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A note on the English short story

THE history of the English short story is a melancholy one. Indeed it might be said that the English short story, before 1900 at least, has no history—for the simple reason that it never existed. It is true that certain nineteenth-century novelists, Dickens, Hardy and Mrs. Gaskell, for example, wrote what were termed short stories, but which were in reality nothing more than a potted extract of novel—or in other words, novels in miniature. The English nineteenth-century novel being what it was, a discursive, exhaustive, and often tedious thing, these short stories were also discursive, exhaustive and in the case of Dickens, so tedious that nine out of ten readers never trouble to finish those short stories which he sandwiched in, for some obscure reason, between the chapters of his novels. For the English nineteenth-century novelist the short story was a kind of orphan literary slavey—very useful for cleaning up the odd scraps of ideas which were too good to be thrown away yet not good enough to be the subjects of novels. So that the true short-story writer, the artistic teller of tales, was unknown though it is possible that he existed in the guise of essayist. It is

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interesting to note that at this time Turgenev was writing *A Sportsman's Sketches*, Tolstoy such masterly short stories as *Family Happiness*, Mérimée such forerunners of the modern surprise story as *Mateo Falcone*, and Poe his masterpieces of imagination and pathological horror.

This famine in short stories continued in England down to the end of the nineteenth century. The short story, when it was considered at all, was a thing to be held in unspoken, if not spoken, contempt. The novel was large, therefore it was great; the short story was small, therefore it was insignificant. But meanwhile Turgenev had been succeeded by Tchegov, Mérimée by Maupassant, Poe by Ambrose Bierce—three writers who, more than all others, were to influence and enrich the short story with vitality and beauty. In England, Dickens had been succeeded by Arnold Bennett, who made the astounding confession that it was Turgenev who had taught him to write, and Hardy by Galsworthy, in whose work the influences of Turgenev was so obvious that he did not need to make the confession that Bennett had done. These men wrote short stories. H. G. Wells, Conrad, George Moore also wrote short stories. But all these writers were regarded primarily as novelists and only secondarily as short-story writers, and though the contempt for the short story had lessened, it still remained.

This was the state of the short story at the end of the Great War. It is interesting to recall that we were promised, then, a poetical and dramatic renaissance. A great epoch of national sacrifice and suffering, we were assured, had always been followed by an epoch of poetical fervour: the young men would pour out their songs: the flame of drama, fed by blood, would burn richly. Unfortunately for these expectations, a great many young poets could not sing because they were dead, and a great many young dramatists

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had acted in a comedy so realistic that their own plots seemed insipid and pointless beside it. The poetical renaissance hardly materialised. But when a new generation of poets sprang up a most unexpected renaissance did take place. It was the renaissance of the short story.

It was an unexpected event, though a most natural one, for the short story more than any other form was the perfect outlet for the creative energy of any poet who had been born in a world of bitterness and blood and yet had life before him. The young poet of another and less troubled generation had sung his lyrics. But the poets' voices of the post-War generation had broken early, and though they had songs to sing, they had not the voices with which to sing them. How were they to express themselves? They wanted a medium through which they could express both their joy and disillusionment, both their criticism of life and their delight in it. The short story was the only medium in literature that would satisfy their need. More than that, it was the perfect medium, and the post-War short-story writer made the discovery that Tchegov and Maupassant had made before him, that the short story was the most flexible of all prose forms, that it could be anything from a prose-poem without a plot or character to an analysis of the most complex human emotions, that it could deal with any subject under the sun, from the death of a horse to a young girl's first love affair, and for the first time in English literature the short-story became something more than a novel in miniature.

But curiously the old indifference, the old lack of public taste for the short story, remained. People still took back to their lending libraries volumes of short stories, unread, which they had mistakenly borrowed as novels. Publishers still held up their hands in commercial horror at the suggested publication of a volume of tales. The editor who printed a

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story of literary value was rarer than such a short story itself had been fifty years before.

Today that indifference for the short story has vanished. Ten years ago the existence in England of a daily newspaper publishing a short story each morning would have been a miracle. Today there are ten newspapers offering a short story each day to a public that has at last grown tired of serials it never read. The policy of the newspapers seems to me a significant one. It would not surprise me indeed if the novel, during the next ten years, lost its position of popularity to the short story. There could be no more refreshing literary revolution.