

ANTHONY BURGESS ON THE SHORT STORY

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I approach the short story from a rather negative angle because it is not a form I practice, and indeed, I do approach it now with a great deal of difficulty, especially in the presence of very reputable practitioners of the form, like my own compatriot and fellow writer, John Wain. But it is a useful thing, occasionally, to approach a form that one knows a little about negatively, because it tells the speaker something about himself. This is rather selfish, but I only speak on these occasions to learn something. I am not at all concerned with teaching you anything. I don't think I can. But I always feel that any practitioner in the art of narrative fiction ought to be able to manage all its forms. We take it for granted that a musician can manage the large forms as well as the short and anybody who sets himself up - professionally, commercially, esthetically - as a writer of fiction, ought to be able to manage the big Proustian novel as well as the smallest possible anecdote. As you know, the shortest science fiction story ever written goes like this : " that morning the sun rose in the west ". You ought to be able to manage that as well as the *roman fleuve*.

Now I have, I must confess, a certain disdain for the short story in the present phase of my development, chiefly because I cannot practice it. I would like to feel that I have abandoned the form, but I know that the form has abandoned me ; hence it is dead. But if I can, to begin with a very brief *biographia literaria*, I could through recounting my very early love affair with the short story, perhaps tell you something about the form in relation to myself.

When I was an undergraduate and had both musical ambitions and literary ambitions, I was working on the university magazine, and naturally the magazine had to be filled up not only with articles and poems, but with short stories, this being at that time an estimable form and even a commercial form. So against my will, I had to write short stories. I remember I wrote two in the year 1939 - a long time ago.

One of them was called " Children of Eve " and it was exactly eight hundred words long. It was

a kind of interior monologue. We were all under the Joycean influence in those days, even though we weren't legally allowed to read *Ulysses* - and this merely presented a young nun, a novice, very young, lying in bed at night in her cell, trying to concentrate on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and trying to push out of her mind thoughts of sex. And she does this fairly successfully. She eventually in a genuinely Loyolan way - composition of place and so forth - sets up in her mind the image of the crucifixion : there's Christ on the cross. But the vision ends with her concentration on the fine bodies of the centurions who are standing around and she escapes into sleep. End of story.

In that same year, I wrote a story which was even simpler, about the same length. It was called " Grief ". Why I remember the title I don't know, but this was a story about a boy in England, who on November 5th was starting to let off the fireworks that traditionally celebrate the attempted destruction of the House of Commons by Guy Fawkes and Catesby and his crew. He is setting off his fireworks with a friend, when some lout from over the fence next door throws a lighted firework into his box of fireworks, letting them all off, and the boy runs in crying to his mother, who takes him into her arms and the story ends. All that happens in that story really was that when the fireworks were let off, with this great pyrotechnical display, the language itself broke down. This was the point of the story : the language itself started to break down. Instead of having straightforward syntax, straightforward words, the words themselves were distorted. It was a very Joycean effort - *Finnegans Wake* - a type of brief experiment in form. That was probably the only reason for writing it. But the curious thing is that with that story I won a prize ; I won a short-story prize. I won five pounds. A lot of money in those days. You could get drunk for a month with five pounds in 1939, and suddenly I discovered that I had a literary vocation. I thought it would be a short story vocation. It was not.

In later years, I have been asked to write short stories and have always failed. There was a time when I was desperately in need and the ability to write a short story of a different kind was forced upon me. This was in 1959, twenty years later. I had been working as a colonial civil servant in Malaysia and Borneo, and I had already published two novels which were about that territory. But in 1959 I was invalided out with a suspected cerebral tumour - admitted into hospital in London and then told that the tumour was inoperable and that I had only a year to live. So I had to start a very rapid, very brief literary career immediately in order to provide some royalties for my prospective widow.

The first thing I wrote was a short story, and this was one of those cheating kind of short stories which Somerset Maugham indulged in : not a word of invention at all, but the mere

recounting of an anecdote. I'd been in a pub in London, and a man - a real rogue - told me that he had worked for a time as a steward on British Railways, serving meals in the dining car. And the previous Christmas Day he had been on duty and they were serving a Christmas dinner in the dining car of a train traveling from London to Penzance. And when the dinner had been served - it was a very good dinner, in so far as British Rail could serve a good dinner - he came in to the tables and presented the bills, and was surprised that nobody had tipped him nor his fellow steward. Later on he discovered that a man had stood up while the two stewards were back in the galley and said, " Ladies and Gentlemen, I think you will agree that we have had a most admirable meal, and I think that we ought to reward our stewards and our cook as much as we possibly can this Christmas Day ". So he went round with a hat and took the money and got off at the next stop.

