

Part Two

Deuxième Partie

**The Philosophy the Science and the Art
of the
Short Story
by
Bernard FONLON**

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
 And God fulfils himself in many ways,
 Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

As I said in the last issue, sooner or later, for one reason or another, by an inexorable law of nature, the present team of *Abbia* must cede place, by and by, to another and younger.

Therefore, if the Cameroon Cultural Review shall not die, it becomes a categorical imperative to rouse, right from now, the rising generations to aspire after the highest standards of scholarship – to make them writers of works notable for depth of thought, for breadth of scope, notable for grace of phrase, for beauty and Power.

I said that this cannot be achieved with a stroke of the pen: it entails penetrating intelligence, keenness of observation, a fertile imagination, rich experience and writing and revising and rewriting; it entails travail and trudging and drudging; only the extremely gifted and limited few can escape this Calvary; are spared this *sturm und drang*, in the climb to excellence.

In order to participate in fostering and furthering this apprenticeship, I have decided to treat, one by one, in succeeding issues of this Review the main literary forms or genres. For, as I said in the last issue, writing does not only entail a skill; it has also laws or principles for the effective plying of that skill; writing is not only an art; it is a Science and Philosophy.

For this issue, I have chosen to give our aspiring young writers some fundamental ideas about the Science, Philosophy and Art of the *Short Story*, for it would appear to be the form most popular with the young; and yet it is one of the most difficult of the genres to ply effectively.

The story belongs to the first of the three main classes of composition, namely, Narrative, the other two being Description and Argument.

The first deals with the world as passing in time, the second with the world as static and the third with the world of Thought, that is, the world as it develops in the mind of man.

We all know what a story is, but it would be no harm to define it. A story is the recounting of the past events or happenings in the life of a person, in the life of an institution, in the life of a community, in the life of the world. If a story faithfully recalls events that *did happen*, then it is History; if of events that *did not happen*, it is Fiction. If the events that *did not happen could have happened or could happen*, that is, if they have the quality variously known as true-to-life, likelihood or verisimilitude, then they are either the novel, the short-story or play, with this difference that, whereas the novel and the short story are told essentially in words, the story in the play is told essentially by action: for there are plays in which a story is told by action alone, some in which the story is told by action plus words or dialogue; others in which the story is told by action plus words plus music; and still another type where the story is

To

Anne Marie Montio Kaba,
 at the dawn of her teens,
 with the fervent hope,
 that her burgeoning zest for Letters,
 should not fail or falter,
 should not sleep or die.

told by action minus words plus music: in other words, the mime or the dumb show, the play, the opera, the ballet.

In a story that is really interesting there must be persons who act or suffer; there is always action or passion — passion in the sense of the Latin verb *patior* *pati passus sum*, I suffer.

That in man which makes him act or suffer is his character — has he a powerful mind or is he a moron? Is he of highly charged emotions or is he phlegmatic? Has he a stern stubborn will or is he spineless? An over-mastering trait of character — be it extra-ordinary intelligence or cleverness, be it an overpowering passion, be it an unbreakable will — is like a dynamo which, when sparked, sets in motion a course of action which nothing can stop until the person involved wins his boon, or meets his doom or is saved therefrom by a *deus ex machina*. If you marry two violently incompatible characters in one household, a clash results, inevitably, which ends either in violent separation or in violent death, with many a furious fight in between.

Even if the story concerns one man, there must be two elements at war within his breast to make an exciting narrative. It takes two to make a love story.

Therefore we can say that Conflict enters into the very nature of a soul-stirring story, whether history or Fiction.

But for character to reveal itself, the persons involved in the story must be put to the test, must be put in *Sturm und Drang*, must be put in a provocative situation, a situation in which they are forced to act, compelled to move, compelled to reveal their true selves, and march, inexorably, to their doom. Therefore after creating characters, the writer must invent a situation in which they act naturally, necessarily.

Next, the story must be beautiful, that is, one that moves us to laughter or to tears; one that, by the events it recounts, even if these be violent or unseemly, moves us to compassion, makes us suffer with the victims, makes us humane; one that is couched in language of more than normal felicity.

