AN ART WITHOUT TRADITIONS?

THE SHORT STORY'S CLAIM TO NEW FREEDOM

DEMOCRACY OF WRITER AND READER

THE spirit bloweth where it listeth, but there are often practical and prosaic reasons why one form of literature flourishes at a particular time and another does not. The level of taste or education of the reading public, or of disparate sections of the reading public, may have a good deal to do with the popularity of this or that literary form. So may the status of the author in society and the economic rewards of authorship generally. And the material and technical development of publishing, of course, has always been a determining influence. Without the magazine Press of the last half-century, for instance, it is most unlikely that the short story could have attained its present variety or degree of popularity. The form of the short story is no doubt as old as any form of literature, but—with only a few classic exceptions—the professional practice of the short story is new. Allowing for the necessary forerunners, the modern short story, in fact, is the short story of not much more than the past half-century.

Much has been written of its appeal and technique in recent years, though seldom at great length and most often by way of criticism of individual short-story writers or as introduction to an anthology of new work. Mr. Bates's is the latest critical survey, and one of the fullest.* He is acute and unfailingly enthusiastic; he writes with lively imagination, and in combining criticism with literary history he is able to put forward a view of the evolution of the short story that carries wide and pointed suggestion. For a writer who himself writes short stories, who is indeed among the half-dozen most richly endowed short-story writers in this country to-day, Mr. Bates has almost too many theories on the subject of the short story and its prospects; together with what may be inferred from two or three extravagant likes and dislikes that he professes they seem to account for some of his own weaknesses of style. But there is generous and penetrating good sense in many of his critical judgments, which in the end seem to provide sound backing for his belief that, just as the complex of contemporary social influences stimulated the drama in the Elizabethan age, the heroic couplet in the eighteenth century, and the novel in the nineteenth century, so to-day it favours the art of the short story.

* THE MODERN SHORT STORY. A Critical Survey. By H. E. BATES. Nelson. 7s. 6d.

Perhaps Mr. Bates rates the short story as a literary form too highly, or at all events feels for it too jealous a love. After all, though it may be true that the public as a whole consistently undervalues the modern short story, it remains a common experience that even the most accomplished short stories have a way of being aesthetically unsatisfying. Except in the case of the very greatest, the truly poetical short-story writers, who are possibly fewer than the number of fingers to be counted on both hands, the short story necessarily lacks the abundance and diversity of the novel. There is substance, when all is said, in the novel-reader's prejudice. The truth, for all that it may seem a platitude of the mistaken sort, is surely that the short story tends to be a minor variety of prose fiction, whose major achievement is the novel. Tolstoy wrote short stories—stories of great light and power—but is it not a little absurd to set Tolstoy down in a book on the short story, as Mr. Bates does, as a short-story writer? The fact is that a great or good novelist appears almost always to have had it in him to write great or good short stories. It is not a matter of using up a scrap of material left over in the novelist's workroom. The aim is admittedly different, the method is radically different in one way or another; but Tolstoy and Flaubert, Henry James and Conrad, Mr. Maugham and Mr. Forster in this respect have all demonstrated the same thing. Writers of successful short stories, on the other hand, have only rarely exhibited a similar capacity for the novel.

Anton Chehov

LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES

However, although in his enthusiasm for the untapped riches of the short story Mr. Bates seems to condemn the novelist and his works to something like futility at the present time, protesting as it were that the part has become immeasurably greater than the whole, his analysis of the distinctive qualities of the modern short story and his sense of its "limitless fascinating possibilities" are both of deep interest. As to what exactly is meant in the first place by the short story, very wisely he is chary of definitions. The modern short story is descended, he says, from Gogol and from Poe, and he proceeds to show how; but the modern short story, he adds at once, can be anything the author chooses to make it. Situation, episode, characterization, or narrative—in effect, says an American critic quoted by Mr. Bates, the short story is a vehicle for every man's talent; and Mr. Bates himself caps that statement by declaring that "the short story, whether short or long, poetical or reported, plotted or sketched, concrete or cobweb, has an insistent and eternal fluidity that slips through the hands."