That was a pointless story. It was an anecdote, no more, and it was worked up rapidly into a fifteen-hundred-word short story, and it earned me, I think, thirty pounds. That was probably written in the twilight of the short story as a commercial form. And I can't help feeling, I must confess, that my unwillingness to tackle the form has something to do with its lack of commercial underpinning. We must not forget that writing is a trade as well as an art, and we only write those things that we can sell. William Shakespeare would, I think, not have written his plays unless the Elizabethan theatre had been a viable commercial form in those days. And something to do with our concern with the form may have its origin in France. It is dying as a commercial form except in certain versions which are acceptable, not because they're primarily literary, but because they are primarily adaptable to another form. I need mention only one short-story writer practicing in England in our day, not a very good short-story writer, not a writer that you would study in university courses, but well-known : his name is Roald Dahl. His stories are in a sense anecdotal: they have a point ; they have a twist in the tale ; something happens in them and they are very easy to adapt to television. Indeed, the short story has found its fulfillment to some extent in the television drama, very brief drama - some-times half an hour, sometimes an hour, very rarely much more than that. When we get to the ninety-minute stage, we're probably summarizing a comparatively short novel.

Now the problem as I've always seen it is that we cannot really confine the form. In France, the term " short story " does not exist. Either the word *conte* or the word *nouvelle* is used, and these present no indication of limitation on length.

Short

story means what it says : it is something short. Of course, " short " itself is a very comparative term. I do feel that the whole field of narrative fiction, narrative art, presents not a continuum but a kind of cline, an upward-moving cline, in which we begin with the shortest possible anecdote and end with the longest possible novel, like

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There is no real limit to the length of the novel, and possibly there is no real limit to the brevity of the short story. We pick out along this cline various forms. We cannot give definitions of these forms, but we recognize the

conte

or the

nouvelle

chiefly by its not being a novel.

The nature of the novel, it seems to me, is this : that it presents an epoch ; it presents a whole biography ; it presents a number of characters living in a particular place, particular places, at a particular time, particular times. It can be a ragbag, a holdall which contains everything. The problem of form in the novel, the longer the novel gets, becomes proportionately less. Dickens never really had problems of form. We never think of form in terms of Dickens, or even in terms of form in Balzac, or in Proust ! The whole point is the massive presentation of a number of situations, a number of characters, and if I ask the question, " What do we learn from it ? ", of course, the answer is " nothing ". We don't learn anything, in effect. We are just given a clearer view of an epoch, a set of characters, the nature of human life, and no more. Events take place - sometimes violent events - these events lead to other events, and, at the end, a series of events has taken place which should clarify our notion of the situation in which such events would happen.

With a short story, we're not quite sure. I've already mentioned the two kinds of short stories I have myself written. One was appropriate to a university magazine, appropriate to a little review subsidized by a university or subsidized by the state : the story in which there is a kind of revelation, the hope of a revelation, but not much more.

Joyce talked about epiphanies. We've just passed the Feast of Epiphany, the Feast of Twelfth Night, and Joyce meant pretty accurately by that term " epiphany " what the church parallel means by it. Joyce said that the epiphany was the showing-forth of a certain truth in circumstances that were not really conducive to the showing-forth of that truth. The three magi on the Feast of Epiphany arrived at a stable in Bethlehem, and instead of the great revelation of the King of Heaven coming to earth, they found a dirty child in a dirty stable. The epiphany lay in the contrast between the truth and the appearance. And in the series of stories called *Dubliners*,

Joyce was working up on a larger scale what he'd been attempting in his notebooks, what he mentions in

Ulysses

as observations presented on oval paper, to be presented eventually to all the libraries in the world, including the library in Alexandria. Joyce had this capacity, which I think Gerard Manley Hopkins also had, of seeing the sudden shooting-forth from ordinary circumstances of a certain truth - not much of a truth, but a truth - something that temporarily modifies or perhaps permanently modifies one's perception of the world.

