



**Journal
of the Short Story in English**
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

64 | Spring 2015
Special Section: The Modernist Short Story, and Varia

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Electronic version

URL: <http://jsse.revues.org/1553>
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2015
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Michael Basseler and Christine Reynier, « Re-framing the Modernist Short Story: Introduction », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 64 | Spring 2015, Online since 01 March 2017, connection on 02 May 2017. URL : <http://jsse.revues.org/1553>

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Re-framing the Modernist Short Story: Introduction

Michael Basseler and Christine Reynier

- 1 This issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* offers a selection of essays from the conference on “The Short Story and Short Story Collection in the Modernist Period: Between Theory and Practice” that was organized by the departments of literary studies of the universities of Ghent, Leuven and Perugia and took place in September 2013 at the Academia Belgica in Rome. The conference’s primary aim, as stated in the call for papers, was “to reflect on the modern short story [...] from a theoretical perspective, but it also [sought] to contextualise this theoretical approach through a number of case studies from different literary traditions.” As a result, the papers gathered in this issue all attempt to critically re-examine and broaden our understanding of “the” modernist short story, while grappling with questions of canon-formation, dominant aesthetics and politics, modernist ideologies and the very role of the short story genre within the larger modernist literary field.
- 2 Through various methodologies and theoretical approaches, the selected papers, which deal primarily with modernist British and American short story writers, thus undertake to “reframe” the modernist short story. As a conceptual metaphor, the notion of reframing is meant to highlight the deliberate changes in vision and perspective that the present papers seek to facilitate. While there arguably exists a dominant picture of the modernist short story, usually framed by short story criticism as an art of epiphany, fragmentation and formalist experimentalism (see Adrian Hunter’s afterword for a detailed discussion), the contributions to the issue at hand use new frames, so to speak, in order to refashion this picture. They thereby bring to the fore alternative modernisms in which the short story plays a crucial role in one way or another. Informed by the latest advances in literary and interdisciplinary theory and philosophy, these papers provide fresh readings of specific short stories as well as new insights into the modernist short story itself. Definitely turning away from formalism and structuralism, but also from post-structuralism and deconstruction, the essays collected in this issue adopt and

advance innovative theoretical approaches, favouring more interdisciplinary readings that go beyond the familiar frameworks of short story theory, and explore new ways of contextualizing the short story that bring out the very stuff life is made of.

- 3 While under-valued short stories by canonical writers like F.S. Fitzgerald, Katherine Mansfield or Virginia Woolf are re-valued, the limits of the modernist canon are extended so as to include short story writers regarded as marginal: T. F. Powys, F. P. Grove, as well as colonial writers like Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham. The modernist canon is thus tentatively reframed.
- 4 The very definition of the modernist short story is in the process extended as the present essays take into account the way in which the socio-historical context is instrumental in shaping this definition. In the end, not only is an alternative genealogy of the modernist short story provided, but undervalued aspects of the modernist short story are brought out. Indeed, critics have long followed the Modernists' own emphasis on their radically new experimental mode of writing. This has prompted studies that try to connect modernist and postmodern forms of experimentation. Recently, in *Modernism, Postmodernism and the Short Story in English*, Jorge Sacido attempted to assess how the short story helps to redefine modernism and postmodernism and the way they relate to each other. The essays collected here take a different but complementary direction and delineate, along the lines of Hunter's previous work and of his afterword in the present issue, an alternative genealogy of the modernist short story, pointing out what the modernist short story, in spite of its innovative impulse, owes to the nineteenth century. Acknowledging this means reassessing the very modernity of the modernist short story; it also helps to shift the emphasis from structural matters to little explored aspects of the modernist short story: the simple, the aging, the destitute, the ab-normal and more generally, poverty and humbleness, which may in turn help to reframe the modernist canon and the picture of the modernist short story. As David Trotter has argued, the novel is "a literary form largely given over to affirmative action" (4) and the stabilization of categories like nation, class or sexual orientation, while the modernist short story is marked by its tendency toward dis-enablement and dis-affirmation. This thesis surfaces to a greater or lesser degree in some of the essays (James, Eeckhout, Basseler) and is challenged or expanded by others (Reynier). Drawing on a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, this issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* thus explores and maps out new paths for future readings of the modernist short story.

Reframing the modernist canon

- 5 Following H.E. Bates, Milosz Wojtyna pinpoints in "Outside the Canon—T. F. Powys's Short Stories and the Ordinary" the binding and misleading nature of concepts developed by modernist critics who often followed in the footsteps of the modernists themselves. T. F. Powys is shown to deflate eventfulness in his short stories and promote events that are trivial, repetitive and synonymous with boredom. The value of the everyday and the ordinary as an end in itself (rather than its transformation into some epiphanic experience) is emphasized and re-examined in the light of Lefebvre and de Certeau in an attempt to break with a negative aesthetics of the quotidian and the commonplace. Characterization is also revisited in the short fiction of a writer who undermines realist conventions without resorting to the modernist representation of human consciousness.

