an attempt to give defining shape to a tradition that is sometimes perceived as lacking in identity. The discussion of a large number of writers who are known primarily for their stories puts a different complexion on the relative evaluation of the novel and the story: the significant number of short story specialists in the English tradition, writing in a diverse range of styles, underscores its special claims for attention.

The historical weight of evidence in this volume reinforces the idea that the short story proper was a modern literary form, coming to prominence in the nineteenth century, promoted widely by magazine publication. Even so, in a longer literary-historical view, the origins of this modern form can be traced back to much earlier periods. The opening chapter uncovers the origins of printed short fiction in England from Tudor times, showing how

some of the features we associate with the short story had their origins in early examples of printed short prose, though without implying a simple 'evolutionary' line. The printed Tudor collection *A Hundred Merry Tales* (1526), a pioneering work in the tradition of the English jest book, demonstrates how various influences were condensed: this volume draws on early storytelling of the late Middle Ages and the Continental Renaissance (Chaucer, Boccaccio). It also anticipates the subversive potential of the Tudor and Elizabethan story collections now best known as jest books, where established class and gender roles – as well as established moral codes – were often challenged or undermined. Something of this ambiguous method, in which the apparent moral of a tale is at odds with the subversiveness of its engaging narrative features – is also apparent in the cony-catching pamphlets of Robert Greene from the 1590s, in which this clash of intentions is deliberately employed. The Elizabethan novella embodies another step forward in the evolution of the short story in the ways it progressed beyond the jests or cony-catching tales, by focusing on a central event or circumstance in a more elaborate manner.

Shorter fiction received another early boost in the Restoration novels (written to be distinct from the longer romance form) from the late seventeenth century, which marked another development in narrative sophistication by virtue of their special interest in setting and character, and – perhaps most importantly – their cultivation of psychological insight. The 'novels' produced around 1700, including the work of Aphra Behn, were a significant staging post in the narrative cultivation of both verisimilitude in the depiction of the world, and in the pursuit of inner realism, features that were further developed in the eighteenth century.

Authors of shorter fiction in the eighteenth century (the focus of Chapter 2) were not striving to develop forms of *technical* complexity, but they did find ways of enhancing their stories by expanding plots and creating stronger characters. This was not an era that cultivated brevity in short fiction, however, since the emphasis was very much on the improving function of fiction as a moral tool with wider social import: the further significant development of the rendering of internal states and the probing of human nature would come later. There were some notable exceptions, however, or at least some innovations that anticipated later developments. For example, the fiction in Eliza Haywood's *Female Spectator* (1744–6) did tend to anatomize the psychology of its protagonists, with a specific focus on the problems and conflicts in women's lives. This focus lent her fiction

a specificity that was absent in the work of her male predecessors, who were more concerned with general moral or social issues.

One writer who thought more self-consciously about the form of short fiction was John Hawkesworth, the only eighteenth-century author of short fiction to theorize about it as a distinct species of writing. His theory that a short narrative should be focused on a single incident unusual enough to engage readers and create suspense anticipates later theories about the coherence and shape of a story (most notably, Poe's 'single effect' theory cited above). He retained the conviction that fiction should instruct as well as please; but he recognized that moral instruction would be more effective if rendered implicitly within the events of a story rather than made explicit.

A significant factor in the evolution – and changing fortunes – of the short story has been the publishing history of magazines. One very influential magazine was *The Yellow Book*. Although it ran to just thirteen volumes (April 1894 to July 1897), it remains strongly associated with the short story, and especially with the direction it was to take in the era of High modernism. (Chapter 7 is devoted to the influence of *The Yellow Book* and its culture.) An earlier formative influence on the development of the short story was the Edinburgh print culture of the early nineteenth century – notably *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, founded in 1817 – which disseminated a distinctive brand of regional Scottish writing rooted in oral traditions. In another example, the new literary magazines in the early nineteenth century created an outlet for a notable development in genre short story writing: the growth of gothic and supernatural short fiction, which flourished through the nineteenth century, leading to the sensational gothic stories of the Victorian era.

The ghost story in England illustrates the porousness of national traditions, since it had myriad influences, notably (but not just) from Ireland and Scotland. Writers were also influenced by European ghost stories dating back to the Middle Ages, and by more recent German authors (such as E. T. A. Hoffmann), as well as by American writers, including Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe. The international influence was a significant general trend, in fact. A notable instance is the influence of European – and especially Russian – models on the short story in Ireland, which encouraged the development of a psychological inflection in the Irish story, notably in the work of George Moore, in anticipation of the modernist experiments of James Joyce (see Chapter 10). In the case of the supernatural tale in the nineteenth century, these myriad influences (as Chapter 3 shows) are apt in the sense that supernatural tales have the tendency to interrogate and dissolve notions of identity, by trading on stereotypes of national identity.