Here, it may occur to the reader, is a clue to that formlessness or shapelessness which so many otherwise talented short-story writers appear unable to avoid and which accounts for the unsatisfying impression they leave behind. The poetical short-story writers, Chehov above all, conjure form from fluidity and so do the craftsmen of the strictly commercial and standardized product; but in between are the hosts of serious and capable writers who, except once in a while, seem powerless to prevent the transmuted and significantly shaped substance of experience from slipping through their hands. Take, for example, a collection of short stories by any of half-a-dozen contemporary names in the top rank in this country—Mr. Bates himself, Rhys Davies, Malachi Whitaker, Elizabeth Bowen, H. A. Manhood, Leslie Halward. Each has his own type of excellence. But does any of them, so to speak, score a bull's-eye more than, say, three or four times out of twenty? As it is practised to-day, indeed, the short story tends to be very much a hit-or-miss affair. The point is that, despite all the skill and suggestiveness of these writers' work, that quality of imaginative completeness which resides only in formal unity and which is always the final test of the short story eludes them more often than not. For the penalty must be paid if the short story, as Mr. Bates declares, is whatever the author cares to make it.

One specially illuminating observation Mr. Bates proffers before setting forth the history of the short story. Aware as he is of the difficulty of circumscribing the aesthetic character of the short story, he quotes with approval the critical views of Miss Bowen:—

> The short story . . . in its use of action is nearer to the drama than to the novel. The cinema, itself busy with a technique, is of the same generation: in the last thirty years the two arts have been accelerating together. They have affinities — neither is sponsored by a tradition; both are, accordingly, free; both, still, are self-conscious, show a self-imposed discipline and regard for form; both have, to work on, immense matter — the disorientated romanticism of the age.

From endorsing these views (which match Miss Bowen's own highly deliberate craftsmanship) Mr. Bates goes on to discover a subtle connexion between the evolution of the short story and the evolution of the general reader. They have followed, he says, a parallel course of freedom; the reader, emancipated by education, travel, wider social contact and the increased uniformity of dress and manners, has enabled the writer to dispense with the oppressive obligation of lavish descriptive detail. "It is no longer necessary to describe; it is enough to suggest." There is a great deal of obvious truth here, since all that is meant by "atmosphere" in the economy of the short story plainly derives from the recourse to suggestion. It is a little unfortunate, however, that in seeking to illustrate the sufficiency of suggestion in the contemporary short story, Mr. Bates is not content with an example from Sherwood Anderson and another from Hemingway but gives us a third, from an English writer, which is typical of the sort of laconic unpictorialness that gives so much short-story writing its amateurish quality. Still, the main point is soundly argued. The modern short story, in its ability to take for granted much that was previously elaborated, is the achievement of both writer and reader. In that sense it is, if you like, an essentially "democratic" literary form.

GOGOL AND POE

Descent by way of Gogol and Poe, both born in the same year, can be proved without difficulty. But the genealogist in these matters needs to go warily. Gogol's is the more indirect influence and much the more profound. For it is Russian prose fiction of the nineteenth century, the novel and the short story, that has done more than anything else to train the reader everywhere in a higher level of imaginative receptivity, and the Russian novel and short story spring from Gogol. It is not "The Overcoat," or the countless Russian imitations and variations of "The Overcoat," that has set the stream of the "realistic" short story flowing, but rather the entire strain of Russian prose literature. The translation into English, from the closing years of the past century onwards, of the great Russian writers was by far the most potent influence from outside, as Mr. Bates remarks later, upon the short story in this country and in America. As for Poe, Mr. Bates truly says that his was in one way a fortuitous greatness. To assert that he adopted the short story as a distinctive form "at a moment when it was in no competitive danger from any other prose form" is to read literary history altogether too positively; but Poe was undoubtedly magnified as a writer by his anticipation of "the vast nineteenth-century hunger for dream-worlds, scientific fantasy and the mystery-drama of the dividing line between known and unknown."

