

José R. Ibáñez, José Francisco Fernández and Carmen M. Bretones, eds. 2007: *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story*. Bern: Peter Lang. xi+240 pp. ISBN: 978-3-03911-246-3

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“The short story is experiencing nowadays an impulse that was unthinkable twenty years ago and the most striking feature of this surge of interest in the genre is the open-mindedness with which scholars are studying this narrative form” (7). With such a conclusive statement starts the introduction to this volume, which draws on the significant role of academics in the enthusiasm for the short story. It is true that its history as a modern literary genre is relatively new, if we trace its origins back to figures like Poe,<sup>1</sup> and more so if we consider the first serious critical studies on this genre. Despite the publication of some well-known criticism before the sixties—Bates (1941), O’Connor (1963), Beachcroft (1968)—it is not until the late eighties that this genre starts to be taken seriously. Some pioneer anthologies of short story criticism from this time and later are most definitely responsible for the gradual prestige that this genre has been acquiring: the anthologies edited by Hanson (1989), Lohafer and Clarey (1989), May (1994), Ifterkharuddin, Rohrberger and Lee (1997) and Tigges (1999). Incidentally, some of these pioneer critics participate in the present volume (May and Ifterkharuddin). Thus, we could consider that the short story begins to gain higher academic respect from the late eighties onwards, as May confirms in his interview with Lohafer (Lohafer 1997: 188), and as Lohafer and Clarey stated in 1989: “No more than a decade ago, referring to a ‘field’ of short story criticism would have seemed odd” (1989: vii).

The vigorous health of this genre nowadays justifies the proliferation of critical studies on the short story, and the volume edited by Ibáñez, Fernández and Bretones is a perfect case study. The selected chapters offer new and contrasting perspectives and the editors are conscious that theirs is a humble yet fundamental contribution to this critical domain. Part of this modesty derives from their awareness that the book is indebted to recent miscellaneous studies on short fiction. *The Tales We Tell. Perspectives on the Short Story*, edited by Lounsberry *et al.* in 1998, is a good example. Like the editors of *Contemporary Debates on the Short Story*, they include contributions by established authors, such as Joyce Carol Oates, and the volume is organised into different sections. Even more conspicuous is the link with the collection *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, edited by Ifterkharuddin *et al.* in 2003. Ifterkharuddin *et*

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<sup>1</sup> This seems to be the general tendency, according to critics such as Ferguson (1989: 182) or Feddersen (2001: xvii-xviii).

al.'s book offers a variety of perspectives on the short story, but fails to enlarge the theoretical problems of postmodernism in relation to this literary genre.

One of the editors of *Contemporary Debates*, Fernández Sánchez, reacts against the "ease with which [the term *postmodernism*] is used to contain virtually any recent theoretical development" (2003-4: 232). Probably this is the reason that he and the other editors avoid the use of the label *postmodernism* and prefer the term *contemporary approaches*. Therefore, the association with, but also the departure from, previous collections is clearly evinced and explains the position of this volume in the larger frame of contemporary short story criticism.

The selection of essays included in *Contemporary Debates* aims to be illustrative of the evolution of the short story since its inception as a literary genre. The book consists of nine chapters, an introduction, notes on contributors and an index. It starts with a chapter that sets an introductory theoretical background, followed by two articles on the great masters of the short story—Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James. Subsequently, there are two essays on Wyndham Lewis and Frank O'Connor, two writers who excelled in the short story in the 1920s and 1930s. The next section focuses on contemporary writers, such as Salman Rushdie, Judith Ortiz Cofer and Carol Swain, and the book concludes with another theoretical reflection on the short story that closes the volume cyclically. All in all, the compilers fulfil their aim: within the restricting boundaries of a volume of 240 pages, they manage to offer a comprehensive and illustrative panorama of the short story, from its modern origins in Poe to contemporary figures like Rushdie, an analysis that is based on, and accompanied by, solid theoretical foundations.

The book opens with José Jiménez Lozano's essay 'Algunas reflexiones sobre el cuento breve', which, being the only article written in Spanish, is accompanied by quite an accurate English translation by Andrew Taylor. Jiménez Lozano is a respected and prolific writer in contemporary Spanish literature. From this privileged standpoint, his essay is a liminal text, a subtle combination of academic writing and poetic prose, full of metaphors and images, which help the reader understand the slippery nature of the short story. He explains his intellectual affiliation with American writers such as Cather, Faulkner, Melville, Hawthorne and especially Flannery O'Connor, and deals with commonplace aspects in the short story. Lozano concludes by linking its shortness, compression and artificiality, fundamental in order to understand its nature. His most powerful images are spatial: the comparison of the short story with many painted or false doors without a real exit; and the story as a window of pure crystal through which the reader glances, just as the narrator does.