When the subject, or the language, — especially the subject — is of extraordinary beauty, is charged with power, fills us with awe, with fear and reverence, then it is no longer just merely beautiful; it is sublime: like the Sermon on the Mount, like the Passion of Christ, like the Apology of Socrates, like the trial of Mahatma Gandhi, like Oedipus the king, like Antigone, like Macbeth, King Lear.

Another thing to be born in mind is this: no story, be it History or Fiction, unfolds itself in a void. It takes place — must take place — in a particular part of the world with its specific geography, its specific culture. It takes place at a particular period in the history of that culture. Achebe's novels have been hailed round the world, but they take place in Iboland; Ibo culture is their very warp and woof. They take place during various periods of that evolving culture. To understand them in depth you must understand the Geography, the History,

the Sociology, in brief, the Ecology of the Ibo people. And this is a thing to note in literature, a thing that looks contradictory at superficial gaze, namely, Sophocles did for the Ancient Greeks, as Achebe has done for the Ibo people — all times; and thus become universal and deathless. A story is not universal because it is told in the vague.

I said at the start that in History, the Novel and the Short Story a story is told in words, in Drama, by action. We shall not deal with History here, neither like the fable, for instance, in which trees and animals take precedence. We shall be concerned in general, with narratives that try to paint a true picture of life, a setting, namely the play, the novel and the short story; but, in this issue, we shall deal particularly with the Short Story.

If there is a short story, there must be a long story. In fact the long story is the novel. But why is the one long and the other short? Is it because one is a big, fat book three hundred pages long and the other a slim, lean book of thirty pages? If you reduced the three hundred pages to a hundred, would the Novel become a Short Story?

What makes the Novel a long story and the Short Story a short story has nothing to do, essentially, with bulk of book.

The intrinsic difference is this, that the action in the novel consists of a series of dramatic incidents or events or episodes, the first provoking the second, the second the third, the third the fourth and so on, till the final catastrophe or denouement. And thus the novel is joined together, becomes one, by this that the dramatic events in it are linked together by the principle of causality — by this that each event that precedes is the cause of the one that follows, and each one that follows is the effect of the one that precedes.

The short story writer, for his part, picks out one dramatic event in a life and limits himself to the treatment of that one event alone; other events that are causes or effects of the main one are just touched on briefly, to facilitate the understanding of the main event.

But before proceeding we must have a clear idea about what we mean when we say that an incident is dramatic. An incident is dramatic when it is sudden, striking, impressive, when it brings about such a drastic, unexpected change in a man's life that, after it, nothing can be the same again. Thus the action in a short story is compact, isolated, intense.

COMPACTNESS.

Beginning with a character and an environment (physical and moral) the short-story writer, sets them through an action or situation compact, concentrated, tense; the French word *ramassé* (mustered into a serried unit) hits off the meaning of compactness in this context.

This compactness and concentration of action and tension leaves no room for lengthy description and commentary; short sketches evoke details in the mind of the reader.

This does not mean that the short story is a short novel. Not at all. To lengthen a short story or shorten a novel would distort them. Their subject matter is very different:

SUBJECT MATTER.

The subject matter of a short story as I have already stressed, is one episode; that of a novel is a series of episodes. The one episode in the one is isolated; the series in the other are joined together by the metaphysical principle *tactile*; the series in the other are joined together by the metaphysical principle of Causality, and thus by *links of intrinsic necessity*, the categorical links between cause and effect.

The novel develops, unfolds; the short story concentrates, packs much into short space.

INTENSITY.

The episodes of the novel can be light and insignificant. The episode of the short story is intense, dense and fraught with significance and tragedy.

From the above it can be seen that the short story is a very difficult art form or literary genre to handle.

DETACHMENT.

In the first place, the short story writer has to handle his material with detachment — should not effusively reveal what he feels about the event.

This detachment is necessary in order to enable the writer to spot out vivid acts, events and utterances that reveal the characters of the *personages*, at grips with external forces, or carried away by internal passions. Like a filmmaker he cuts out the irrelevant, focuses light on the significant and produces a story rich in concentrated detail, and profound in psychological insight, in that he can from the actions of the *personage*, see what is happening in the mind and heart or will of the said *dramatis persona*.