So if you take the short stories of Joyce and try to read them aloud to an audience which is inured to a different kind of short story, the sort of short story that Roald Dahl now practices, you'll find that the response sometimes is a response of great disappointment. They expect the short story shall contain action, that it shall contain events, shall contain a *denouement*, things of change, but all they find in these short stories of Joyce is the possibility of change, the possibility of a new perception, a slight revelation.

I remember reading aloud to a group of Malaysian students - Indians, Chinese, and Malays - one story of Joyce called "Counterparts". In this story, as you remember, a man working in a scrivener's office in Dublin, not very good at his work, a man called Farrington, wants his beer and he's not getting on well with his boss. He is longing for the moment when work will end and the pubs will open, and he has no money, or very little. He pawns his watch. He goes and gets drunk, and he feels cut off from the bigger world, which he finds represented by a couple of ladies who speak with London accents, who are smartly dressed in a pub. At the end of the evening, he's pawned his watch, spent all his money, is in danger of losing his job, and has not even got drunk. He waits for the tram, gets the tram and goes home. And when he gets home, he finds that his wife is not there; she has gone out. And his son is there. His son is going to prepare his dinner for him. He's let the fire go out, and then Farrington goes mad. "You've let that fire go out", and he beats the child.

That's all that happens in the story, that's all there is, and naturally, any audience brought up on a different kind of short story would be immensely disappointed. Nothing has happened. Certain events have been described; certain scenes have been delineated; but at the end of the story there is no real change. Of course, Joyce's real point there, I think, is that the counterpart lies between the situation of the son and the situation of the father. A pattern emerges from a very sordid set of facts, not much of a pattern, but it's all the pattern Joyce is prepared to give us.

And this, I think, even applies to the biggest short story of that group, the last short story, "The Dead", which, again, I have read aloud to students with the same response, a response of intense disappointment that nothing has happened. You know the story well, a story in which the successful, small Dublin journalist, Gabriel Conroy, with his wife who comes from Galway, the west, goes to a party given by one of his aunts on the Feast of Epiphany, and there a song is sung, "The Lass of Aughrim". Gabriel's wife, hearing this song, is taken back to a time in Galway when she heard that song. She associates it with the death of a young man who was in love with her, and this story comes out when Gabriel and herself, Gretta, are in a hotel room in Dublin after the party is over, and a curious magic takes over - hard to explain, in some ways hard to justify. Gabriel feels himself to be low, mean, smaller despite all his literary success,

than this simple boy in Galway who died, apparently, for love. And the snow, which is general all over Ireland, becomes symbolic of a blanket covering both the living and the dead. In some ways the dead who have died for love are more living than the real living who have died for nothing. The living and the dead become one body, and the snow, general all over Ireland, symbolizes this.

Curiously enough, the snow is never general all over Ireland. This again is a kind of perversion of the meteorological truth, in the service of symbolism. But I was in Dublin last January. I was helping to record a musical version of *Ulysses* I had written called "Blooms of Dublin", and snow was general all over Ireland when I arrived, and it had started on the Feast of Epiphany. Probably for Joyce's centenary, magical things were beginning to happen. However, this is the kind of short story which we associate, I suppose, with literature. It's the kind of short story that we find in the works of Chekhov. Chekhov is one of the predecessors of the Joycean short story, one of the makers of the kind of story in which there is a brief revelation.

The other kind of story, in which there is a bigger revelation, in which there is action, in which there is even murder, belongs, we feel, to this commercial field. We can only publish the Joycean kind of short story now in a subsidized magazine. The commercialized short story is the short story that people understand and that people regard as a mere truncated form of the novel.