On the whole, because they stand on the margins of modernism, Powys's short stories compel us to reframe the modernist canon.

- 6 In her article "Spatial, Temporal and Linguistic Displacement in Kipling's and Maugham's Colonial Short Stories: the Disrupting Power of the Colonial in Modern Short Fiction," Jaine Chemmachery brings two short story writers who also wrote from the margin, center-stage. Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham are shown to resort, in their early short stories, to experimental narrative discourse and polyphony, while displaying an interest in psychoanalytic theories and developing themes like exile, usually connected to modernist writing. Re-valuing undervalued short stories, Chemmachery points out not only what Kipling and Maugham owe to the Victorian era and a conservative ideology, but also how they connect, both through their poetics and thematics, to modernist short story writing. She thus comes to question the critical consensus, gives a fresh appraisal of Kipling's and Maugham's short stories and of these two writers' positions in relation to, rather than outside, modernism. Conversely, the modernist canon is reframed.

Extending the definition of the modernist short story

- 7 Building on the existing criticism on Woolf's short stories while decentering critical practices, Amy Bromley offers a fresh perspective in her essay entitled "Flying round her, across her, towards her in a pattern': Towards a Materialist Historiography of Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction." Bromley interrogates framing and editorial decisions, which leads her to embrace the historical context. Looking at the magazines some short stories were published in, and examining Woolf's own framing practices (punctuation, for example), Bromley exposes the unstable nature of Woolf's short stories in a new way and positions Woolf among the Surrealists and the Parisian avant-garde. This exciting research promises to renew the definition not only of Woolf's short stories but also of the modernist short story at large.
- 8 Andrew James focuses on a lesser known short story cycle *Tales from the Margin* by German-Canadian writer Frederick Philip Grove. In his carefully researched essay, "The Tales of Frederick Philip Grove," James explores how our interpretation of these stories changes when they are read as tales. With reference to canonical writers like Chaucer, Poe, and Conrad, James argues that tales are marked by three characteristics, namely a tendency to cross class barriers, a "psychological penetration" of marginal characters, and a rather subjective style of narration. All of these characteristics are shown to be central in Grove's short story writing. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Grove's "tales" with episodes from his own troubled life as an immigrant not only discloses the author's socialist ideals and his striving for a new identity, but also brings to the fore the cultural climate in early twentieth-century Canada.

The modernist short story redefined as an art of disablement

- 9 With "A Normal Biography Reversed: the Temporalization of Life in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,'" Michael Basseler offers a radically new reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," often dismissed as of little interest. Fitzgerald's introduction of "fabulous time" and anomalies in the aging process

of his protagonist are read through the defamiliarizing lens of life-course studies. Fitzgerald's seemingly absurd and inconceivable character, a seventy-year old baby, is analyzed as an inverted but very "normal biography," the outcome of his own time. A marginal short story is thus reassessed as bearing directly on the social upheavals of modernist times and the alienating effects of the modern life-course regime.

- 10 In "Theorizing the Queer Modernist Short Story: from Failures of Sociality to Negative Affects," Bart Eeckhout focuses on non-normative sexualities in six stories by Sherwood Anderson, Katherine Mansfield, E.M. Forster, Radclyffe Hall, D.H. Lawrence, and Gertrude Stein, and thus sheds light on the queerness of Anglophone literary modernism. Drawing on the work by contemporary theorists such as José Muñoz and Heather Love, Eeckhout is primarily interested in what these stories reveal about modernism's normative social discourses that are most significantly reflected in failures of sociality and negative affects. While a melancholic experience of feeling backward pervades most of the stories, the close analyses reveal a great deal about the structures of feeling of modernist queerness that are somewhat at odds with the progress narrative of today's LGBT criticism and activism.
- 11 Taking its cue from the influential work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and particularly his concept of poverty as bareness and use, Christine Reynier's thought-provoking essay, "Theorising the Modernist Short Story with Woolf (and Agamben) as an Art of Empowering 'Poverty'" zeros in on the ethical dimensions of the genre in general and of Virginia Woolf's writing in particular. What Woolf has in common with other great writers of the modernist era like William Faulkner or F. Scott Fitzgerald, is that her short stories have been hitherto regarded as secondary to her achievements in the novel. Reynier challenges this position by pointing out the great variety and artfulness of Woolf's short fiction which she defines as an "empowering art of poverty" since it combines a simplicity of style with an ethical disposition, intensity, and a "use" of the property of other writers and artists (i.e. intertextuality). This notion of the short story as an art of poverty provides an intriguing theoretical angle for reassessing the significance and the very conception not only of Woolf's short fiction but of the modernist short story in general.

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