SKILL.

The significant merit of the short story as opposed to the novel lies in the perfection of the skill that it demands. It should not merely be *true*; it must also be beautiful. A great novelist can be a mediocre writer — a work full of dramatic incident but poorly written, can pass muster. The short story writer must be a veritable artist, must produce a *chef-d'œuvre* — a master-piece.

UNITY OF EFFECT.

According to Edgar Allan Poe, the novel certainly demands more sustained effort; in other words, drudgery or perseverance, a virtue which is quite different from talent.

Furthermore, unity of effect is indispensable in the short story, but not in the novel: many a novel is admired for individual successful passages in it and not for its general integrated plan which, even when it exists, is not perceived at first sight by the reader on account of the length and the complexity of the narration.

In the short story, as space is short, to develop character or to accumulate varied incidents, a plan is categorically imperative.

STYLE.

Furthermore, the style, in its descriptions should be more disciplined than colourful, exact and sober in its portraits, natural in its dialogue, and should contribute to the impression of density that this genre demands.

MEDAL ENGRAVER.

Thus it has been said that the art of the short story writer resembles that of the medal engraver. The engraver of a medal has to battle against all the difficulties that face the sculptor of a bas-relief. In a circle two or three inches in diameter, he has to give the vision of crowds, the illusion of distance (third dimension or depth) and the impression of size. He has not the liberty of the painter. He must be precise but suggestive: it is the triumph of art which is precise and happy in choice of detail, which does not allow itself the liberty of a stroke that is needless or mediocre. It is a veritable *tour de force* of art that the short story writer is called upon to accomplish.

THE QUALITIES OF A SHORT STORY WRITER.

They are like those of the novelist — penetrating intelligence, keen observation, power to think, a creative imagination, vivid memory, experience of life, wide culture, command of language and style.

DISCIPLINE AND RESTRAINT.

In addition, the short story writer must be a man of discipline and restraint, with a sense of proportion, and precision.

Since his art is one that deals with concentrated and compact and dramatic event, he should be able to spot and recognise, thanks to his keenness of perception and observation, the latent ferocities that he finds asleep within the human beast.

He should fight against all exuberance and effusiveness and lyric outpourings, against all holdings-forth at length; as has been said, discipline and restraint should be his watch word.

THE PERSONNAGES OF THE SHORT STORY.

They are generally marked by violence of passion, stubbornness of will, tragedy, fate, loneliness; more often than not, they are the central character, as

forceful or violent as they are unique. In this character we contemplate the mystery of passion in paroxysm; it is a character that reveals its whole psychology in a few acts, in a few pages. Paroxysm is an extreme feat of passion, or pain that explodes into sudden violent action.

NOT CHANCE.

But this reaction is not a chance reaction: it is the result of a powerful or violent temperament, of an upbringing or education, of a culture, of a life, of heredity — of race! A race in which a person is born has a peculiar culture, developed thanks to their environment and history. Comicans, Whites and Blacks in the United States are striking examples of this fact and influence of race.

This is the distinctive quality of the short story: a crisis of the soul, fraught with implications and prolongations, but which end in one stroke without comment; these (collectively known as ecology) shape the culture, the history, the bent of peoples and the character and conduct of the individuals in the collectivity.

Not only is there no comment, but the author passes no judgment on his hero, he even gives the impression of making no effort to understand, limiting himself to a clear portrayal of the barest facts.

Even the most objective of novelists looks for causes. The novelist is like a botanist who shows the tree with the compost around its roots; the short story writer only plucks a flower, and presents it alone, isolated. Presenting the facts he seems to say: let the reader draw his conclusions as to temperament, education, physical and moral environment, education and race, of the personage.

The short story writer applies himself to the artist's labour, an art which he plies meticulously; an art whose rules he has pondered, digested and applies unwaveringly.

THE STYLE OF THE SHORT STORY WRITER.

Something has already been said about this; yet it needs to be elaborated upon. Such is its importance. The best short story stands out for the extreme sureness of vision, the intelligence and the taste that mark it.

