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# José R. Ibañez, José Francisco Fernández and Carmen M. Breyones, Eds., Contemporary Debates on the Short Story

Carole Birkan-Berz

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- 1 Edited by three Spanish-speaking scholars with backgrounds respectively in literature, Irish studies and cognitivism, this book aims to approach the short story through a variety of angles by offering contributions from nine leading scholars in the field, including Charles E. May, author of the groundbreaking *Short Story Theories* (1976). The book opens by highlighting a new impulse in the publication of short stories and a concomitant increase in the academic study of the genre. Insisting on open-mindedness as a prerequisite, the authors set the short story in a global context and aim to go beyond the canonical field of English literature. Naming new fields which have taken up the short story as research material, they mention translation, gender studies, and language-learning (8). The authors also highlight a cognitivist approach among the approaches which are now being used fruitfully. In their view, the short story is an apt medium for demonstrating that 'the literary mind is not a separate kind of mind, it is the fundamental mind, the mind that makes everyday life possible' (8). The editors then detail the book's objectives. Aiming to break new ground, they purport to show and 'organize multiple perspectives and visions on the short story' and to analyze the form 'beyond traditional state of the art critical frameworks' (9), promising both revision and controversy. In this respect, this book can be placed alongside other edited volumes on the genre such as May's *The New Short Story Theories* (1994) or Per Winther et al's *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis* (2004) or Iftekharuddin et al's *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues* (2003). The back cover blurb reminds us that 'making it new' either requires studying new authors or reading established ones with a new perspective. In this regard, the book seeks to provide both approaches, such as modern readings of canonical authors, and introductions to more contemporary authors such as Judith Ortiz Cofer or the graphic novelist Carol Swain.

- 2 Like the books mentioned above, *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story* includes and indeed starts with an essay by a short story writer, a welcome step in a critical opus, giving us a glimpse of the creative faculty. In this regard, José Jimenez Lozano's 'Reflections on the *short story*', printed in the original Spanish as well as in translation, reveals how much a short story's quality can be informed by the formal or generic issues addressed by the author. In this perspective, Lozano adopts the point of view of writer-reader. His most forceful point is that the short story can be distinguished from the novel in that it gives the reader a 'shock' rather than a gradual encounter with characters, plot or atmosphere (21). He also points out that a good short story often commands a new reading, once the reader comes to its end (*ibid.*). Strikingly, the essay abounds with critical metaphors usually employed for poetry, for example the short story as a sparsely 'furnished' space (19), recalling the metaphor of the sonnet as a small room and highlighting the importance of thematic unity and stylistic economy. Robert Frost is also called upon in the hint that a short story, like a poem, 'must not mean but be' (20). The insistence on time and rhythm as key parameters of writing is likewise reminiscent of Lozano's poetic outlook. Lastly, the global or universalistic aim of the collection, highlighted by the attention to form and genre across cultures, is fulfilled in this author's use of examples from American or Russian literature and in the cross-cultural quotations of readings of Flannery O'Connor by her translator Guadalupe Arbona. All in all, this piece of genre criticism demonstrates that generic boundaries and issues remain fuel for the writer's creativity even though they may seem superseded by more political, stylistic or narratological ones.
  
- 3 With the exception of this opening contribution by Spanish author Lozano, and the closing one by Charles E. May, the essays are then organized chronologically, by order of the author focused on. In the second chapter, entitled 'On the Margins of Mystery: the Detective in Poe and After', Thomas Leitch pursues the generic questions broached by Lozano through an investigation of the short story's origins in detective and mystery stories. In this piece of slightly revisionist literary history, Poe's practice and criticism of the detective story is seen as laying the groundwork for the short story in general. After surveying and analyzing the different types of stories written by Poe, this essay ends by offering a link between the short story and various genres of modern crime fiction. Then, reminding us of Poe's dislike of Washington Irving's fables or discursive, moralizing tales, Leitch establishes Poe as the creator of the 'climactic' tale written in heightened literary diction, where every sentence contributes to a 'deferred teleology' (27-30). Moreover, Poe is seen as the first writer to set a detective, or detective-like figure, at the center of the story. Such characters engage in investigating and interpreting one event after another, until the reader gets to a climactic resolution of the mystery. Leitch argues that some of Poe's stories, which either feature a failed detective or do not offer a solution to the puzzle, are the actual forerunners of the modern short story, with its sense of overwhelming ambiguity and lack of closure. In these tales, the hero is not a detective, who organizes all the clues he has found, rather what he terms a 'hyperaesthete' (36), who perceives perhaps more acutely but ultimately gets lost in a world of the senses. This perceptive and erudite article is of interest as literary history as well as genre criticism, but also has potential ramifications into cognitive studies.
  
