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Theatricality in the Short Story: Staging the Word?

Laurent Lepaludier

- 1 After working for two years on orality in the short story, the CRILA research centre has been focusing its seminars on the question of theatricality in the short story. The symposium on the question appropriately broadened the research on an international basis. This paper aims at sorting out general directions on the subject. As the call for papers indicated, “[T]he short story is obviously not a dramatic genre, however it sometimes produces theatrical effects.” Theatricality is here simply understood as related to the theatre, or the presentation of plays. The second meaning of the term — i.e. histrionic or artificial — will be considered as a possible quality of theatre-acting. In his *Introduction à l’architexte*¹, Gérard Genette retraces Plato’s and Aristotle’s views on the fundamental forms of literature: the lyrical form, the dramatic form and the epic. He explains that Plato distinguished between the purely narrative mode (corresponding to the lyrical form), the purely mimetic mode (corresponding to the dramatic form) and a mixed mode (with narrative and mimetic forms) corresponding to the epic. Plato’s triad eventually gave way to Aristotle’s dyad: the purely narrative form was neglected and the mixed form was considered as narrative. Genette develops a historical study of the evolution of these formal categories with the Latins, XVIth, XVIIth and XVIIIth century poetics, and finally more recent criticism.
- 2 Narrative fiction can actually be seen as a mixed mode, a mode which most of the time blends the narrative and the dramatic forms. If the short story cannot be defined as a theatrical genre, *stricto sensu*, such marks as the presence of dialogues testify to the dramatic dimension of many stories. In a short story, some passages may create effects of theatricality. But dialogue is not the only form of theatricality in the short story. This calls for a study of the nature and types of theatricality shown in a short story.
- 3 What exactly compares with the theatre? When does the story mimic the theatre and with what devices? What effects, motivations and implications are there in a genre which mixes the narrative and the dramatic modes? These are general questions I would like to examine and which might inspire some reflexions and further

developments or reactions. It seems first that a number of ambiguities should be clarified, for when the term “theatricality” is used, it is meant to define different relations to the theatre. Another point of discussion bears on the mixed quality of a type of narrative fiction which mimics the theatre. When the dramatic dimension of some stories supersedes the narrative one, it seems to “aspire to the condition” of theatre — to slightly pastiche and adapt Walter Pater’s famous quote from *The Renaissance*, “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music”². The effects of theatricality will thus be evoked. Finally, when the short story blends the resources of narrative fiction and those of drama, it becomes a sort of versatile hybrid form whose powers should be examined.

The theatricality of the short story

- 4 The theatricality of narrative fiction in general — and of the short story in particular — should be compared with and differentiated from drama itself. Strictly speaking, the theatricality of a text does not compare with a theatrical performance on stage. The two different modes of mimesis create two different types of illusion. The dramatic mode implies a direct sensory contact between the characters and the audience. The staging of the scene necessitates the presence of actors who impersonate the characters and make us believe in their presence. Quite different is the experience of reading, based on the reader’s power of imagination and his/her faculty to stage the scene in his/her mind. Drama involves watching and hearing. It also differs from reading in the sense that another semiotic encoding/decoding is made possible thanks to direct sensory experience. The actors’ gestures, their movements, the tones of the voices, the lighting, the setting, etc. contribute to producing profound and complex effects on the audience. This cannot be achieved in reading, at least not through the same means. In addition, drama is essentially a collective activity. It involves the cultural and social interaction of a company of actors with an audience, whereas reading a short story — even a theatrical one — is bound to be an individual activity relating a reader with a text. The question of interpretation is thus central: a company of actors already interpret the script of a play for the benefit of an audience and mediate between the audience and the script, whereas the reader of narrative fiction directly interprets the significance of a story. The phenomenological differences in nature between the performance of a play and the reading of a short story are obvious and can be put aside for a while before we return to the comparison of their effects.
- 5 Comparing a short story with the script of a play seems much more appropriate. Indeed the script of a play and a short story are both texts, and both call for a reading experience. Thus they appeal to the imagination of the reader and preclude direct sensory experience. They both involve a relation between a reader —an individual reader, most of the time— and a text. Of course, a collective or shared reading is possible in cases of rehearsal or dramatised reading in the classroom, the latter being also possible for the short story if it is not too long. But the essential difference lies in the exclusively dramatic form of the script, whereas the dramatic short story also allows passages of narration. Stage directions appear in the theatrical script, but they are most often reduced to a bare minimum. There are, of course, exceptions: some playwrights tend to develop stage directions mostly in descriptive introductions to the plays. This is the case of Eugene O’Neill, for instance. Yet, if, on the whole, drama relies

