THE SHORT STORY: AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF THE GENRE

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A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of the story is only to help you to experience that meaning more fully.¹

Theory and history of the form
As early as 1937 Elizabeth Bowen claimed, “The short story is a young art … the child of this century”, which developed at the same time as the cinema and photography.² According to Mary Rohrberger, one of the first theorizers of the genre, “short narrative fiction is as old

as the history of literature …. But the short story, as we know it today, is the newest of literary genres.\(^3\)

The origins of the short form go back to myth and biblical verse narratives, medieval sermons and romance, fables, folktales, ballads and the rise of the German Gothic in the eighteenth century. But its mythic origins, filtered through the Romantic influence, had to come to terms with the conventions of mimesis and \textit{vraisemblance} of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realism.\(^4\) Charles May observes that “the short story has from its beginning been a hybrid form combining both the metaphoric mode of the old romance and the metonymic mode of the new realism”.\(^5\)

Although the short story constitutes a form in its own right, it has suffered a theoretical neglect in comparison with other genres such as poetry, drama, the epic, or the novel. As May argues, “a genre only truly comes into being when the conventions that constitute it are articulated within the larger conceptual context of literature as a whole”.\(^6\) In the case of the short story this was a long-deferred process. Until half a century ago those who theorized about the genre were not literary critics but practitioners of the form themselves: Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Anton Chekhov in the nineteenth century; and Henry James, Flannery O’Connor, Julio Cortázar and Eudora Welty, among others, in the twentieth. But interest in the short story has been growing continuously since the


\(^5\) May, \textit{The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice}, 72.

\(^6\) \textit{Ibid.}, 108.