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The realm of prophecy and that of betting on racehorses have at least two things in common: whereas both are a mug's game the participants in each are always promising to learn by experience but rarely do.

When at the conclusion of *The Modern Short Story* in 1941 I prophesied that if the war then in progress produced nothing else in the way of literature it would certainly provide a rich crop of short stories, I did not for one moment believe that the statement was by any means a rash one. On the contrary, I felt it to be self-evident that at such a time of dislocation, excitement and widening of experience in all manner of directions and for all manner of people, a vast amount of material, inestimable, as I saw it, in its value for short story writers both established and new, would inevitably be thrown up. The bombing of London,

the war in all its theatres, in the air, on the sea, in the desert, in the jungle: all this offered, or seemed to offer, a rich and exciting vein of experience such as the comparatively humdrum days of peace could never match. Out of it, I consequently thought, must come short stories: my bet being on short stories rather than novels for the good reason that at such a time of crisis the physical effort of producing the shorter form must inevitably make it the more probable and acceptable medium of the two.

In all this I made several mistakes, having forgotten, for example, the fundamental principle that because a short story is short it is not therefore easier to write than a novel, ten, twenty or thirty times its length—the exact reverse being in fact the truth. I had also forgotten another truth, namely, that mere experience of itself cannot automatically create a work of art, since in the last crucial essence all art is a physical act. All the fine dreams, the sublimest excursions of the mind, the most exciting of experiences, the most beautiful of thoughts are as nothing until the act of transmuting them into physical terms has been accomplished. Until the writer has put pen to paper, the artist his paint to canvas, the sculptor his tools to wood, stone and marble, the composer his notes to the score, there is, in fact, nothing.

I had also allowed myself to be misled in yet another direction. I had supposed that the aftermath of war would find expression, after the long dark tragic years, in light and joy. It never occurred to me, even remotely, that it might well express itself in a sourness even darker. Of course the virtues of hindsight are legion. We could not possibly know, in 1941, what course or courses literature would seek out for itself, or be seduced into, in the fifties, sixties, or, Heaven help us, the seventies. We had no way of foreseeing the era of the Angry Young Men, the Permissive Society or the Parade of Pornography.

All this, however, duly came about. The playwrights of the 1950s assailed us and then, for the most part, faded away; various firework novelists followed them in the 1960s and as rapidly fell as damp squibs; there followed the band wagon of *Oh! Calcutta* and its dubious brethren, led for the most part by persons with neither taste nor talent. The gutter took over; the stench was noisome. A new generation of writers sprang up with no other purpose than to tell all, revolting or revoltingly silly though it might be; public copulation, with all the attendant vocabulary, was abroad on stage and screen and no less palpably evident on the printed page. All these things were repeated in America, *ad nauseam*, too.

This, then, was the era of “tell all”: the worst possible climate and conditions in which the short story could be expected to flourish. For in the short story, you cannot possibly tell all; this is the road to confusion and negation. In writing the short story, it is essentials that matter. As in a great drawing, so in a great short story: it is the lines that are left out that are of paramount importance. Not that this is all; it is knowing what lines to leave out that is of the greatest importance, too. There is in one of Tchehov’s letters a reply of his to a correspondent who wished to have Tchehov’s opinion on X, a minor Russian writer of the time. Tchehov’s reply is illuminating in its brevity: “I

long to rewrite it," he wrote, "*lacily*". Exactly. "Lacily" is the *mot juste*, expressing the very essence of what the short story should be, showing that it must depict more by implication than by statement, more by what is left out than left in. It ought, in fact, to resemble lace: strong but delicate, deviously woven yet full of light and air.

The antithesis of all this is the school of "tell all," which may otherwise be called "the school of stodge," the school where all is offered and nothing left to the imagination, the perception, or the wit of the reader. At the same time, largely due to the war, yet another phenomenon appeared: namely that of the so-called reportage, the factual, or documentary school of writing. The latter was the death-kiss also of many British films before, during, and after the war. An even more bastard form eventually raised its obtuse, ugly head: a creature known as documentary fiction. No such animal can of course exist, since the very definition is a contradiction in terms. What is fiction cannot be documentary, what is documentary cannot be fiction. The business of writing fiction is, in fact, an exercise in the art of telling lies. If the writer tells these lies with all the art and skill he is able to command then he will not only persuade his readers that what he is telling them is the truth but also that it is truer than life itself: all of which brings us back to Thackeray's well-known dictum that "the work of fiction contains more truth in solution than the work which purports to be all true." In other words it is through fidelity to imagination and not fidelity to observation that the truth will be revealed.