mostly on the characters' enunciation to impart the audience with the necessary information for them to understand the scene, the short story may very well rely on other types of enunciation than dialogues to convey information about the atmosphere, the setting, a narrator's view or impressions, the characters' thoughts, the symbolic significance of the text, etc. The narrative and descriptive capacities of a short story can be relied on. When reading Henry James's, D.H. Lawrence's, Joseph Conrad's or Virginia Woolf's stories, to name but a few famous writers, much meaning is derived from what is not said by the characters. This is not true only of pre-modernist and modernist writers. It also applies to Edgar Poe's, or Raymond Carver's, or Alistair McLeod's stories, for instance. Nevertheless, the capacity of a short story to approach the theatrical script is averred. In "A Society", for instance, Virginia Woolf devotes the main body of the text to verbal exchanges which mimic the theatre.

- 6 Generic criticism has identified dramatic and narrative poles in the short story, and more generally in narrative fiction. "Telling" and "showing" are indeed the two major ways of presenting a character or a scene. Some stories rely more on telling and others on showing. There are short stories which are exclusively narrative or descriptive, where dialogue is not used at all, such as Virginia Woolf's "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection"³. Short stories which exclude all narration or description are certainly more rare and, all things considered, the genre of the short story may very well imply, because of its nature, a certain resistance to a complete dramatisation which would turn the short story into the script of a play. Reading Helen Simpson's story collection *Four Bare legs in a Bed and Other Stories*⁴, one may expect "Labour" to be a short story. Yet, it has the form of a five-act Aristotelian play complying with the rules of the three unities and with *dramatis personae* including the prospective mother, the midwives, the uterus, the cervix etc. In fact, it is the script of a short comic play sharing much more in the spirit of the collection of stories. In less particular cases, some features of the short story genre may constitute factors of resistance to or limitation of the dramatic impulse. The very brevity of the short story often confines the theatrical potentials of the short story to the sketch. The orientation of the short story towards producing what Edgar Poe called the "unique or single effect"⁵ may be instrumental in precluding certain dramatic genres which call for a fuller and more complex development. In addition, the Joycean epiphany, which often characterises the short story, might be too limited or too intimate to be given a theatrical dimension. The narrative and descriptive impulses and their extensive capacities, aspirations towards the condition of music or the image may also discourage an overwhelming conquest of the story by the dramatic impulse. What is more, if both the play and the short story are characterised by a certain condensation, this condensation is in fact of two different types. The dramatic one is due to the absence of a narrative voice or commentary and implies that information is passed on essentially through the characters' discourses, whereas condensation in the short story is due to lack of textual space.
- 7 Another point of comparison can be examined. When the short story refers or alludes to a play, the nature of its theatricality is then intertextual. This can be achieved either through content (reference to a character, a situation, a scene belonging to a play) or through the imitation of the form (through pastiche or parody, for instance). In the first case, the genre of the short story itself is not directly affected as the reader continues to see the text as a short story alluding to a play. Thus, E.M. Forster's story "The Road from Colonus"⁶ alludes to Sophocles' Theban tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus*, yet

the genre of this short story itself is not directly affected by the allusion. The two genres are thus treated on two different planes. In the second case — i.e. when the story imitates a dramatic genre — , intertextuality affects more directly the nature of the short story since it seems to change it — albeit partly and for a time — into the script of a play. As a matter of fact, these two types of devices — reference to drama as content and imitation of theatrical form — are often mixed in a story and “The Road from Colonus” is not completely devoid of parodic elements based on subversive imitation of form. It is those formal parallels generating the theatricality of the short story which will more particularly focus my interest.