The stock figures of gothic and supernatural tales – such as vampires and ghosts – find a central role in short fiction, often revealing a metaphorical function to frame current cultural tensions and anxieties, fears of sexuality, contagion or disease. The vampire figure can also be seen to symbolize a degenerate aristocracy in some instances. In the Victorian era, the ghost story's capacity for social commentary is well illustrated in Elizabeth Gaskell's short fiction, which betrays a gothic dimension. Gaskell's concern with the wielding of power in these tales is given a clear gender inflexion, revealing a point of contact between the gothic short story and the beginnings of the women's movement. In the right hands, the gothic tale could lend itself to relatively sophisticated deliberations about literary form. George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil' (1859), for example, illustrates the preoccupation with representation in gothic writing: this is a psychological tale that can also be read as an allegory about the role of the author in narrative fiction. Another example of popular writing anticipating the formal concerns of later short story writing is Charles Dickens's well-known story 'The Signal-Man' (1866), an exemplar of the Victorian ghost story. In denying the reader any single interpretation, Dickens's story keeps a number of social topics in view; but it also demonstrates the capacity of the short story to cultivate a resonant ambiguity.

Ghost stories often have their origins in local lore and oral tradition; and, indeed, the influence of the oral story heritage on the modern printed form has been enduring. A notable twentieth century demonstration of this endurance is the category of stories by Anglophone postcolonial writers, where different oral traditions have been hugely important. (As Chapter 22 shows, this is a rich vein of story writing.) In African and Asian societies once subjected to British colonization, the short story has been developed in ways that are significantly shaped by the influence of traditional tale-telling. The legacy of colonialism is a complicated one in this regard, as the taint of imperialism associated with the spread of the English language has been softened and then rendered increasingly inconsequential as English has gained popularity as a lingua franca in the age of globalization. This appropriation has paved the way for the significant enrichment of the short story in English.

In the Anglophone Caribbean, where the legacy of slavery problematizes the lines of cultural continuity, there has been an uneasy, yet productive interaction between local oral traditions and the conventions of the English short story. In other post-imperial sites, in the Americas and in Australasia, indigenous voices have survived, their experiences enshrined in short fiction,

which can also comment pertinently on the contemporary context. On the Indian subcontinent, the relationship between the oral and the written has a longer history, drawing on an extensive history of short narrative that has enabled the spoken and the written to coalesce for centuries. The variety of postcolonial short stories embodies a spectrum in the fusion or interaction of oral and written modes: sometimes postcolonial writers extend the range of English conventions by prioritizing the oral and the demotic; in other instances they work more closely with literary conventions, while also altering those conventions by evoking a sense of uncontainable difference.

An earlier, and very different example that illustrates this non-linear process of evolution is the pointed adaptation of oral and traditional story forms by late Victorian and early twentieth-century writers. An appropriation of myth and fable was often a crucial aspect of this phenomenon, as Chapter 5 demonstrates. The fable form, in particular, can reveal modernized satirical potential. The little-read Gilbert Cannan is an excellent example; but T. F. Powys is perhaps the best-known writer of modern fables. In one sense, he is easy to categorize as the writer of quirky religious allegories. At the same time, his fables often serve to ridicule the principles of logic and faith underpinning Western metaphysics.

The potential of the fable to reveal a distinctively – and troubling – modern aesthetic is well illustrated by Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902), which combine elements of both fairy tale and fable in pursuit of a hidden purpose: the stories effectively oust Christian accounts of Creation, whilst also engaging in a humorous and ironic treatment of world myths and religions. Yet fabulistic forms are not always so clear in their moral or topical content, as the work of A. E. Coppard attests: his fiction, to the contrary, can serve to foreground the disjunction between the order imposed by art and the messy contingency of life. In the hands of modernist authors, mythology and religious parable are used as a form of primitivist critique of modernity, productive of a modern form of moral or religious awareness. If some of E. M. Forster's stories hint at this potential, there is a more full-blown attempt to realize it in the fables of D. H. Lawrence, where the rewriting of Christian mythology – as in *The Escaped Cock* – can be challengingly direct.

A feature more commonly associated with modernist writing is also one of the central technical features associated with the short story – the sudden illuminating moment. Yet the idea of the revelation is explored in self-conscious ways that exploit the paradoxical ambiguities that surround the

apparent 'epiphany', as it is treated in representative gnomic modernist stories. In some cases, this obfuscation of a simple, single revelation can facilitate a very economical suggestion of the hidden, and perhaps contradictory complexity of personality, as in James Joyce's 'The Dead'; in other cases, a 'non-epiphany' can reveal the social constraints that hinder a character's understanding of him or herself, as in Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss'. Viewed more broadly, the cultivation of the fragmented perspective has given short story writers purchase on a variety of experiences through the history of modernity. Chapter 9 explores the capacity of short fiction to capture moments of social dissonance and rupture in the short fiction of the two World Wars, showing how the story functions very effectively to capture 'snapshot' views of war experience.

