

THE SHORT STORY: A NON-DEFINITION

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## ABSTRACT

The short story is defined, in this thesis, in terms of what it does rather than what it is. The need to transcend the limitations of brevity determines that the primary quality of the form is the necessity of generating a superior quality of response in the reader. Identifying this primary quality allows the critic a focus which enables him to examine the genre in terms of textual strategies specifically designed to generate reader response. This critical perspective is open-ended and non-deterministic, and thus frees short fiction criticism from its previously prescriptive and proscriptive tendencies, which is why the definition offered here is better termed a "non-definition".

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## Introduction

Short stories are frequently used to introduce students to the study of literature. As a form they are brief, and therefore easily apprehensible as completed works, usually entertaining, frequently intriguing in both form and content, and not at all intimidating. In short, they form an excellent means of demonstrating that the study of literature, although a serious pursuit, is also enjoyable and satisfying on many levels. The more important aspect of the genre from the instructor's point of view, however, is the opportunity it presents to expand from its apparent simplicity to consideration of the sophisticated literary techniques that are used by the short-story writer to accomplish his much-in-little magic. In many ways short stories are distillations of the essence of literature, and it is from this perspective that this thesis will examine the short story as a genre.

It is generally conceded, and easily verifiable, that the volume of criticism devoted to the short story per se is small compared to that generated by any other single literary genre. There have been only five book-length studies published in this century, with the addition, this year, of one more;<sup>1</sup> and although there is one publication, Studies in Short Fiction,

which concerns itself exclusively with short stories, much of its content consists of readings of individual stories or critical considerations of the short fiction of particular writers. It contains proportionally little theoretical criticism of the short story as a distinct genre, a genre which, although it borrows creatively from other literary forms such as poetry, drama, film, and novels, remains essentially true to its own attributes and is thus recognisable on the basis of accepted criteria. There are also scattered articles on short fiction to be found in various literary publications, some of which have been collected into a few volumes of essays by various hands,<sup>2</sup> and occasionally the genre becomes the focus of journal symposia, such as the one run over several issues of The Kenyon Review in 1968, 1969, and 1970, and the one found in the Spring 1982 issue of Modern Fiction Studies.

Until the last few years, however, critical practice in short fiction studies has been composed largely of reiterations of critical commonplaces, such as the short story's density, its poeticality, its limitations, and its unity and organic wholeness -- much of this generated from the prescriptions and proscriptions of the first modern theorist of the genre, Edgar Allen Poe, whose attempts at defining the parameters of the form have had a pervasive and long-lasting effect. The first chapter here will review the main lines of thought of this traditional type of criticism because it tells us many basic things about the genre and it provides a solid background



against which to foreground the more recent attempts to view the nature of the short story from different perspectives.

One of the more interesting aspects of short stories is their ability, used frequently by writers of story cycles, to provide a writer with a means of approaching a given topic from several different and sharply differentiated points of view, each of which illuminates with its own particular hue. In emulation of this fruitful technique my first chapter, entitled "Anthology", takes the form of a series of short sections, each of which considers the "problem" of the short story from a different perspective; for example, from a historical point of view, as a reflection of contemporary life, as poetical, as relatively convention-free, and finally, at the beginning of Chapter Two, in terms of the problem of definition.

To speak of short stories and definitions in the same sentence, however, is almost a contradiction in terms. Despite the many attempts made by critics after Poe, definitions are almost always accompanied by caveats and acknowledgements of the deficiencies or incompleteness of the attempts. Recently there has been a resurgence of critical interest in the form, due primarily to its suitability as a vehicle for the kind of highly detailed theoretical criticism practiced by theorists in such fields as semiotics, structuralism, and narratology. The interest of these critics has not been in the short story per se, but in theories of language, reader-response, coding

and decoding, and other matters of the theory of literature; but simply because their general theories have been explicated via short fiction -- in much the same way and for many of the same reasons that the New Critics concentrated on lyric poetry -- it has become obvious that these theories can in turn be used to amend the deficiencies that have heretofore been symptomatic of definitions of the short story.