This notion of the need for the short story as the basic literary narrative form began about 1840. The short story has always existed. The stories we tell to children at bedtime are short stories. The stories we find in *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* are short stories, but there was never any real theory of the short story until Edgar Allan Poe, in about 1840, said that no literary experience should be, of its nature, interruptible. We should be able to have a literary experience in a single session. The analogy, of course, was the experience of listening to music. We expect in a Beethoven symphony or a Handel oratorio to obtain a kind of analogy to all the essential experiences - emotional experiences and the like - we have when we're reading a novel. I suppose a musical analogue, even to

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is Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony", strangely. Can we say Wagner's "The Ring"? Possibly not. Music is always shorter than literature. But Poe did believe that we should not be interrupted in our perusal of a piece of narrative art. He said there's something fundamentally wrong with the notion that we read part of the book one day and go back to it the following day. We ourselves have changed in the meantime. But sitting down with a book with a story, with a magazine, and spending half an hour or an hour, or two hours on a piece of narrative fiction gives us the same kind of holistic, the same kind of total effect - the effect of being absorbed in an artistic experience without interruption - that we get from listening to a piece of music.

But the content of this truncated, this shortened form was never made clear. With Poe we know exactly what it is. It is the kind of material you're prepared to find in a novel. It's no accident that one of the great forms, one of the important literary forms, or probably I should say subliterary forms of the nineteenth century, began with Poe : the detective novel, the story of mystery and imagination, which was taken up with triumphant success by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Conan Doyle could only learn how to write the short Sherlock Holmes stories by tackling the bigger forms first, and with this I can sympathize. It's fairly easy to write a novel, in spite of everything, and I think that Conan Doyle found it easier to write a novel like *Micah Clarke* than to write the Sherlock Holmes short stories. He wrote

Micah Clarke,

and suddenly, through tackling this large form, the form of the historical novel, felt he could understand better the shorter forms. And so we get a series of remarkable tales of crime and detection which feature Sherlock Holmes.

Here is the story doing a kind of novelistic job and doing it briefly. Obviously, there's a concentration on one particular event, one particular mystery, and on the solution of that mystery. In a novel, the mystery itself must usually put out, like a tree, leaves or branches of other mysteries. The form of the novel is ideal for that purpose, but we've never been satisfied that either the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe or the stories of Conan Doyle are literature, in the sense that William Shakespeare is literature, or Joyce is literature, or Flaubert is literature.

When I come to examine what happened in France, I can see there that the concept of what a shorter form of fiction should be is rather different from what it's expected to be in Anglo-America. The French work which has influenced me most, from which I've learned most as a writer, is, naturally, the work by Flaubert - all writers learn from Flaubert - but it is *Les Trois Contes*

which influenced me more than

L'Education Sentimentale, *Madame Bovary*,

or

Salammbô,

or any of the others. I don't quite know why : the perfection of the writing? the capacity to compress ? I don't know. As to the style itself, they're not quite sure if Flaubert was as great a stylist as his followers said he was. We have the anecdote about James Joyce who was sitting outside a café in Paris when a great admirer of Flaubert came along with a volume under his arm. It was

Les Trois Contes.

"What a stylist !" And Joyce said, "Let me see the volume". And he looked at it, obviously spotting various mistakes. But on the first page of "Un Coeur simple", he read the opening : " pendant quelques années, les voisins de Mme so and so envièrent à Mme so and so sa servante Felicité." And Joyce said, "That should be 'enviaient', it should be the imperfect tense,

as everyone knows. " Then he turned to the final page; the final story is "Hérodiades", and there the followers of John the Baptist are described as carrying the head away. He said because the head was heavy, "ils la portaient alternativement". Joyce said "there were three people carrying this head, so it can't be 'alternativement'". The fact is that in these three *contes*

we have a tradition which is probably not really held either in England or America. One is the first short story; it is the story in which nothing happens. In that sense, it's very close to the literary short story, the short story whose essence is style or exact observations rather than events. Nothing happens to Felicité, except at the end when there's a magical touch. Just as she's dying, she sees hovering over her head " un perroquet gigantesque ". This ties up with a parrot that her nephew had, we remember. The other two stories, "St. Julien l'Hospitalier" and "Hérodiades" are merely retellings of myths or ancient stories; very beautifully told they are, but nothing new is presented. The beauty is in the style ; the pleasure is in the formation of the sentences. The pleasure is also in the exact evocation of the circumstances of speech and the like in a past time, a mythical time, and a real historical time, and so on. These do not seem to me to fall into any short-story category that we know in Anglo-America. It's as though what Flaubert is doing here is presenting on a smaller scale something already to be done or having been done already in the novel. We always feel that the story of Felicité, "Un Coeur simple", has some vague relation to

Madame Bovary

or perhaps even to

l'Education Sentimentale,

that "St. Julien" has some relation to

La Tentation de Saint Antoine,

and that the final story, "Herodias", has something to do with

Salammbô.