'On the Margins of Mystery: The Detective in Poe and After', by Thomas Leitch, elaborates on Poe's use of mystery and his contribution to the modern short story. Leitch offers a factual introduction to Poe's achievement as a theorist, reader and short story writer. The paper then calls attention to Poe's innovation in using a detective rather than a criminal at the centre of his stories, thus creating the detective story. Leitch's argument is that all Poe's stories are constructed on the principle of deferred teleology and, therefore, they can be reduced to either a mystery story or a burlesque of a mystery story: in this latter case the mystery is not solved. Based on this dichotomy, Leitch defends the label of *detective story* in Poe, which inaugurates a long tradition of detectives in literature. His central argument is that Poe sets the ambiguity upon which

the genre of detective fiction has fluctuated since then: a reassuring tradition where the detective's rationality solves the riddle and a counter-tradition of greater ambiguity and unsolved mysteries. The last section of the paper studies the impact of these two legacies on subsequent writers and more recent developments of the genre, such as the police procedural and the postwar detective story. This article serves as a valuable background to understand Gavin's contribution later on in the volume.

José Antonio Álvarez Amorós's chapter—'Reaching Out for Fictional Reality: Para-Derridean Forms of *Différance* in Henry James's "The Coxon Fund"'— is the longest in the volume and conceptually the most complex since its theoretical frames are Bakhtinian dialogism and Derridean deconstruction. Álvarez Amorós sets the theoretical background by choosing two of Derrida's most well-known works: his essay 'Différance' and *Of Grammatology*. He links Derrida's concept of *différance* to those of relational rather than substantial existence, impressionism, absence vs. presence and lack of extra-textual meaning, and explains Derrida's view that speech has been favoured over writing by Western metaphysics. To round up his theoretical premises, Álvarez Amorós connects Derrida's relativism with Bakhtin's idea of the self as in endless dialogue with the other, from which it obtains its selfhood. He then applies this theoretical framework to Henry James's 'The Coxon Fund' to show indirection and deferral in this story. The first concern is with the type of narration, a variety of first-person narrative conducted through a first-person marginal narrator-witness. Álvarez Amorós explains that this type of narration goes in line with Derridean and Bakhtinian relativism since, rather than using an omniscient third-person narration, James prefers the relativising dialogue between the protagonist (Saltram) and the narrator-witness.

'Visual Dynamics in "Bestre" by Wyndham Lewis', the article by Laurent Lepaludier, insists on another dimension of the short story: its traditional association with a photograph, as opposed to the novel and its comparison with a film. The author's innovation lies in linking the largely visual dimension of short stories with the interest in the image as dynamic, rather than its traditional perception as static. The focus is Lewis's story 'Bestre', included in his collection *The Wild Body* (1927). Lepaludier presents the narrator, Ker Orr, as an eye-witness who adopts a two-fold tyrannical position. Through the power of his gaze and his discourse as a narrator he usurps the characters' identities by presenting them as wild and grotesque bodies rather than human beings. The bodies are displayed as "a logorrhoea of heterogeneous images" (93). Vorticism, the art movement set up by Lewis and Ezra Pound, is central to this presentation of characters as a chaotic succession of images on the screen-body. Lepaludier goes so far as to suggest that the levels of mediation in the story are multiple: Lewis as an author is the professional eye who hides behind Bestre's eye—the protagonist in the story— and Orr's narrative.

Eibhear Walshe deals in his article with a key figure in short story criticism and writing: Frank O'Connor. In his study 'Frank O'Connor's Lonely Voice: Dissent in the Modern Irish Short Story', Walshe alludes to O'Connor's pivotal study on short fiction, *The Lonely Voice* (1962), where he contended that the short story is the perfect medium to present marginal figures who are remote from the community. Even though O'Connor was a prolific writer, his production of short stories is the most significant and this is precisely the genre where he excelled. Like the outcasts in the short story,

Walshe proves O'Connor's marginality as a writer in his native Ireland. Together with O'Faolain and unlike Joyce or Beckett, he stayed in Ireland after its political autonomy in 1922 and during the extreme censorship that followed. Walshe's argument is that despite O'Connor's apparent popularity and accessible, conservative fiction, his "stories deconstruct most of the cultural and imaginative preoccupations of the New Irish state and thus his body of work can be read as a critique of the new state's self image" (109). To underline his rebellious attitude, Walshe presents O'Connor as a victim of Irish censorship. In the second section of the essay, Walshe analyses five stories by O'Connor to illustrate the negative effects of censorship, loss of intellectual freedom, sexual loneliness and mass migration from the countryside, a criticism of the Irish state hidden behind O'Connor's oral folk tradition. The only objection to Walshe's article is his conclusion, which is too succinct for such a monumental analysis.