From the word go the characters are present before you — they are there in the room present! *This gift of presence* is obtained by complete rejection of indulgence in detailed description; the short story writer does not even indulge in dialogue; he even shows indifference to his characters, even adopts a certain mocking air towards them — he does not allow the effusions of his feelings to intervene: he limits himself to the choice and arrangements of the incidents, the acts, the attitudes; and this he does, as I have said, with extreme sureness of vision, with intelligence and taste. Even if the writer feels deeply about the event, he does not say so; he leaves you to find out. Most important, the short

story presented with such truth to life, such verisimilitude, is written in the most *rustural style*, the plainest style. The writer prefers this because of his allowing them to speak for themselves; he deems them eloquent enough, without comment or explanation on his part.

This style, dry-as-dust, shorn of all irrelevance, decoration, and stark as it were, is notwithstanding, clear and solid, and living.

Here again, what dominates is a sense of measure, proportion, namely, what size the part should have in view of the whole — and all this is fruit of restraint, the fruit of discipline that is learned, well-studied and well-advised.

Most important, when a subject is dramatic, intense and fraught with tragedy, it needs no verbal ornamentation, no flowery language.

HOW A SHORT STORY IS BUILT UP: NIHIL EX NIHILO!

There is a saying in Latin: *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*; nothing can be made out of nothing. The creative artist must have some material to start with, to build from, or to build on.

In the case of a short story this starting point must be some dramatic incident, experienced, observed, heard or read by the writer.

Next he has to use his intelligence, his knowledge of human nature, his knowledge of psychology and philosophy to unearth the forces in the persons involved, which forces lead to the dramatic event.

If he lacks a creative imagination he could simply tell the story with some alterations to move it away from the sphere of real History. A good example is *Mérimée's Mateo Falcone*.

But if the writer is endowed, not only with keen observation and deep philosophical and psychological insight, but also with a fertile imagination, and a perfect knowledge of the manners and the mind of the society in which he lives, he can transform the original story to such an extent that only slight traces of the real event survive in the new story. A good example of this is *Cora Unashamed* by Langston Hughes. Hughes, tells of how he came to write this story in his second biography, *I Wonder as I Wander*. Here is his account.

The circumstances of my beginning to write were curious. Shortly after I moved into the New Moscow Hotel, I met there Marie Seaton from London. She was doing a study of Russian motion pictures, and gathering data on Sergei Eisenstein and his work, which she later used in her biography of him. Marie Seaton had with her a paper-bound copy of D.H. Lawrence's short stories, *The Lovely Lady*, which she lent me. I had never read anything of Lawrence's before, and was particularly taken with the

title story, and with *The Rocking Horse Winner*. Both tales made my hair stand on end. The possessive, terrifying elderly woman in *The Lovely Lady* seemed in some ways so much like my former Park Avenue patron that I could hardly bear to read the story, yet I could not put the book down, although it brought cold sweat and goose-pimples to my body. A night or two after I had read the Lawrence stories, I sat down to write a short story. I had article on Tashkent when, instead, I began to write a short story. I had been saying to myself all day, "If D.H. Lawrence can write such psychologically powerful accounts of folks in England, that send shivers up and down my spine, maybe I could write stories like his about folks in America. I wonder."

It had never occurred to me to try to write short stories before, other than the enforced compositions of college English. But in wondering, I began to think about some of the people in my own life, and some of the tales I had heard from others, that affected me in the same hair-raising manner as did the characters and situations in D.H. Lawrence's two stories concerning possessive people like the lovely lady and neglective people like the parents of the *Rocking Horse Winner*. I began to turn over people like the parents of a young lawyer in California, Loren Miller, had in my mind a story about a young lawyer in Kansas where he had told me. He said that in one of the small towns in Kansas where he had lived during his childhood, there had been a very pretty colored girl who, as she grew up, attracted the amorous eye of the town's only Negro doctor, the town's only Negro undertaker, and the town's Negro minister. All three of these men enjoyed her favor. The girl became pregnant. At any rate, the doctor performed an abortion on her and she died. The undertaker who had courted her took charge of her body. The minister preached her funeral. Since all the colored people of the town knew that each one of these men had been intimate with the girl, they wondered what would happen at her funeral. All three men were present, but nothing happened. She was just buried.