My prophecy as to the probability of a new golden age of the short story, such as we had on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s and 1930s was, therefore, dismally unfulfilled. There were of course other factors mitigating against it, not the least of them being the economic situation. Even before the war in England the little magazines to which writers of my generation contributed and were very glad to contribute, were already dead or dying. Nor was it merely little magazines that disappeared; in America even a magazine such as *Colliers*, with a reputed circulation of some millions, was unable to survive; other notable names followed it. Everywhere, therefore, the market for stories dwindled. Young writers, however ardent their desire to write short stories and live by them, found themselves forced, by the sheer economics of the business, into spheres that offered security: novels, plays and some television drama. Nor could they be blamed for this.

This then is the situation of the short story today; if it is not quite one of unmitigated gloom it is certainly not bright. Nor can I myself see it, in a world of rising costs, not only of printing and production but in the very cost of living itself, getting any brighter. It is said that D. H. Lawrence, as a young man, managed on ten shillings a week; another short story writer friend of mine certainly lived on a pound; I, rather more fortunate, scraped along on two pounds. I do not need to point out the ludicrous nature of all this in relation to the literary world of today. Like Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad, who firmly rejected the idea of living in a garret, I have no use for starvation as a means of inspiring writers to create masterpieces. They are better done on full bellies.

To this pessimistic picture must be added the fact that the reading public, not only in Britain and America, but also on the continent, shows no disposition to revise its age-old prejudice against reading short stories in volume form. It grants some exceptions to this, of course, as in the case of Maugham, Kipling and some others, but by and large it views volumes of short stories with grave and unwarranted suspicion. The young short story writer, even if able to get his stories published between two covers, need look for no vast fortune in that direction.

Still, paradoxically, great numbers of people yearn to write short stories. A competition for short stories in a national newspaper some few years back is said to have produced the staggering figure of 50,000 entries, of which only the merest handful were publishable. I do not propose to examine here the causes of so lamentable a state of affairs. I will merely repeat what I have said time and time again: that the short story is the most difficult and exacting of all prose forms; it cannot be treated as a spare-time occupation; and above all it must not be allowed to foster the illusion, as I pointed out earlier in this preface, that its very brevity makes it easy to do.

All this brings me to a restatement of what *The Modern Short Story* purports to be and do. It does *not* exist as a manual of instruction for writing short stories; such was never my intention. It examines, instead, the work of many of the most distinguished masters of the form, confiding almost all of its investigations into the form as evolved in the 19th century and as we know it today: an essentially modern art.

Writing a short story may be compared with building a house with match-sticks. There comes a point in its construction when the addition of another stick may well bring down the whole affair in ruins. Thus balance is one of the supreme essentials to its creation and nowhere is this more true than in the very short story, say of one thousand words or less, or in the *novella*, fifteen or twenty times as long.

If it should be thought that one thousand words is really short then I recommend a glance at the Authorized Version of *The Prodigal Son*. This long-renowned and beautiful story contains something just over 130 words and begins with what would at first appear to be an extremely ordinary sentence: "A certain man had two sons". I suggest, on the contrary, that it is a very remarkable sentence, introducing as it does the story's three main characters in exactly six words. Here indeed is true economy.

Balance without stiffness, economy without cramp, essentials that are not merely bare bones, a canvas of scene and character which, though only a quarter or even a tenth of the size of the novel, must nevertheless satisfy the reader just as much and do so, as I have already remarked, perhaps more by what it leaves out than by what it puts in—these are merely a few of the technical challenges that make the *novella* so fascinating to the truly creative artist. It is moreover important not only that the reader should be satisfied but that, as at the end of a perfectly created meal, he should be left wanting a little more—or in other words that his curiosity and interest in the author's char-

acters is still sharp enough to make him want to walk out with them beyond the printed page.

“Fiction,” it has been said, “is the natural heir to poetry”; if this is true, and I firmly believe it is, I find it equally true that the short story is to fiction what the lyric is to poetry. In its finest mould the short story is, in fact, a prose poem. If the reader of *The Modern Short Story* absorbs this truth as he reads then the purpose of this book will have been fully justified. (pp. 7-12)