Effects of theatricality

- 8 When the story mimics the theatre by means of certain devices, it produces effects of theatricality which may give the impression that the story “aspires towards the condition” of theatre, so to speak. It may come close to the theatre in two ways, either because it resembles the script of a play or because it creates the illusion of a theatrical performance.
- 9 In passages of dialogues, the short story may appear to be similar to the script of a play. Then, the narrative voice effaces itself or is limited to indications which resemble stage directions. This could be exemplified by a great number of stories. Most of the short story “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” by James Joyce could pass for the script of a play. Dialogues come forth and it is as though the words acquired a theatrical dimension. Like in drama, the significance of the story is conveyed essentially through the characters’ parts and the dramaturgy. The narrative is stripped of all that would not be useful for a play and the style resembles stage directions. In two pages ⁷, the only narrative indications, apart from the regular use of declarative verbs and subjects which allow an identification of the character speaking, are:

Mr Henchy returned with the candlestick and put it on the table. He sat down again at the fire. There was silence for a few moments.(...)

Mr O’Connor laughed.(...).

At this point there was a knock at the door, and a boy put in his head.(...)

The old man helped the boy to transfer the bottles from the basket to the table and counted the full tally.(...)
- 10 The effect of theatricality is thus achieved and the reader feels as if he's watching a play in his/her imagination. The scene is seen potentially as a script which could easily be put on stage. Time corresponds exactly to the time of discourse on stage, and descriptive and narrative indications are directed towards the performance. There is no place for a narrator’s comments or characters’ inner thoughts which would not be voiced. The scene is completely public.
- 11 Considering its macrostructure, a short story may mimic the script of a play, following rules of a particular dramatic genre: the tragedy, the comedy, the farce, the *tableau*, the pantomime, the melodrama, the Celtic Renaissance play, the Kabuki play, etc. The papers which follow will illustrate the great diversity of parallels between short stories and dramatic genres.
- 12 Theatrical effects are not restricted to a formal resemblance with the script of a play. Another type of dramatic effect is due to the power of the short story to create the illusion of performance. In other words, the reader of a short story may feel that the

scene evoked is actually performed in front of his/her eyes, as on a stage. This is due to several combined factors which I would like to identify —albeit briefly and incompletely—, as a starting point for further developments. For a short story to create the illusion of drama, the scene evoked must be “spectacular”, i.e. suggest that it is worth watching by an audience. It must have visual and oral qualities, for indeed a dramatic scene needs to be seen and heard. Thus dramatic action or a vivid conversation allow the reader to imagine the scene easily. In “Other Kingdom” by E.M. Forster, for instance, Harcourt Worters and Miss Evelyn Beaumont express their opposite conceptions of “Other Kingdom Copse”, a wood that he, the wealthy owner, has bought her as a present. The scene appears vividly on the reader’s inner imaginary stage:

“A simple fence,” he continued, “just like what I have put round my garden and the fields. Then at the other side of the copse, away from the house, I would put a gate, and have keys – two keys, I think – one for me and one for you – not more; and I would bring the asphalt path – ”

“But, Harcourt – ”

“But, Evelyn!”

“I – I – I – ”

“You – you – you – ?”

“I- I don’t want an asphalt path.”

“No? Perhaps you are right. Cinders perhaps. Yes. Or even gravel.”

“But, Harcourt – I don’t want a path at all. I – I – can’t afford a path.”