A definition, however, is, axiomatically, a short, necessarily highly condensed form, and as such, inherently unsatisfactory in terms of a comprehensive understanding of its subject. What is necessary, therefore, in an attempt to understand the short story as a genre, is a detailed theory of short fiction of the type recently begun by Suzanne Brown in her unpublished 1981 PhD dissertation titled "Dimension and Genre: Towards a Theory of the Short Story" and by Susan Lohafer in Coming to Terms with the Short Story (1983). These writers apply to the study of the form the theories of contemporary criticism, much of which is particularly applicable to describing the definitive aspects of short stories in greater detail than has heretofore been possible. Lohafer and Brown, however, confine their considerations primarily to the work of North American critics such as W.H. Gass and Seymour Chapman,<sup>3</sup> whereas those critical theories which I find to be the more useful emanate from the work of European theorists such as Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Wolfgang Iser, and Roman Jakobson. It is pertinent aspects of the work of these writers that will be considered in Chapter Two, along with some insights from Brown and Lohafer themselves.

Chapter Three consists of readings of two contemporary short stories. These readings are the result of applying contemporary theories in order to demonstrate that such descriptive techniques are not merely theoretical, but can provide useful tools for critical analysis, tools of a quality easily matching that of traditional criticism. The choice of stories for this exercise takes into account the fact that there are two strains in contemporary short fiction writing -- the traditional and the avant-garde -- in order to demonstrate that contemporary critical techniques can be applied successfully to the whole spectrum of the genre.

In the course of the argument of this paper, especially in those sections concerned with the history of the form, I allude to short stories dating from as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, but my main focus is on contemporary short stories. By contemporary I mean stories written in the last twenty-five years. The main reason for this is the pragmatic issue of thesis length, but a secondary consideration is the recent renaissance in short story writing which has manifested itself in a wide variety of good stories which exploit the creative freedom of the genre to the limits (if any exist).

Unfortunately it is not so simple to define what we mean by "modern" or "modernism". The modern short story is generally deemed to have originated with Poe in the United States and with Gogol in Europe. The period conventionally known as "Modern", however, is much narrower: 1910-1930.

Generally speaking, most of my references to "Modern" short stories allude to the stories of the 1910-1930 period, and those that intend the other sense of "modern" are clear from context, such as my reference to Poe on page two of this introduction. Deviations from this procedure are footnoted.

One final caveat: the perspective of this paper is more descriptive<sup>4</sup> than evaluative. The differentiations made between traditional and contemporary critical methodologies are not intended to denigrate one to the advantage of the other. Similarly, comparisons made between short fiction and other genres are not to be construed as a claim that the genre does all things literary better than the other forms; my contention is simply that, because it does some things superlatively, it is time that critical neglect was redressed, and that the means of performing this service are present in the methodologies inherent in contemporary literary theory.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>H.E. Bates, The Modern Short Story (Boston: The Writer Inc., 1972, first published, 1941).  
 S. O'Faolin, The Short Story (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1951).  
 F. O'Connor, The Lonely Voice (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1963).  
 I. Reid, The Short Story (London: Methuen and Company Ltd., 1977).  
 W. Allen, The Short Story in English (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981).  
 S. Lohafer, Coming to Terms with the Short Story (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).  
 It is interesting to note, with reference to the issue of critical neglect of the form, that three of the writers of these studies -- Bates, O'Faolin, and O'Connor -- are primarily writers of short fiction, not critics, and that Lohafer is both critic and writer.

<sup>2</sup>S.K. Kumar and K. McKean, eds., Critical Approaches to Fiction (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968).  
 C. May, ed., Short Story Theories (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup>Brown does make some use of the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (Brown, pp. 138, 139, 140) and Lohafer discusses some aspects of Roman Ingarden's work in his The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic and Theory of Literature, tr. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). (Lohafer, pp. 35, 36, 38, 44, 57, 52n, 73), but neither extends her discussion of European critics to encompass those considered in this study. Brown's study is conducted from the perspective of the reader's response, but her focus is primarily on a detailed study of the psychological and physiological norms of perception and the ways in which they can be exploited by writers of short stories.

<sup>4</sup>I am using "descriptive" here in the phenomenological sense. Phenomenologists claim that the essence of being, what Kant called the unknowable noumenon, the thing-in-itself, can in fact be known through very close examination by an observer who is consciously as unprejudiced as possible. In this case the division of being under consideration is the short story. It is interesting to note in passing that phenomenological thinking is premeating to many levels of literary criticism in the wake of an increased interest, in both literary and philosophical circles, in the philosophy of language.