- 4 In the next chapter, José Alvarez Amoros offers a deconstructive reading of Henry James' story 'The Coxon Fund', using what he calls a 'para-Derridian' frame of analysis.

In this in-depth article, Amoros gives an analysis of James through the dual and self-avowedly anachronistic viewpoint of Bakhtinian and Derridian criticism (54). After giving a summary of Derrida's replacement of a metaphysics of speech and presence with twinned notions of writing (*écriture*) and *différance*, whereby meaning is found in displacement and trace, the author reminds us of Bakhtin's dialogism, through which the self only exists in relation to the other. Such critical notions, Amoros argues, are helpful in understanding the narrative construction of 'The Coxon Fund'. In this story, a talented writer and storyteller is at the center of the plot, but is conspicuously absent from the lines. His gift for speech is constantly emphasized and yet the reader never hears him speak. His alleged brilliance only appears through the narrative filters of various other characters who report hearing him at first or second-hand. This has implications on a cognitive plane, as no omniscient or stable narrator is offered to anchor meaning. This sets apart a form of deceptive realism, in which meaning is stabilized by an authoritative point of view, and what the author terms 'arch-realism' (73), where knowledge and understanding may come from 'guesswork', 'biased filters' or 'hearsay' (*ibid.*). Towards the end of his study, Amoros links his careful, perceptive reading to the notion of impressionism in Henry James' stories (75). It might be argued, though the author does not make that point, that making an 'impression' on the reader by means of the characters' many impressions of one another contributes to the generic feature of unity of effect which characterizes the short story, despite its modern deferral of meaning.

- 5 In the following chapter, Laurent Lepaludier discusses the 'visual dynamics' of Wyndham Lewis's 'Bestre'. Through a thematic, stylistic and metatextual analysis of this short story given from a structuralist perspective, Lepaludier demonstrates how Lewis creates a world of appearances and of screen-like grotesque bodies, yet endows them with a vortex-like movement, in which these images gyrate and succeed each other at a 'frantic pace' reflected in the rhythm of the text (95). He goes on to show how the fast succession of images leads to an abundance of copies threatening authorial creation as well as thematic unity and characterization (99). In a world of images, the author continues, the capitalized 'Eye' takes the place of every organ, not only perceiving but organizing, projecting and distorting images, thus becoming an instrument of brutality. In this way, Lepaludier argues, the narrator Ken Orr and the character Bestre become masks for Lewis, the Vorticist writer-painter, reveling in grotesque realism with a certain violence.
- 6 Eibhann Walshe's article, next in the collection, is a historical reading of Frank O'Connor's short stories in the light of O'Connor's critique of Irish nation-building. This essay is particularly apt at showing how the short story may challenge official national narratives. Walshe offers a helpful insight in the short story's dynamics, by making an astute link between loneliness and dissent. Indeed one could argue that the short story is a 'lonely' genre, being at once set apart from more canonical ones, but also, as O'Connor forcefully says, in that it has no 'hero', merely a string of 'outlawed figures wandering about the margins' (115). However, Walshe explains that O'Connor took the form seriously and through it expressed a double sense of alienation: that of the dissenting individual, writing in an ever more insular State. This study is particularly interesting and factual in its first part, which consists in a recollection of early Irish statehood, ideology and censorship. Its second part

provides perceptive readings and throws light on a particularly sensitive, nuanced yet accessible writer.