He gave a roar of triumphant laughter. “Dearest! As if you were going to be bothered? The path’s part of my present.”⁸

- 13 The dramatic conflict over the asphalt path pits Harcourt and Evelyn against each other in a very theatrical fashion. The opposite opinions expressed in direct discourse create a scene which not only attracts the reader’s interest but also contribute to dramatising it as on a stage. This is a typical lovers’ scene in a comedy. The protagonists stand out as well-known theatrical types. Mr Harcourt Worters corresponds to the type of the rich, powerful yet insensitive man who lends a deaf ear to the sensitive, gentle but determined woman he courts. The comic effect lies in the gap between on the one hand what Evelyn expresses — which the readers or audience understand very well — and on the other hand Harcourt’s complete inability to simply hear, understand or imagine an opinion different from his own. The dramatic opposition is enhanced by a vivid dialogue with quick cues. The theatricality of the scene is also highlighted by the oral quality of the dialogue. The hesitations, the repetitions, the interruptions, the rhythmic nature of the verbal exchange, the questions, the ellipses, the roar of laughter, all these elements testify to the orality of the scene, which is part and parcel of its theatrical nature. The overall effect is that the scene appears to be one made for the stage, and even, that it *is* a scene taken from the theatre. It creates the impression that the scene is being performed on stage. There is a sense of actuality, as though the short story had shifted from a narrative type of mimesis to a dramatic one.
- 14 The examples illustrating the theatrical quality of short stories abound in this *JSSE* issue and the analyses of the theatrical devices and of their effects considerably enrich and deepen what I simply sketch here. But if the short story sometimes seems to both “aspire to the condition” of theatre and resist this aspiration, as we previously saw, the power of the theatrical short story may very well reside in its capacity to do both.

The power of the theatrical short story

15 The power of the theatrical short story does not simply lie in its capacity to imitate drama, which would imply that it is of a subaltern or secondary nature and that its ideal or primary condition would be the theatre. In cases of theatrical adaptations of short stories, the short story could be seen as a potential reservoir for a dramatic development. Conversely the theatrical story could be seen as a mere transformation as are film adaptations of novels. The conceptions of short story writers turned playwrights or of playwrights turned short story writers would certainly throw a light on the subject. The following considerations are simply general reflexions on what the theatrical nature of a short story may imply in terms of aesthetic power.

16 The theatrical short story –if we may call it so, or rather the short story with theatrical effects– engages a dialogue with theatrical genres and with drama in general. It constitutes a very rewarding experience as it invites the reader to explore the borderline between narrative fiction and drama. The reader may thus experience an intertextual and intergeneric journey. The “in-between” generic position allows a view which throws a light on both genres. In her story “Mr. and Mrs. Dove”, Katherine Mansfield stages Reggie and Anne in scenes which compare with dramatic comedies. The serious conversation between Reggie, in love with Anne, and Anne, who finds him rather ridiculous, is punctuated comically by the cries of Anne’s doves:

‘Coo-too-coo-coo-coo’, sounded from the quiet.

‘But you’re fond of being out there, aren’t you?’ said Anne. She hooked her finger through her pearl necklace. ‘Father was saying only the other night how lucky he thought you were having a life of your own.’ And she looked up at him. Reginald’s smile was rather wan. ‘I don’t feel fearfully lucky,’ he said lightly.

‘Roo-coo-coo-coo,’ came again. And Anne murmured, ‘You mean it’s lonely.’

‘Oh, it isn’t the loneliness I care about,’ said Reginald, and he stumped his cigarette savagely on the green ash-tray. ‘I could stand any amount of it, used to like it even. It’s the idea of – Suddenly, to his horror, he felt himself blushing.

‘Roo-coo-coo-coo! Roo-coo-coo-coo!’⁹

17 Mansfield’s text invites the reader to an exploration of sentimental drama and dramatic comedy seen from the short story, and of the short story seen from a theatrical scene, a reflexion she prolongs with a remark on drama through Reggie’s imaginary conception of a potential rival seen as a heroic figure in a sort of cheap sentimental comedy turning into gothic drama in which Reggie is left playing the part of the villain:

‘The point is’ - she [Anne] shook her head - ‘I couldn’t possibly marry a man I laughed at. Surely you see that. The man I marry -’ breathed Anne softly. She broke off. She drew her hand away, and looking at Reggie, she smiled strangely, dreamily. ‘The man I marry-’

And it seemed to Reggie that a tall, handsome, brilliant stranger stepped in front of him and took his place - the kind of man that Anne and he had often seen at the theatre, walking on to the stage from nowhere, without a word catching the heroine in his arms, and after a long, tremendous look, carrying her off to anywhere...¹⁰

18 The text shows how the short story operates a dramatic shift in genre which reveals how deeply affected Reggie’s heart is and how the stereotypical theatricality of his rival bears upon Reggie’s sentimental life. The blending of dramatic means through

theatricality and narrative technique through internal focalisation increases the power of the text.