In the next chapter, 'Recalcitrant Discourse: The Uncompromising Content in *East, West Stories*', Farhat Iftakharuddin focuses on one of the most international contemporary writers: Salman Rushdie. Iftakharuddin departs from Rushdie's traditional preoccupation in his novels—the clash between the Indian Sub-continent and Western culture and its resulting issues of racism, discrimination and human exploitation—to prove that his short fiction is another instance of his politically charged narrative. Iftakharuddin briefly illustrates this topic in Rushdie's best-known novels—*Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*—and then, with this background in mind, analyses in greater detail each of the nine stories comprising the collection *East, West Stories* (1994). His conclusion is that, despite the existence of these two opposing philosophies that "survive through the macabre dance of mutual dislike" (151), cultural and racial assimilation are inevitable. Iftakharuddin's greatest contribution is the detailed study of Rushdie's short fiction in the light of his highly acclaimed longer narrative.

Carmen Flys Junquera's chapter is the one that most clearly exemplifies the potential and eclecticism of contemporary short fiction. 'Fluid Boundaries in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*' is a case study of the difficulty to pigeon-hole new contemporary productions. The article starts by mentioning the difficulty that Cofer had to publish her 1990 work *Silent Dancing* due to the fact that it is a multi-genre book, including autobiographical essays, personal essays, poetry and short stories. Flys Junquera takes as point of departure Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris's concept of a "composite novel", along with Margot Kelly's "novel-in-stories", to prove that Cofer's book is a hybrid text that allows the writer to "portray hybrid notions of identity and reality" (156) in line with her double marginal position as a postcolonial, ethnic woman writer. Although the article mentions other important critics who justify the combination of autobiography and fiction in Cofer's book (Hesse and García Pinto), it focuses on Dunn and Morris's five general principles of a composite novel, which Flys Junquera exemplifies in Cofer's *Silent Dancing*: setting, a single protagonist, a collective protagonist, pattern and storytelling.

The next chapter, by Adrienne E. Gavin, is a further illustration of eclecticism. It focuses on the rise of the graphic short story, which Gavin defines as "a form which draws on the traditions of fiction and comics to create stories that are told through both word and image" (186). Under the title 'Painting it Black: Art, Crime and (Ir)resolution

in Carol Swan's Graphic Short Story "come down town", this article claims the complexity and literary value of this type of fiction, particularly in revealing postmodernist innovations in form, content and style, such as the use of intertextuality, indeterminacy, circularity, filmic techniques and metafiction. Gavin takes Swain's 'come down town' as an example to prove that what appears to be a straightforward detective story about the mystery of an elusive criminal who paints books and buildings black "becomes, in effect, a never-ending story which raises more questions than it answers" (186). This apparently transparent story involves deeper issues concerning censorship and the question of what is considered art, which could be, in my opinion, an allegory of the very status of the graphic short story as a literary genre. The mystery surrounding the Black Artist—an alternative to the canon—remains unsolved, and there is a hint that the detective himself could be the Black Artist. As Gavin proves, this is a text where opposites coexist: "artist/criminal, writer/painter, rejected/noticed, failure/success, censor/censored" (194). Hence, we have the rationale of postmodernism and the recognition of the value of alternative texts, which Ibáñez *et al.*'s volume supports. I wish to highlight Gavin's own style, since she constructs her arguments and hypotheses with unresolved questions, very much in line with Swan's discourse.

'The Secret Life in the Modern Short Story', Charles E. May's article, closes the volume. His central argument is a commonplace in short story studies; namely, the problem for early nineteenth-century writers to combine newly developed eighteenth-century conventions of realism with the spiritual and allegorical meaning of the mythic romance. May believes that this change of focus "necessitated a new narrative form" (208) and speaks of a radical implication: the sacred is now viewed as a psychological projection, resulting in "the demythologizing of the outer world and the remythologizing of the inner self" (209), as represented by Irving, Poe and particularly Chekhov. After insisting on the mythical perception of temporality in the short story and its connection with mystery, mentioning critics like Cassirer and Eliade and writers like Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty, May illustrates this focus on the secret life in the external world with the analysis of short stories by reputable writers such as Conrad, Joyce, Anderson, Munro, and Lordan.

My only concern is with the presence of some errata in the volume that result in grammatical inconsistencies: "... then all this [sic] stories are in some sense mystery stories" (30); "The eye is lead [sic] away from its original function..." (101); "... the image is a also word [sic]" (104); "... they have sometimes been read as deceptively simply [sic] and artless..." (109); "The content of these stories attain [sic] universal relevance ..." (152); "... arguing a [sic] an issue or principle" (160).

Despite these minor formal issues, this is a work of great value and numerous strengths, a milestone for those interested in the short story and its most recent projections. The book's interdisciplinary focus and its diachronic and representative selection of authors make it a notable and valuable addition to the dynamic and flexible field of short story criticism.

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Received 19 June 2007

Accepted 17 February 2008