It's as though Flaubert has a rather willful desire to show on a smaller scale what he's much more fully, and even more beautifully, presented in the novels. They're not quite short stories as we know them, then, yet to any modern writer, in whatever language, these are recommended as a fundamental textbook of style. But it's nothing to do with the short story as we know it.

Let me try and consider others. We know that in Russia, the whole of Russian fiction is supposed to have come out of the hem of Gogol's "Overcoat", and in Gogol's story "The Nose", we have again, according to Nabokov, the roots of later Russian fiction. These, again, are not quite short stories as we know them. They have something far more to do with the fable: the notion that the author can get away with something quite fan-tastic if he doesn't let it go on too long. And this brings me to somebody who is, curiously enough, related to Gogol. I mean my namesake, Borges, the Argentine short-story writer who doesn't, again, write short stories at all but writes "ficciones". It seems to me that there's not great narrative urge in Borges. The fact that Borges has never written a novel has nothing to do with his unwillingness to tackle the great labour, or even his long incipient blindness which has now become total blindness. It's rather that he is not a narrative man at all. What he has is a number of philosophical ideas which can best be presented in some quasi-fictional form, so that he imagines what would be

the situation if the world, the universe, were a library, the library were a universe, a situation in which we were lacking in one dimension or the whole of our language had to be built up on nouns and verbs. (I'm making these up, but I think this would be very close to Borges.)

Let's take a particular story of Borges, which comes closest, I think, to the genuine narrative form. One reads it with some surprise. One actually feels one's reading a real story, which is very rare in Borges. I mean the story "Averroes' Search", where Borges sets up, with great exactitude and great skill and great beauty of style, a scene in Moorish Spain, in the south, where Averroes is sitting with his friends. They have a pleasant evening discussing philosophy, and then he goes home, and he has a bath. Silken girls dry him and bring him sherbet, and he sits down to resume his work, and his work presently is a translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Arabic. And he's trying to translate the word "tragedy". He doesn't know what the term means; he's never met it before because the drama doesn't exist in Islam, but he feels that, as Aristotle has become a sort of sacred Islamic text, he has to make some sort of showing. So he says "in the Koran we find many examples of 'tragedy'", which is a palpable lie. And at that moment, Borges makes the whole scene collapse. Averroes just collapses into a bundle of clothes. Everything disappears, and the story not only ends but is liquidated. Borges explains this and says, "I have no faith in Averroes after this assertion; therefore Averroes can have no faith in himself; therefore he cannot exist." Therefore he killed him.

Now again, this is not quite a short story as we know it. It's as though Borges has to try a particular experiment, which cannot go on too long, and, hence, he borrows the form of a few pages which we associate with the traditional narrative short story, called "una ficcion", and gets away with a bit of literary experimentation because he's chosen a very short form.

The commercial short story, which I've already mentioned, does have, strangely enough, properties which come from both ends of the cline, both the anecdotal and the qualities of the genuine novel. Now again, with some shame, I have to mention the name of William Somerset Maugham, the most successful practitioner of the short story we've ever had in England. He became a very rich man chiefly by writing short stories. To some extent, he wrote very cynically. He was offered by American magazines very large sums of money, 3,000 dollars in 1920 for example, for a short story of 1,000 words, no more. Of course, 1,000 words would fill up one page and the opposite page would have an illustration. He was somewhat cynical in that he was doing this for money, turning out these stories regularly. Not altogether cynical, in that he was performing the artist's sempiternal job of limiting himself to a given form. After all, as Italian painters limited themselves to a given subject matter, there's no reason why a commercial writer should not limit himself to a given form.