- 19 The power of the theatrical short story lies precisely in its hybrid nature and versatility. Indeed, in “Mr. and Mrs. Dove”, the short story’s narrative capacity to give the reader access to Reginald’s mind complexifies the situation and allows the reader to see both Anne’s and Reginald’s views on their relationship. Thus narrative fiction provides added effects or a greater significance when combined with a theatrical scene.
- 20 Another story by Katherine Mansfield would illustrate this point. In “Mr. Reginald Peacock’s Day”, the protagonist lends himself to a lot of imaginary and real theatrical and operatic attitudes. If the theatricality of the scene contributes greatly to a comic effect, the narrative comment allows the reader to delve into Reginald Peacock’s shallow nature with shattering irony. The weaving together of the narrative weft and the theatrical warp magnifies the comic and satirical capacities of each genre. The protagonist’s impressions and thoughts, a narrator’s humorous remark, an unexpected use of bathos are among the narrative means which develop the hilarious dramatic core of the scene:

He began to imagine a series of enchanting scenes which ended with his latest, most charming pupil putting her bare, scented arms round his neck and covering him with her long perfumed hair. ‘Awake, my love!’

As was his daily habit, while the bath water ran, Reginald Peacock tried his voice.

‘When her mother tends her before the laughing mirror,

Looping up her laces, tying up her hair,’

he sang, softly at first, listening to the quality, nursing his voice until he came to the third line:

‘Often she thinks, were this wild thing wedded...’

and upon the word ‘wedded’ he burst into such a shout of triumph that the tooth-glass on the bathroom shelf trembled and even the bath tap seemed to gush stormy applause...

Well, there was nothing wrong with his voice, he thought, leaping into the bath and soaping his soft, pink body all over with a loofah shaped like a fish. He could fill Covent Garden with it! ‘Wedded,’ he shouted again, seizing the towel with a magnificent operatic gesture, and went on singing while he rubbed as though he had been Lohengrin tipped out by an unwary Swan and drying himself in the greatest haste before that tiresome Elsa came along, along...¹¹

- 21 George Meredith’s poem “Love in the Valley” and Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin* are used with burlesque effect in reciprocally dramatic and narrative ways.
- 22 The theatrical power of the short story lies indeed in its versatility and compression. It can create dramatic effects through showing, using pastiche or parody, and it can also use the flexibility of narrative fiction through telling in a compressed way. This is one more reason why the short story cannot be seen as a minor genre. It is a very versatile and powerful one. Long seen by some as a genre for beginners who want to have a go at something shorter than a novel, the short story has nevertheless been considered by others as a challenging and experimental one. Indeed, its capacity to absorb the dramatic qualities of theatre testifies to its versatile power. Staging the word is what theatrical short stories can do and it is also what good plays will do.
- 23 The versatility of the short story can be illustrated by Helen Simpson’s “Café Society”, which introduces two shattered young mothers, Frances and Sally at a lovely and quiet café. Sally is trying to keep her baby Ben as quiet as possible, a task which proves extremely difficult since Ben drops a buttery knife onto his mother’s coat and the knife

falls noisily to the floor. He brays like a donkey, then grunts like a pig, throws his felt tips against the window while Sally is trying to sustain a conversation with Frances, a young mother she knows only by sight from the nursery school queue. The story is based on an alternate pattern of theatrical dialogues and passages of interior monologue in italics revealing Sally's or Frances's thoughts. The dramatic interest and the comic effect culminate towards the end of the story when

[A]n elderly woman pauses as she edges past their table on the way to the till. She cocks her head on one side and smiles brightly at Ben, whose mouth drops open. He stares at her, transfixed, with the expression of a seraph who has understood the mystery of the sixth pair of wings. His mother Sally knows that he is in fact temporarily dumb-struck by the woman's tremendous wart, which sits at the corner of her mouth with several black hairs sprouting from it.