What Poe, whose interest was in the extraordinary, could not have guessed, Mr. Bates observes, is that within a century after he had brought the short story to a point of technical perfection the imaginative emphasis of the short story would have turned almost entirely from the extraordinary to the ordinary. It is this transformation that Mr. Bates records, though perhaps with too little regard for the corresponding process of technical dissolution. Until quite recent years the writer in England, he points out, had no great part in the development of the short story. There was good reason for this: the short story "cannot tolerate a weight of words or a weight of moral teaching," and both were characteristic of the Victorian English novel. New impulses came from America, and this for many and various reasons to do with the distinctive course of American history. From Bret Harte, then, rough-fibred and sentimental though his stories are, comes the lesson of regionalism—a lesson to be more deeply learned by American short-story writers of a later generation—and also a concise quality of humour that is still the nerve of the American short story to-day. From Ambrose Bierce comes the psychological study, not of war alone, together with a tentative impressionism of method. There is, again, the regionalism of Sarah Orne Jewett, there is the supremely vital showmanship, with its legacy of the "surprise ending," of O. Henry, there is the truth-telling force and brilliance of Stephen Crane.

EMANCIPATORS

From this point Mr. Bates reaches the heart of his survey with Chehov and Maupassant. He writes very well indeed about them both. For him, as surely for every practising short-story writer, they are the great masters of the short story, though for him also they are much more alike, even in so-called technique, than they are for almost everybody else. It is a surprising view to take, and it may have been prompted in the first place only by crude comparisons that have been drawn to the advantage of one or the other. At the same time this discovery of a close likeness between Chehov and Maupassant gives some indication of what seems to be Mr. Bates's failing as critic—his absorption in imaginative values to the exclusion of much else. Thus in the next chapter, on an oddly compounded trinity, Tolstoy, Wells and Kipling, his distaste for "the creed of Empire" is such that he can flatly subscribe himself among those "to whom no single syllable of Kipling has ever given a moment's pleasure." Personal taste is privileged, of course, but it seems doubtful whether Mr. Bates is qualified to pass critical judgment upon Kipling's short stories.

So to the adult emancipation of the short story in England. The two liberating figures are Katherine Mansfield and A. E. Coppard. Katherine Mansfield, in a direct line of indebtedness to Chehov, with a hint of delicate immaturity even in her most finished work, constantly attempting to squeeze significance out of the seemingly commonplace, is always an unspeaking personality behind what she

Guy de Maupassant

writes. Mr. Coppard mingles and contrasts tale-telling at its simplest with tale-telling at its most sophisticated, sophistication having won hands down in the end. These, however, do not belong to the generation of writers that had cut its teeth, as Mr. Bates puts it, on bullets. Before he comes to the writers of the 1920's he passes in review the Irish school, noting the surcharged, creative impulse that seems to spring from the clash of religion and experience and dwelling on the originality and beauty of the stories in Joyce's volume, "Dubliners," and then goes on to discuss the American renaissance after the vogue of the story written to a commercial formula. In his presentation of indigenous American material Sherwood Anderson helped to bring about a new phase of freedom for

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the short story, and in so doing prepared the destructively austere way for Hemingway and his example. Of Hemingway's work Mr. Bates writes with specially generous and acute perception :—

> What Hemingway went for was that direct pictorial contact between eye and object, between object and reader. To get it he cut out a whole forest of verbosity. He got back to clean fundamental growth. He trimmed off explanation, discussion, even comment; he hacked off all metaphorical floweriness: he pruned off the dead, sacred clichés; until finally, through the sparse trained words, there was a view.

Hemingway's, according to Mr. Bates, has been the strongest and healthiest contemporary influence upon the short story, making for the objective truth of common experience above all else. That of D. H. Lawrence upon the English short-story writer, who has caught and retained something of the visual intensity of Lawrence's realism, is considered with similar warmth of understanding. But there is a limit to what can profitably be learned from a single literary influence, and in Mr. Bates's opinion the short story here may be approaching a new phase of freedom. "If the story of the past twenty years has been close to the lyric, the short story of the next twenty years may move, or be forced to move, nearer to dramatic poetry." It may be so. The doubt that lingers in one's mind, at the end of Mr. Bates's very stimulating volume, is whether, if an author's imaginative values are right, all the rest will be added unto him. True, a short story, like poetry, may be about anything, for all things partake of a scheme of values. But the modern short-story writer fails more often through sheer lack of narrative resource or discipline than through low or imperfect values. Chehov's or Maupassant's art, after all, exhibits individual and something like complete mastery of form.