- 7 Salman Rushdie is the focus of the next essay: 'Recalcitrant Discourse: The Uncompromising Content in East, West Stories' by Farhat Iftekharruddin. Unlike the previous chapter, which clearly separated the Irish historical context from its embodiment in fiction, this article meshes Rushdie's stories with their political interpretations. Granted that it may be hard to separate literature from controversy in this case, Rushdie's literariness would nonetheless benefit from a close textual study. The review of these short stories constitutes a survey of the contemporary Indian sub-continent, of its various peoples, struggles and political scandals. While a historical and socio-political interpretation of these texts is important in its own right, it seems nevertheless reductive. First of all, formal issues appear to be ignored: starting with a panorama of Rushdie's novels, the author goes on to expound on the short stories, without explicitly distinguishing between the two forms (129). It might have been interesting to ask why Rushdie's next two books after *The Satanic Verses* had to be short story collections or sequences - the first one being the children's fiction *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Second, while Iftekharruddin's insistence on cultural 'heterogeneity' (151) might be in keeping with Rushdie's works, one might wonder whether these short stories were really written with a view to 'eradicating cultural dissonance' (*ibid.*) or towards an imperative of 'symbiotic existence' (152), and whether such an aim is compatible with 'recalcitrant discourse'. In a nutshell, a more deconstructive reading of a highly deconstructive writer might have done more justice to the richness of the text.
- 8 The next chapter, written by Carmen Flys Junquera, discusses the Puerto Rican American writer Judith Ortiz Cofer. In her well researched and theoretically grounded study, Junquera delves into the generic problems caused by the work *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. Is it enough, she asks implicitly, to call this collection of partly autobiographic stories and poems 'creative non-fiction', as Cofer herself does - or would other categories, such as the personal essay, the novel-in-stories or the composite novel be more accurate to describe this hybrid work? Junquera goes on to examine all of these categories, rigorously putting many short story theories to the test. Investigating generic boundaries helps her to show how Ortiz's autobiography is conceived as a kaleidoscope of various memories and acts of witness, and leads her to argue that despite the ever-shifting spaces of the text, the author does remain 'whole' (168). Towards the end of the essay, an insightful discussion of space in the short story leads to one on assimilation. Ortiz, who admits she is no longer able to live in Puerto Rico, claims not to have assimilated into the American model, but rather to have adapted. While the writer's honesty is refreshing, her great reliance upon the English literature canon - adumbrated in Junquera's quotes of Hawthorne and Woolf - might benefit from a more critical outlook. Overall though, Junquera's penetrating study is nurtured by her knowledge of English and Spanish-speaking cultures and contributes fruitfully to the 'global' or 'universalistic' agenda of *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story*.
- 9 A graphic short story, Carol Swain's 'come down town' is the subject of Adrienne E. Gavin's article, next in the collection. Gavin's starting point is that the short story's simple plot allows it to 'break out in many places' (186), either in the course of a collection or in the space of the story itself. Taking a bold look at an innovative

artist, she proceeds to analyze the graphic story from the dual perspective of narratology and visual semiotics. The essay chimes nicely with Leitch's piece at the beginning of the volume as the two protagonists of Swain's story hark back to Poe's detective and hyperaesthete figures. One of the characters is indeed a police inspector and the other one a criminal-cum-failed artist who paints the town black. Gavin's analysis throws light on the question of guilt in the arts, thus uncovering an ethics of the graphic story in Swain's work. This contribution is therefore a most welcome one. Perhaps one direction which might have been explored further is the visual artist's challenge of creating an almost black frame, a point which Gavin explores semiotically and partly under the banner of narrative technique, but not in terms of graphic creation.

- 10 Coming to the end of the volume, Charles E. May's contribution 'The Secret Life in the Modern Short Story' coalesces with Gavin's exploration of 'black spots' in the text. Indeed, May's point is that the short story comes into being at a crossroads between the mythical romance and the nineteenth century psychological novel. In retaining elements of both forms, the genre's forte was to suggest that individuals could never be fully apprehended in reality, and always had 'secret lives'. May's study thus wraps up the collection by tying up many of its threads, such as literary history, cognitive issues, the cosmopolitan dimension (with close readings of Chekhov, Conrad and Joyce), the interest of the short story for new writers (through an introduction to American writer Beth Lordan), as well as a glimpse at issues of loneliness and alienation dealt with in Walshe's article.
- 11 In conclusion, this collection is varied and informative. The only criticism one could find, apart from a number of avoidable typos in the text, is that the theoretical framework given is not as novel as the editors might have wanted it to be. In this respect, the traditional 'monographic' format of the essays, though conducive to quality scholarship, could have been broken up to a certain extent. Inviting scholars to read short stories with a more comparative outlook for example might have provided the critical distance the editors sought to acquire. The reader might also have wished for a more synthetic account of the volume's project, which would have tied its disparate pieces, whose links are apparent despite their heterogeneous theoretical stances. All in all, this collection is a step in the right direction, pointing out the increasing relevance of the short story and the continuous interest in genre issues.

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## RÉSUMÉS

### Book Reviews

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Carole Birkan-Berz teaches at Paris Descartes University. She is the author of a doctoral thesis on 'Poetic Forms and National Values in Geoffrey Hill's work' and of scholarly articles on poetry and nationhood. Her research focuses on the intersection of literary forms or genres with national or communal narratives.