Chapter One  
Anthology

History

Many book-length studies of the short story are designed as historic considerations of writers of short fiction,<sup>1</sup> and even those that are organised differently, such as Ian Reid's The Short Story, which considers the question of definition first, contain long historical sections. The reason for this, other than the obvious one that in any generic study some consideration must be given to origins and derivations, is that among students of short fiction it is agreed that a clear break must be made between traditional and modern stories. No precise date, or even decade is unanimously agreed upon by commentators, although most agree with O'Connor's contention that all modern short-story writers have come out from under Gogol's Overcoat.<sup>2</sup> What is important, however, is that a distinction be made between the old type of story, which is clearly related to oral traditions and thus full of repetitious patterning and stock plotting, and the modern version, which is much more closely related to novelistic structuring and modern concerns.<sup>3</sup> W. Allen makes the point clearer by comparing Turgenev's "Yermolai and the Miller's Wife" with similar tales by Chaucer or Boccaccio. He notes that in the Turgenev story:

what might have been a simple story of sexual intrigue is changed into or becomes the launching pad for ... an image of a woman's suffering, of callousness and hypocrisy, above all, of the evils of slavery.

In other words, what Turgenev does that is "modern" is to transcend the old limitations of stock characters and pre-determined plots, and generate out of the traditional materials a more than traditional meaning. What Turgenev in fact does in this story is construct multivalency of meaning via resonant images and symbols rather than repetitive verbal patterning of the type used, for example, by Chaucer in "The Miller's Tale".

Modern short-story writers also exhibit a considerable interest in the possibilities of manipulation of form. This dates from around 1842, when Edgar Allen Poe first formulated the modern conception of the short story -- which he called the "prose tale"-- and which he claimed as next only to the lyric poem as the form which "best fulfills the demands of high genius" (p.622).<sup>5</sup> He insisted that the short story be short, requiring from half an hour to two hours to read; that it be complete, since there is "immense force derivable from totality" (the emphasis is Poe's) ; that it be "conceived with deliberate care" to evoke a "unique or single effect" (p.623), and that, like the lyric poem, it should "induce exaltation of the soul" (p.622). He further noted that, due to its brevity, "during the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control" (p.623),<sup>6</sup> and also that extreme brevity, in short story as in lyric poem, "will degenerate into epigram-

matism" (p.622). He was also aware of the versatility of the medium both in form and content. He noted, furthermore, that despite its undoubted advantages, rhythm in poetry is an essentially artificial device and, as such, a hindrance to the development "of all points of thought or expression which have their basis in Truth" (emphasis his) (p.623). By this he seems to imply that poetry, because of its conventions of artificiality, is incapable of being as mimetic as prose tales -- a point which is at the least arguable, but which merely indicates that Poe was in some ways simply a man of his times, times in which the subject matter of poetry was still severely circumscribed by convention. Poe also alludes to a facet of the prose tale that has been developed into an important sub-genre in fiction and an influential factor in the structuring of short stories when he comments that: "Some of the finest tales are tales of ratiocination" (p.623). The sub-genre is, of course, detective fiction, and the significance of "ratiocination" for short-story structure is related to the tendency of many short-story writers to present their tales as puzzles or mysteries -- in the case of contemporary short-story writers, sometimes as unsolvable puzzles.

Poe's final point is worth quoting in its entirety:

The field of this species of composition [the prose tale], if not in so elaborate a region on the mountain of the Mind, is a tableland of far vaster extent than the domain of the mere poem. Its products are never so rich, but infinitely more numerous and more appreciable by the mass of mankind. (p.623)



Again this has implications that will be further developed at a later point, but what is important to note for now is the breadth and depth of Poe's insight into the form and his formal presentation of a set of reference criteria for subsequent short-story writers and critics.