"What a handsome little fellow," says the woman fondly. "Make the most of it, dear," she continues, smiling at Sally. "It goes so fast." Sally tenses as she smiles brightly back, willing her son not to produce one of his devastating monosyllables. Surely he does not know the word for wart yet.

"Such a short time," repeats the woman, damp-eyed.

Well, not really, thinks Frances. Sometimes it takes an hour to go a hundred yards. Now she knows what she knows she puts it at three and a half years per child, the time spent exhausted, absorbed, used up, and, what's more, if not, then something's wrong. That's a whole decade if you have three! (...)

Ben's eyes have sharpened and focused on his admirer's huge side-of-the-mouth wart.

"Witch," he says loud and distinct.

"Ben," says Sally. She looks ready to cry, and so does the older woman, who smiles with a hurt face and says, "Don't worry, dear, he didn't mean anything," and moves off.

"WITCH", shouts Ben, following her with his eyes. (...) ¹²

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NOTES

1. Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte*, (Paris: Seuil, 1979.) See also G. Genette et al. , *Théorie des genres*, (Paris: Seuil, Points, 1986.)
2. Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London : Macmillan, 1873) 135.
3. Virginia Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection", *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford's World's Classics, 2001) 63-68.
4. Helen Simpson, *Four Bare Legs in a Bed and Other Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1990).
5. "A skilful artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect." Edgar Allan Poe, from a review originally published in *Graham's Magazine*, May 1842, of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed., James A. Harrison (New-York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 1902) XI, 107.
6. E.M. Forster, "The Road from Colonus", *Collected Short Stories* (1947), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002) 95-108.
7. James Joyce, "Ivy-Day in the Committee Room", *Dubliners* (1914), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 124 and 125 (116-133)
8. E.M. Forster, "Other Kingdom" in *Collected Short Stories* (1947), (Harmondsworth : Penguin) 72-3.
9. Katherine Mansfield, "Mr. And Mrs. Dove", in *Selected Stories* (1953), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, World's Classics, 1981) 277-8.
10. *Ibid.*, 279.
11. Katherine Mansfield, "Mr. Reginald Peacock's Day" in *Selected Stories*, 156.
12. Helen Simpson, "Café Society", *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life* (2000.) (London: Vintage, 2001) 17-19.

ABSTRACTS

Qu'est-ce qui, dans la nouvelle, rappelle le théâtre ? Dans quels cas et par quels procédés la nouvelle imite-t-elle le théâtre ? Quels sont les effets dramatiques, leurs raisons et leurs implications dans un genre littéraire qui mêle le mode narratif et le mode dramatique ? Telles sont les questions d'ordre général abordées dans cet article. Il semble tout d'abord qu'un certain

nombre d'ambiguïtés devraient être levées, car lorsque l'on utilise le terme de "théâtralité", il s'agit de divers rapports au théâtre. Un autre aspect du débat porte sur la nature mixte de la nouvelle théâtrale, genre narratif qui imite le théâtre. Quand la dimension dramatique de certaines nouvelles prend le pas sur leur dimension narrative, elles semblent alors "aspirer à la condition" du théâtre – pour pasticher quelque peu et adapter la célèbre citation de La Renaissance de Walter Pater, "Tout art aspire sans cesse à la condition de la musique". Certains effets de théâtralité sont donc identifiés. Finalement, lorsque la nouvelle mêle les ressources du récit et celles du théâtre, elle devient une sorte de forme hybride dotée de pouvoirs étendus

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Laurent Lepaludier, agrégation and Doctorat d'Etat, is a professor of English at the University of Angers where he teaches British literature and critical theory. He has written a thesis on Joseph Conrad. Head of the CRILA research centre of Angers, he is also head of the English section of the CERPECA (the Canadian studies research centre of Angers). He has published articles on XIXth and XXth century British novels and short stories, on Canadian short stories, and a book entitled *L'Objet et le récit de fiction* (P.U. Rennes). His research currently focuses on fiction and knowledge and on the poetics of narrative fiction.