But what are Somerset Maugham's short stories? They are mostly anecdotal. Having lived for many years myself in Malaysia, I know that Maugham was still well remembered as a traveler around the Malayan archipelago, the good companion in the club who would listen sympathetically to men and women at dinner, in a planter's bungalow, or over whiskey and soda or a game of bridge. Maugham would remember these half stories and just churn them out, churn these true anecdotes out as short stories - a cynical thing to do in a sense because this kind of writing caused a lot of upset, a lot of pain, and a lot of legal trouble. One of his longest stories, called "The Letter", based on a famous Singapore murder case, nearly landed him into severe legal trouble, but this is the way he normally did it. And the story always had to end with some kind of apothegm, some kind of moral conclusion, vaguely cynical, somewhat superficial, and strangely enough, very strangely enough, it is this particular form which was Maugham's preferred form, which infects his novels. It isn't as though he's taken from the form of the novel something he can use in the short story, but as though the short story itself can become the novel.

His best novel, without any doubt, is a fairly short one of about 18,000 words called *Cakes and Ale*. This is about a famous writer, somewhat like Thomas Hardy, Driffield, who marries a woman much below his station, Rosie Driffield. And she runs away with a coal merchant called George Kemp, or rather because of his upper-class manners and his way of showing off his spending of money, is called Lord George Kemp. She runs off with Lord George Kemp, and Driffield marries someone else and becomes a great writer, like Thomas Hardy. And at the end of the book, it is evident that Maugham does not know how to provide a satisfactory finish, a satisfactory conclusion. How can he bring the thing to an end? So he goes, in the character of his narrator, Ashingdon, to America. He goes to Yonkers, New York State, and there he sees Rosie Driffield, now grown old but still very smart, with beautiful false teeth, a great player of bridge, and so on, living in a nice little apartment with a black maid. And he asks the question, "Why did you go off with George Kemp [the coal merchant]?" And she says, "He was such a gentleman". End of story.

There are wide implications in the statement. The statement itself is a pregnant statement, in that if we examine it closely, especially if we're writers, we'll see that it's a condemnation of writers: writers are not gentlemen. Driffield, the great writer, the great Hardy-esque novelist, was not a gentleman, but Lord George Kemp, so-called, the coal merchant, was.

This strikes me as being a short story pulled out to novel length. And I want to say the most terrible thing of all now, that perhaps the greatest novel of the century and certainly one of the longest, is nothing more than a short story. I mean Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is well-known that Joyce planned as one of the stories in *Dubliners*

a tale about the Dublin Jew who went around the city and whose adventures would provide a kind of comic counterpart to the adventures of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*.

The idea grew, and eventually a huge, a mammoth novel came out of this tiny seed. If we examine this novel very carefully, we find that it's a total negation of everything the novel has ever stood for and everything, indeed, that the traditional commercial short story has ever stood for. There's no action in it. It's a negation of action. Joyce takes a myth which is crammed with action - the story of Odysseus going back to Ithaca after the Trojan Wars, meeting all kinds of hair-raising adventures - these adventures in the Dublin of 1904, where the action takes place, are tamed to mere symbolism. The Ulysses, that Joyce presents, Mr. Leopold Bloom, does not meet real Lystragonians, real man-eaters; he merely meets people swilling food in the various restaurants of Dublin. He doesn't really meet a Cyclops who hurls a rock at him, having eaten some of his companions. He merely meets an Irish patriot who throws an empty biscuit-tin at him. There's a deliberate taming of action to the state of genuine stasis - the stasis which we find so often in the short stories, a stasis which will suddenly, we hope, turn up at unexpected points and produce an epiphany, a vision.

This is all that happens in *Ulysses*. *Ulysses* is not capable of being a novel because of the limitations that Joyce imposes on himself, the limitations of a single day. All the action takes place in a single day; nothing much can happen in a single day. There can be no great revelations. There can be no great changes, and I see now I'm coming to almost a definition of what the novel is: the novel is about the changes that take place in human personalities. It is about what happens to human personalities under certain circumstances, how they are different on the last page from what they are on the first. That will do. Any novelist will know that there's a point, a watershed in his novel where the change begins to take place. One of his skills is trying to prevent the reader from seeing this watershed too clearly, so that the change in the personality the novelist is dealing with comes as something of a surprise. We know it to be true; we trace back the process whereby the change took place, and see it to be all there, but in the act of reading we are not aware of the mechanics of change.

