

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON THE SHORT STORY

José R. Ibañez, José Francisco Fernández and Carmen M. Bretones, eds.

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In spite of the long tradition of short fiction, criticism devoted to the study of the shorter literary forms is much younger, as the short story has been seen as the novel's underdeveloped little sister, and, thus, as a non-serious kind of subgenre. Self-consciousness in the literary theory devoted to the short-story forms increased towards the end of the nineteenth century, and this acknowledgment became crucial to the understanding of the genre. Nevertheless, the early Formalist studies mostly tackled the old length-issue (how many words should a short story have in order to be considered a short story?) or rigid structural requirements (based on precepts such as the classic idea that short stories mostly follow the three unities of the French classic drama, and present one character, one event and one emotion [Matthews 1901: 16]).

Later on, as it became clear that twenty-first century short stories did not fulfil these strict requisites, critics started to focus on varied aspects such as characterisation, ideology, social function, identity, voice, etc. In the last few decades, short-story criticism has abandoned the attempt to define the genre in strict formal or thematic terms, and has concentrated instead on diverse features of the genre. The collection of essays *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story* (2007) displays a plurality of approaches that sometimes take the form of essays that deal with very specific aspects of certain short stories—such as those by Lepaludier or Fly Junquera—, or of more general essays that cover the diversity of the genre and its wide-ranging criticism—thanks to the contrast of perspectives in the collection.

The present collection, edited by José R. Ibañez, José Francisco Fernández, —also editor of the collection entitled *Breves e Intensos. Artículos sobre Relatos Cortos de Autores Británicos Contemporáneos* (2001)—, and Carmen M. Bretones, gathers articles by nine outstanding scholars in the field of short-story criticism, such as Farhat Iftekharuddin and Charles E. May, and offers a plural critical perspective on the genre.

José Jiménez Lozano opens the book with some general reflections on the nature of the short-story form that have populated the pages of short-story criticism from its beginnings. The essay, written both in Spanish and in English, is an excellent introduction to “the slippery nature of the short story”, as Rodríguez Salas has put it (2008: 198), since it emphasises the genre’s mutability; as “su naturaleza propia es la del encuentro radical con lo que ocurre” (Ibañez *et al.* 2007: 17).

The next two chapters are devoted to classic figures in short-story writing, such as Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe. José Antonio Álvarez Amorós’ brilliant chapter applies Deconstructive and Dialogic theories to Henry James’ “The Coxon Fund”. Álvarez Amorós focuses on the “relativization of reference, and [...] extra-textual (fictional) reality” in James’ short story (2007: 49). The selves in James’ stories are not presented as fixed substances but “rather constructed through the interplay and clash of perspectives, contrasts [...] and the multiplicity of cognitive positions” (2007: 56). As Henry James put it in *The Art of Fiction* (1884), the short story is an organic form in which “character and action [...] are inseparable” (in Shaw 1992: 118). Like the theories used for the analysis, James’ narration suggests a self-other relation that reveals itself as an indispensable movement in the creation of meaning, since it is understood as inter-action, which is always a dynamic and provisional process. James’ narrative embodiments of psychic processes could be read as the impressionistic influence “of the romantic trend that began the short story form [...] in the nineteenth century” (May 2002: 51). After this chapter on the short fiction of Henry James, there follows Thomas Leitch’s essay, which focuses on Edgar Allan Poe’s under-valued detective stories, which would have shaped the evolution of the subgenre. Especially remarkable is Leitch’s analysis of the mystery story and the detective story.

Farhat Iftekharuddin has co-edited with Mary Rohrberger and Maurice Lee a series of interviews with short story writers, entitled *Speaking of the Short Story: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (1997); and is author of the wide-ranging collection *The Postmodern Short Story. Forms and Issues* (2003), together with Joseph Boyden, Mary Rohrberger and Jaie Claudet. His chapter focuses on the shorter fiction of Salman Rushdie, which has not been as widely analysed as Rushdie’s longer fiction, and examines the nine stories in the collection *East, West Stories* (1994). Iftekharuddin illuminates the parallelism of Rushdie’s political stand and the dialogue between West and East in the collection. The short-story form, classically

thought to be a genre detached from society—as stated by O’Connor, who saw a “romantic, individualistic and intransigent” nature in the short story (1985: 21)—, clearly establishes an ethical bond with the world, since, as the author of the essay states, “[t]he content of these stories attain universal relevance” (Ibáñez *et al.* 2007: 152).

In the next chapter, Eibhear Walshe studies the work of Frank O’Connor—author of the essential study *The Lonely Voice* (1962)— in the context of the modern Irish short story. According to Walshe, O’Connor is a marginal figure who “remains [...] remote from the community”, like his short-story characters (O’Connor 1985: 21). This individualism exceeds the written page and engulfs the figure of the Irish writer, whose “body of work can be read as a critique of the new state’s self image” (Ibáñez *et al.* 2007: 109).

Laurent Lepaludier’s essay starts from the association of the short-story form to the visual, an idea that has been fostered by the criticism focused on the genre’s impressionistic inclination, present in classic writers such as Chekhov, whose stories presented a “fugitive impression focused with the swiftness of a snapshot” (May 2002: 51). Lepaludier examines the violently energetic images in Wyndham Lewis’ “Bestre”, where forces collide, amplify and overflow into “excess and exuberance” (Ibáñez *et al.* 2007: 97). His analysis shows that some contemporary short stories cannot be compared to fixed snapshots but to dynamic and even grotesque visual vortexes, and that the genre continues to represent “our own attitude to life” (O’Connor 1985: 13).

In line with this analysis of more contemporary forms, we find Carmen Flys Junquera’s essay, devoted to the analysis of Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *Silent Dancing* (1990), an inter-genre work that combines poetry, fiction and essay. The hybrid text, Junquera argues, allows the portrayal of a relational self, since “[t]he disconnected, fragmented, multidimensional texts are patterned in a diffusion and diversity of relationships” (Ibáñez *et al.* 2007: 169).

Adrienne E. Gavin continues with the visual and examines the graphic short story “come down town” by Carol Swain. The essay uncovers the difficulties of analysing graphic stories due to criticism’s traditional lack of interest in these forms, and it also asserts the richness of texts that combine different codes, and the necessity of an adjusted or renewed theoretical framework that enables serious study of such forms.

By way of conclusion, Charles E. May, author of the influential and exhaustive study on the short story entitled *The Short Story. The Reality of Artifice* (2002), closes the collection with his essay on the modern short story: “The Secret Life in the Modern Short Story”. The short-story genre changed profoundly with Modernism, as the emphasis on identity and character construction further

developed. “The secret life” of an individual became partially revealed in the modern text. As May states, “[t]his discovery of the hidden, secret self is a persistent characteristic of the modern short story as a genre”; and, in my opinion, it continues to be an essential element in many contemporary short stories (2007: 219).

But the truth is that the short-story form is a very heterogeneous genre, which is still evolving and changing, and so is its criticism. The present collection does not aim at providing an unambiguous definition of the genre, or at an organised presentation of the different existing perspectives. The chapters in the collection are quite disparate, but they promote debate, as the title promises, through the variety of essays. Nevertheless, it could be argued that there is a general line, as many articles included in *Contemporary Debates* seem to follow the current critical tendency that studies the short-story genre in a broad human context, that is, placing it within a social, “psychological and philosophical framework”, as proposed by Charles May (Ifterkharudin, Rohrberg and Lee 1997: 182–3).

The collection is without doubt an example of the good health of short-story criticism, and a work of great value for those who love the short-story form.

Works cited

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