

TELLING THE TALE

The Modern Short Story. By H. E. BATES.
Nelson, 7s. 6d.

The common prejudice against short stories in England—a prejudice which has never existed in Russia, France or America, where the best short stories are written, has left the accusation that it is a minority cult with a High Church appeal to the eye. Mr. H. E. Bates, who is very eminent in its practice, refutes this and writes the brief history of the art, analyses the chief influences which have formed it and defends it as a new form of writing with an original achievement and future. This was worth doing, for the short story as we have known it in the last 30 years or more is a new form of writing: short stories are not novels compressed to the dimension of an emergency ration. They are the result of a marriage between the reporter and the poet. They have broken into the field of fiction very much as free verse broke into poetry in the 'eighties. But to say that these stories are something new in literature does not, I am afraid, mean as Mr. Bates hopes, that they are going even in a minor degree to be as important as the invention of the drama in the sixteenth century or the novel in the eighteenth. I also have that hope and can see many arguments for it. The short story writer, like the makers of films, can cover the ground more quickly and with a more exciting and summary variety than the novelist. But it is as well to remember that dissenting cults have a way of dwindling and returning eventually to the main body. The cinema may absorb the short story. The short story may prove to have been simply nature's way of purging the novel of its verbiage, its repetitions, and its plodding devotion to the frontal attack on its subjects. This purging has been, indeed, already the effect of Hemingway's stories on the modern novel, though not, oddly enough, on the latest work of Hemingway himself.

The history of the short story in Europe and America is recent. It begins when both Gogol and Poe, writing almost at the same time, struck out from the folk tale and the novel. The aim appears even then to have been to make a genre which would have the tension of poetry, the insinuation of unofficial news. The break can perhaps be seen more easily in Balzac, where pieces like *Honorine*, *Le Curé de Tours*, *Le Chef d'Oeuvre Inconnu* or *Une Passion dans le Désert* are not the novelist's left-overs or discarded chapters like *La Maison du Chat qui Pelote*. The hankering had existed in a maddening way in the seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century novelists: there are Fielding's *Man on the Hill* wedged tediously into *Tom Jones*, the dilatory romances which stop the action of *Don Quixote* or the human documents through which the reader makes his weary detour in *Gil Blas*. The novelist was always aware of the value of these unofficial stories, with their heightened or at any rate private and different rhythm.

The strange thing, as Mr. Bates points out, is that while France, Russia and America produced masters in this new form, next to nothing of importance was written in English until Kipling. What is the explanation? The national suspicion of wit and intellect? Mr. Bates's suggestions are that the story cannot bear the weight of words and moral injunction which English writers liked to carry in the nineteenth century, that class barriers held the novel like a mould and gave it an official prestige. New literary forms arise as society itself changes; and English society did not change. The emancipated middle class of the eighteenth century merely got richer in the nineteenth. In Mr. Bates's mind—and I think he is right—there is some connection between freedom of movement in society which class barriers restrict, the reporter's irreverent pass into privacy, and the development of short story writing. In England the man with an anecdote to tell, the curious experience or emotion or man to describe had to give it the pomp of conventional literary ceremony; in Russia and

America the thing could be thrown out as a piece of life without social apology, for the class areas were simpler and wider. Life had no position to keep up; and for a new literary form, that is not only propitious but indispensable, as one may see from the birth of the novel itself. Bret Harte—in an interesting passage quoted by Mr. Bates—seems to support this theory. Bret Harte believed that the American short story was born out of the folk humour—not exactly rich in a middle class culture—upon which people fall back when they are lost in exceptional circumstances, when society is in chaos as American society was in his time. To humour he might have added folk horror which gets a free rein from public credulity when standards have gone and new ones have yet to be made. The link of Poe's stories with the enormous craze for spiritualism in the United States is well-known.

But these theories are so speculative that one looks around for more concrete reasons for the time lag in the production of distinguished short stories in England. The place to turn to is, of course, periodical literature. Here there is a suggestion. It looks to me as though the English essay is responsible for suffocating the child. From Steele to Lamb, from the sketches of Thackeray to the light articles of the 'nineties there was plenty of short impromptu writing, but people and living were incidental to reflection. The admired aim was not the sort of tension a story would have had, but a relaxation and dispersal of tension. The ideal of the English reporter—see old files of the *Times*—was to write like a don in his cups; and if one is bent on finding the real English short stories of the period, one must look in the verses of the music-hall—"At Trinity Church I met me doom; Now we live in a top back room"—in the dramatic poems of Browning and the rhymed *faits divers* of Thomas Hardy.

Mr. Bates goes over the work of Maupassant and Chehov, Kipling, Mansfield, Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson and Hemingway with the acute eye of a practitioner, and discusses their contribution. To his own generation he is very kind. We all raise our hats politely. The virtue and vice of our contribution is that it began, at any rate, as a substitute for poetry, and this rather than the inability to write as well as Chehov has been its disadvantage. The book will be pleasant for the general reader, useful to schools, particularly in its discussion of methods, and is brightly and shrewdly written; as a piece of criticism it is appreciative rather than penetrating. More than the novel, the short story has depended on outstanding personalities who can give the quickly discoverable tricks a hard-headed assurance, like Maupassant's, or a startling force like D. H. Lawrence's. The war and dislocation of society certainly provide the episodic material which is the form's special food, but unless writers develop moral gravity it will cease to be more than a decorative contribution to imaginative literature. The lack of comic writing is due to this failure. An example of what is meant by this gravity can be taken from Joyce's *The Dead*, which appears to have impressed most critics chiefly because of its beautiful and often quoted last paragraph. This story really stands firm because Joyce had invested the comedy of the Christmas party which is described with a subtle and dual sense of time. The people stand with one foot in history and with the other in eternity. The "beautiful school" of poetic Chehovian short story writers have always tended to plump for the snow and eternity at the end of *The Dead* because these are aesthetically effective; but without the solid sense of historical situation in the heart of the story this effect would have the mere prettiness of a half-truth.

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