In *Ulysses* there is no change at all. We have three major characters. We have Molly Bloom, Bloom himself, and we have Stephen Daedalus, and Stephen meets Bloom, and Molly hears in bed that her husband has met a young poet, of course, Stephen Daedalus. The book comes to an end. All that we feel is that there's a possibility after the meeting between these two main characters, that there will be a change. We don't know what the change will be. It may be as simple as this: that Stephen will come and live in the house and teach Molly good Italian pronunciation via singing, and he will write his poetry there, and Molly perhaps will go dreaming of his becoming a kind of lover, son, and messiah all in one. These things may happen in the future, and some people have said that the real novel takes place on the seventeenth of June, 1904, not on the sixteenth of June. All that happens in the novel we are given is a mere preliminary to what's going to happen afterwards.

This is a short story, and it is a short story with far less matter in it than most of the really short short stories. So we may come to a tentative conclusion : that the nature of a short story may have nothing to do with length, that there is a kind of short story element, the short story entity, which can be accommodated to any size, that a novel of immense length can be no more than a short story in that it doesn't present this process of change taking place in human passions. The possibility of change, yes, and the revelation that may lead to change ; but that is for another story and not the story we have been reading.

There is a lot more to be said. The more one thinks of a short story as practiced in the English language, the more one is aware that there is not a single definition. There's no worry. It is not a form which one can place in a dictionary of literary terms and exactly define. I think something has perhaps already been said of the short stories of Rudyard Kipling. We may find a parallel here to what Kipling did and what many of us did who were much smaller than Kipling.

Those of us who were in the services were able to turn into anecdotal short stories or short stories of atmosphere, the possibility of change, our own service experiences. There were many, many short stories in many, many magazines, in Britain during the war, strangely, despite the shortage of paper, which presented this form. It was one of the major forms of the period, but no-body wrote a novel about the war. Nobody could get the overall vision, and some people say we're still waiting for that overall vision, in Britain at least, of the war we all experienced. We had to wait until 1948 and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* before we understood what a war novel was. We had to wait a little later in England for Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy, but even then that's a limited view of the war. The best war novel we produced was a limited view of it, yet all we could do during the war itself, and even after the war, was to produce these fragmentary visions of what it was like.

Now there's a parallel here with Kipling. Kipling was the one man ordained by God or the Muses to write the great Imperial novel, the great *War and Peace* of the British Empire, its rise and fall, and he did not do it. He wrote *Kim*.

He wrote admirable poems about service life in India and elsewhere, and he wrote admirable short stories - whatever the term means. But in the short stories, again, we feel we're not dealing so much with the desire to create an art, to deal with an art form, as to struggle with interior problems of psychology, interior problems in Kipling's own mind, and at the same time to fulfill a lust for exact technical description, a very curious combination. The symbolic dealing

out of the inner problems, meaningful only to himself probably, and this genuine lust, this descriptive lust which covered the whole range of technology as he saw it in his own time. This is perhaps an unfair summation of what Kipling did. Some of his short stories are remarkable. Because I'm engaged at the moment in writing a scenario for a television film series based on the Acts of the Apostles and Suetonius'

Lives of the Twelve Caesars,

I was drawn back to the story he wrote called "The Church at Antioch", where we meet some of them. This is brilliantly done, this brilliant evocation of past time, but those seem to be to no end except the evocation of past time with exact geographical and historical detail. In stories of his written in the twenties, written in the thirties, the same thing occurs. It always seemed to me that the root of Kipling's short stories lies in his own inner perturbations which had to find some symbolic outlet and found some difficulty in doing so, and the fact that a great empty space had been made in his mind because of his loss of the languages of India. I had a parallel experience myself, living in Malaya as I did, speaking the Malay language every day, writing it, reading it, coming back to Europe and finding it totally useless, an empty space in my mind. I felt in myself the necessity to fill in that empty space with forms of English, words, structures which were not quite English. What Kipling seems to me to do is to fill in this emptiness with this tremendous, this voracious desire to absorb all the techniques and the languages that went along with the techniques available in his own day.

What do we call this? However we describe all these writers I've already discussed, we can say they have nothing in common, except that the forms they chose to write in were not the novel form. Now there is in France, I think, a less rigid idea of what the novel is than in Anglo-America. The novel was in the nineteenth century a long form. It was a big structure, and this was imposed, not by the inner artistic necessity to produce a big structure, but because of the conditions of publishing. We must never forget this. In England Dickens produced his mammoth novels like *Bleak House*, for example, a huge book. But the impetus to write at such length was provided by serial publication. You had to go on writing the novel fortnight after fortnight, until eventually it was evident that people were getting very tired of it and you had better bring it to an end.