When I sat down at my well-travelled typewriter and began to write my first short story, 'Cora Unshamed,' the material of the factual narrative I'd heard from Loren Miller changed into fiction. The Negro girl became a white girl of middle-class family, whose parents did not want her to fall in love with an immigrant Greek boy whose father ran an ice-cream stand. My story consisted of what happened when this girl's mother forced her to have an abortion, the girl died, and the Negro cook spoke her piece concerning love and morals at the funeral. None of the situations in my story were as in the real one, but its inspiration came from Loren Miller's tale.

It was Marie Seaton's loan of D.H. Lawrence that started me off writing short stories in Moscow. I had had no thought of doing so. But I am glad it happened. That was because I sent my first three stories from Russia to an agent in New York, and by the time I got back to America he had sold all three, one to *The American Mercury*, one to *Scriber's Fiction Parade*, and one to *Esquire*. The money came in handy. And once started, I wrote almost nothing but short stories.

When in Moscow I started writing intensively, I really did not want to be bothered with an almost slightly female visitor. On the other hand, I hated to be rude to Natacha and say "Go home." But another and more possessive *Lovely Lady* from D.H. Lawrence's stories had come between us.

In either case the new story retains the full dramatic impact of the original tragedy, indeed it may even heighten it and make it more intense; it is a faithful portrayal of the life and times and environment in which the writer chose to set the new story; it is solidly entrenched in reality.

What is also most important is the artistic skill of the story teller, his genius for perfection: that from documents and facts, sometimes precious and detailed, sometimes crude and sketchy, supplied to him by observation, by History and Geography and Sociology, the narrator is able to create something new and beautiful, true to life and moving, by inserting it in a setting that is precise, clear and exact, the scenes of a dramatic episode, which episode springs deep from most powerful forces in the soul of man. It is an anecdote which portrays the inward human heart, by portraying its outward manifestations, soberly but faithfully.

HOW TO JUDGE THE SUCCESS OF A SHORT STORY.

First and foremost is the force with which it strikes our emotions, the force with which it moves, us, the depth of sorrow it causes, or the hilarity it arouses, the sympathy that it rouses in us.

Secondly, the conciseness, the terseness, the exclusion of irrelevant detail, and the grip it has on us — we don't put it down till the end. And when it comes to an end we are still thirsty for more.

Another criterion is the scrupulous exactness with which the writer enriches his story by means of details of manners and customs and History and Geography carefully observed and noted.

This preoccupation of writing a story that is true to life should be a special concern in the writer's portrayal of his subject, the history and the characters that people it. But they must be transformed, as I have said, to a certain extent: changing or transposing his action from the real historical scene to another, changing the names of the persons concerned.

In like manner the story gains in interest if it is transported from the present into a more distant past according to the time honoured principles: *Major e longinquo reverentia*: its distance lends enchantment to the view; a thing is more beautiful when discerned from afar in place or time.

If the details forming the story are from various sources they should be so welded together that no cracks should appear.

Furthermore, the preoccupation of the writer should be to place in a particular setting a dramatic crisis or event that is true for all times and all

places — a dramatic event of universal proportions gives unity to the story and makes it delight or stir hearts of divergent temperaments and divergent backgrounds.

An important point to bear in mind on this point is that although characters react according to their various natures almost necessarily, they do not react as machines. Within themselves each is torn between conflicting emotions, there is as it were an internal debate, before the trait that predominates finally explodes.

STRUCTURE.

There are various ways of building up the drama according to the genre of the writer. But normally, the Short Story goes through the following stages:

1. The introduction or the setting of the scene, clear and complete, in which is sketched the scenery or landscape or the milieu or environment, the principal characters, and the society in which they live, with its customs, its moves.
2. The story itself leading to a climax or crisis.
3. The denouement, the final catastrophe, or the unravelling of the crisis.

I proceed to illustrate this theory with examples from famous short story writers, Pushkin, the famous Russian Negro, and maker of modern Russian, the French men, Prosper Merimée and Alphonse Daudet, the celebrated black American writer, James Langston Hughes, and the great English poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson.

I am sure you will enjoy this collection, will treasure these stories, will use them as models.

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