Accounts of the development of the short story, from the nineteenth century through the twentieth century, can frame and condense the experience of modernity in different ways. This economical framing can encompass national experience, too. In the case of the short story in Ireland, key phases in the development of the nation can be read off from the technical and stylistic progression of the short story, which maps on to the transition from colonialism to independence. (Chapters 10 and 11 delineate this process very clearly.) The nineteenth-century tale in Ireland was often implicated in British imperialism, geared to explaining Irish mores to English readers. The origins of an Irish short story tradition are evident in the nineteenth century, but writers were often caught between two stools, celebrating the Irish traditions and communities on one hand, whilst, on the other, pandering to the tastes of an English readership – as in the case of William Carleton. The Irish Literary Revival had an important bearing on the short story in Ireland, reviving and modernizing the folk tradition at the same time. A mood of transition in post-independence Ireland is discernible in the early work of key practitioners Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin, whose 'apprentice' work of the 1930s anticipated the major contribution they were to make mid-century. There was no greater modernizer than O'Faoláin, whose work as an editor and a writer was instrumental in shaping the Irish short story from the 1940s, giving it greater purchase in its realistic portrayals of contemporary urban and rural life. As modernity gained an increasing hold on Irish life through the second half of the twentieth century, so did a new mood issue in the Irish short story, affecting its forms and techniques. Emerging writers found it possible to be more critical of the Irish state, and moved away from romantic nationalism. A marked tendency in the Irish tradition – for example in the stories of Seán O'Faoláin,

Mary Lavin and Maeve Brennan – was towards more complex psychological treatments.

A transition from depictions of rural to urban life is one of the markers of the march of modernity in the Irish tradition, much as it is in the short story in Scotland, the focus of Chapter 12. This is not a simple linear progression, however, since the depiction of rural isolation can be one of the ways in which Scottish writers negotiate questions of community and belonging. The re-purposing of dialect and orality is another distinctive feature of how Scottish writers interrogate questions of national identity, a feature that also informs arresting experimental forms in the later twentieth century. In this connection the Scottish short story has much in common with the celebrated renaissance of the Scottish novel since the 1980s, especially the dominance of working-class realism: that dominance is just as much a feature of the short story – for example in the work of James Kelman and Agnes Owens.

An element that unites regional and national traditions of short story writing is that they have flourished in difficult social and economic circumstances. This has been especially true of the story in Wales (see Chapter 13), as writers have responded, in different eras, to the consequences of economic collapse. While this capacity seems to chime with that characteristic of the short story identified by Frank O'Connor in his very influential and often cited study – its propensity to treat of the 'submerged population group' – this tendency in the Welsh tradition goes further.[3] Whether presenting politicized anger, or inciting that feeling in readers, short stories from Wales can approach the qualities of social realism that are not often found in regional writing, or the short story.

The dominance of the novel in twentieth-century literary history, coupled with the influence of modernist experimentation, has tended to occlude the reputation of many fine English short story writers (Chapter 14), either because they were not ground-breaking in a technical sense, or because their novels overshadow their achievements in shorter fiction. Graham Greene, for example, wrote many excellent stories, but is primarily known as a novelist. H. E. Bates is, perhaps, the writer whose reputation has suffered most from the dominance of the novel and the prioritizing of technical innovation in accounts of twentieth-century literary history. Bates was not a formal innovator; yet he is strongly associated with a particular mood and style, which can be seen as the translation of European influences – including Maupassant, and especially Chekhov – to an English context.[4] Alongside the lush, romantic style of his rural stories, which evoke and record a passing era in ways that complicate and enrich the nostalgic response, Bates quietly

engaged with a host of issues that, with hindsight, can be seen as seminal to the developing twentieth century: the morality of war; the rapidity of class change; evolving social and sexual mores; and, with an expressly formal significance, the increasing importance of middlebrow writing.

Some of the writers associated with this neglected English mood were also proponents of the rural short story (see Chapter 15), a tradition that is often misperceived as an anachronism. In fact, the literary mediation of rural experience serves to frame the challenges of modernity, especially through complex and disjunctive narrative styles, which themselves often embody an ambivalent interrogation of nostalgia. If the rural tradition utilizes specific characteristics of the short story, other distinctive formal features help define a canon of metropolitan writing, focused on London, in the English short story. As Chapter 16 shows, it is the episodic nature of the story that is pertinent here: the short story is well suited to the capture of metropolitan disorientation and to suggesting the connection between isolated moments and the larger throng of city experience. After the Second World War, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds began the task of recasting London as a post-imperial metropolis, with new multicultural energies transforming the urban experience and urban perception.

The short story's capacity to render marginalized experience – or the concerns of Frank O'Connor's 'submerged population groups' – has a relevance not just to life in the British Isles away from the metropolitan centre: it is equally pertinent to the experience of groups marginalized by ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, or because of experiences of subjugation in relation to the end of Empire. Chapters 17 to 22 examine a series of these contexts, also exploring ways in which the short story can transform the marginal into something affirmative. Strong claims can be made, for example, for a deep affinity between female experience and short fiction, exemplified in the highly accomplished work of the most prominent practitioners in the second half of the twentieth century, such as Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, A. S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro.

After the Second World War – and especially promoted by second-wave feminism from the 1970s onwards – feminist concerns became increasingly prominent in cultural and political debates, refracted through the lens of dramatic social change: immigration and the end of Empire; the institution of the welfare state; the sexual revolution; and the restructuring of Higher Education, for example. All of these changes had a profound impact on women's opportunities and social roles. The widening of access to