As previously noted, Poe's formulation has been extremely influential, although in recent times it has been criticised as being restrictive, resulting in "stereotyped views of the short story", and as needing to be superseded by a "respect" for "the openness and variety inherent in the form."<sup>7</sup> It is equally arguable, however, that latent in Poe's criteria lies inspiration that can be mined still by modern short-story writers intent on expanding the genre's horizons, and by critics bent on reinterpreting his strictures in structuralist and psychological terms, and that on this basis his definitions are still valid.<sup>8</sup> For example, it is easy to see, in the tight structural interdependence of form and content in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants", where every structural element -- diction, syntax, setting, tone -- emphasises the aridity of the relationship between the protagonists, a reflection of Poe's insistence that: "in the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design " (p.623). Poe's dictum can also be exemplified with reference to many contemporary short stories, for example, Barth's "Night-Sea Journey", Borges' "Funes The Memorios", and Barthelme's "The Balloon".

It would take more than the limited scope of this dissertation to examine fully the ways in which various practitioners have, from the point of Poe's 1842 manifesto to the beginning of the contemporary period, influenced short-story writing. We should, however, at least allude to Ambrose Bierce's early exploration of psychological phenomena in such stories as "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and "One of the Missing", and his impressionistic techniques in a story such as "The Horseman In The Sky". Such techniques are further developed by Crane in "The Open Boat", a story which mixes its impressionism with realistic and naturalistic elements which were to come to their peak in writers such as Sherwood Anderson and Hemingway in the United States, and the James Joyce of Dubliners in Ireland. It is the Joyce of the longer prose fiction, however, who has had the greatest influence on contemporary short stories via the dislocatory and epiphanic techniques practised in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. A parallel realistic, and yet profoundly Romantic, phenomenon is seen in the short stories of D.H. Lawrence and in those of Katherine Mansfield, although Mansfield lacks the overt psychological concerns of Lawrence in such stories as "The Rocking Horse Winner" and "The Woman Who Rode Away". This interest in psychology, which has become increasingly strong in contemporary times, is shared, however, by Katherine Anne Porter in a story such as "Flowering Judas". The growing interest in psychology is also reflected in the diminishing occurrence of exotic locales and characters, such

as those found in Poe's gothic horror stories and Hawthorne's devils in woods, which are replaced by local, commonplace settings: Joyce's Dublin, Anderson's Winesberg, Ohio, Joyce Carol Oates' Detroit, John Updike's local A&P. Similarly, we also find everyday characters, Joyce's laundress ("Clay"), O'Connor's soldiers ("Guests of the Nation"), and Alice Munro's Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd, in the story of that name. This trend to "normalcy" has to a large extent been reversed by contemporary writers of avant-garde short fiction such as Barthelme, Coover, and Robbe-Grillet, but it has been perpetuated in the work of, for example, Lessing, Gordimer, and Munro. As will become obvious, one of the genre's primary attributes is its versatility, which one critic, seeking to justify neglect, has termed "untidiness"<sup>9</sup> but which I prefer to term its attractively elusive chameleon-like character.

As previously noted there are several good book-length studies of the short story whose emphasis on diachronic development of the genre enables us to leave this historical sketch and go on to view our subject from other perspectives.<sup>10</sup> But before we do so, it will be useful to examine briefly some influences that cannot, strictly speaking, be termed literary.

O'Connor places great emphasis on the influence of geography on the development of the American short story. He notes that colonial America's isolation from Europe caused it to generate not only its own entertainment but its own forms of entertainment, of the type of Washington Irving's The

Sketch Book (1820), and later Poe's, Hawthorne's, and Melville's stories of individualism, and the relationship of the individual to his society and with Nature. O'Connor's point, here and in the entire study, which is entitled The Lonely Voice, is that the short story is naturally generated out of countries in which geographic and cultural isolation tends to produce societies which understand themselves as outsiders and which place a high premium on self-sufficiency, both nationally and at the level of the individual; countries such as America and Russia, and to some extent, Ireland. The argument, of course, does not hold for the strong short fiction tradition of France, but consistency is rarely O'Connor's primary concern.<sup>11</sup> W. Allen supports O'Connor when he quotes A.W. Litz to the effect that:

the brief poetic tale, rather than the sprawling novel of manners seemed the natural form for their [Americans'] intense but isolated experiences. At the same time they were acutely responsive to the developments of English and European Romanticism. This collision of local and fragmented social experience proved ideal for the growth of the short story.<sup>12</sup>

One of the important ramifications of this historical/geographical determination is the prevalence in contemporary short fiction of satire and irony. Satire, in particular, is primarily the province of the "outsider". The position tenuously held by the Irish, moralistic and idealistic Swift on the edges of the materialistic and frequently hedonistic society of eighteenth century England, for example, is mirrored by the relationship of intellectuals such as Barth and Barth-

elme to the essentially non-intellectual, materialistic ethos of twentieth-century North America.