War and Peace, the most massive novel of all, perhaps, was written in the same circumstances, as a serial. This was the big novel of the period. But in France, despite the example of Balzac and the bigger example of Proust, the novel has always been accepted as a possibly quite short form.

Here the term *novella* and the word *nouvelle* somehow came together. We have to remember that our own word "novel" in English comes from

novella

;

a little, new thing. The word

roman

comes from another source, the idea being that it is something in the Roman vernacular; it's in a Latinate vernacular, not in the Latin language itself. You see, even in this disparity of terms,

we find a fundamental dubiety about the nature of the form. If this is so with the novel, how much more so it is with the short story. But the form that ultimately one can appreciate is the *nouvelle*, which fulfills the basic temporal criterion of Edgar Allan Poe. We can sit down and read one of the *contes* of Flaubert in a single sitting. We can take a story by Merimée, like *Carmen*, which is a novel that could have been swollen out to great length - it is a ready-made libretto for an opera, as we know - but is comparatively short. This is, presumably, ultimately the ideal form. If only one could write an all-inclusive kind of narrative fiction, which should be not much longer than, shall we say, about 40,000 words, I think a lot of us would be happy.

We see why it cannot be done. It can't be done in France. It's very hard to do it in Anglo-America. You cannot publish a very short book. The price, the pricing process will insure a comparatively small volume. The thing looks too expensive. The prospective reader sees it in the shop, knows that however good it is, he will have read it in an hour and feel that he has thrown his money away. I wrote a fairly long novel myself a couple of years ago, about a quarter of a million words, partly as a parody of the American best-seller, knowing that the book might well sell in America because people would feel, " Ah ! we don't have to read it yet. We can buy it but we don't have to read it. One of these days when I retire I will read that. " Of course he might read *War and Peace*, but at the moment, it's a piece of furniture. It's not wasted, it doesn't have to be thrown away. Short fiction always makes the buyer feel that he's wasted his money. He spends a number of francs or pounds, he sits down, he reads it in a sitting; what do you do with it now ? Possibly read it again sometime, but there's always that sense of disappointment, whereas the massive, multi-volume *A la Recherche du temps perdu* - which nobody reads, they're always going to - sits on the shelf and becomes part of the literary furniture.

Well, I must end now with, again, a personal expression of regret that I've said nothing. I never expected to say anything, but I do know that as far as my own literary career is concerned, I deeply regret that I cannot tackle the form of the short story, which means that there must be something in the short story which is ultimately elusive to a particular kind of mind, and I think this has something to do with timing - a simple matter like musical timing, the telling of a joke and knowing exactly how long to pause before the punch line. I've written short stories, and I've known that they're wrong because they don't end at the right point. Should they end later ? Should they end earlier ? My timing has somehow gone wrong.

We can see the importance of timing, which, of course, also has something to do with the

presentation of the final epiphany or the final revelation, such as it is, if we examine some of the adaptations that have been made for film or for television of known popular short stories. I'm thinking of a short story by Somerset Maugham called "The Cold Lady". It's not a bad story. There is this retired colonel who's running a farm in Sussex or somewhere, and there's his wife who's a rather mousy lady, rather literary - reads books - and he, her husband, cannot be bothered with books. But one day she produces a volume of poems. Now this volume of poems has a tremendous impact on the literary world. It's also a best-seller. One of the booksellers says "It's hot stuff, but it's also literature." It's about a love affair, a series of poems, a sequence of poems about a love affair, and this non-literary colonel, who's been married to this lady for so long, looks at the book and says "So it's about a love affair she had with another chap, I wonder what the hell he saw in her?" End of story.

When this was filmed, the producer, director, scenario-writer tried to end at that point. It didn't work. Something else had to be added. There had to be a kind of schmalzy ending in which the wife said to the colonel, "That is you, my love, when we were much younger." We feel that's wrong as an ending. There's some curious disparity of timing between the short story on the page and the short story in its adaptive form. And I feel this mystery of timing cannot be readily solved. It's ultimately an instinctual matter, and one's instinct may run to either the short story or one's instinct may not. My instinct, unfortunately, doesn't.