Another important factor, which came into play in the late 1800s, in America as in Europe, was the increasing general level of literacy, as education became available to the general populace. This factor influenced all literary forms, but one of its manifestations was the appearance of weekly and monthly magazines, which quickly became a major market for short stories. These were not literary magazines of the quality of The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, or Harper's (although some of these had their genesis in this period too), but they did provide an impetus for short story writing despite the fact that journalistic techniques generated by deadline and space pressures tended to lower the quality of such stories.<sup>13</sup>

These factors influenced the writer of the short story indirectly, in terms of his market and his audience, but a more direct influence also exists, the import of which has become increasingly important as both audience and writers have become more sophisticated. This element is philosophy, particularly as it influences the increasingly close and complex relationship that holds between short fiction and the intellectual milieu of our time.

#### Philosophical Influences

As Robert Alter notes:

If modern philosophy can be said to begin with Descartes' methodological skepticism, his making ontology essentially problematic, a whole tradition of the novel [and the short story], as the

paradigmatically modern narrative genre, is informed by that same critical-philosophical awareness, beginning almost half a century before Descartes with Cervantes [Don Quixote could easily be characterised as a short story cycle]. Ontological critique in the novel, moreover, is carried on typically not as discursive exposition but as a critical exploration through the technical manipulation of the very form that purports to represent reality.<sup>14</sup>

Alter further comments, as an observation on the philosophical background of mechanistic Newtonian physics and Lockean empiricism against which Tristram Shandy was written, that Sterne treats Locke as: "a hob-goblin to be exorcised because his ontological devaluation of the imagination and its products cuts the ground from under the whole enterprise of literature."<sup>15</sup>

Sterne's rebellion against empiricism and a mechanistic Lebenswelt has been emulated by many writers -- writers after all, have a vested interest in anything that devalues the imagination -- but by none so often as the writer of short fiction, who has a particularly good reason to do so. Because of its brevity, the short story cannot rely on meaning being built up over time by repetition and accretion, as can the novelist. He must therefore utilize what Roman Jakobson calls "metaphoric" techniques, that is, those which rely on similarity, analogy, and association, or, in Saussurean terms, "verticality", as opposed to horizontality, which is based on narrative linearity, and which Jakobson considers in terms of sequential association and calls "metonymy".<sup>16</sup> The metaphoric process is what is commonly referred to as the short story's poeticality or density, and it depends on the reader's ability to make associations imaginatively.

The short-story writer's necessary reliance on the reader's imagination underlies Rohrberger and Burns' comment that the short story is a mirror "but what is reflected is not an image of waking reality, but an image of the human mind",<sup>17</sup> or, to put it in the terms of Bishop Berkeley, the idealist philosopher who argued against Locke's empiricism, esse est in percipere -- to be is to be perceived. In other words, reality (and meaning) is perceiver-determined.

It is but a short journey, via Hume, Kant, and Hegel, to a development of Berkeley's thesis generated by contemporary phenomenologists, which claims that the nature of reality can be understood via a close, detailed, description of phenomena. This is what the short story does. Typically it examines closely a tiny fragment of life, a situation, a relationship, to see what can be learned from the scrutiny. Examples abound: Borges' "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero", in which the protagonist fulfils both roles simultaneously; Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" which illuminates the nature of loneliness and empathy; Lessing's "Each Other" which sheds some light on incest and the question of "normality"; and Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me A Riddle" in which the chronicle of the last few months of life of an elderly woman reiterates in a pathetic, curiously moving, and rigorously unsentimental way, the truism that life has always been a riddle. Even in avant-garde stories where the "moment" of illumination tends to be not a moment, but a sustained movement within the structure of the story, the concept of scrutiny is maintained.

Susan Ferguson casts another light on the philosophical underpinnings of modern fiction when she notes that the philosophical preoccupation with epistemological themes, (such as the nature of perception), is reflected in the short fiction of the Modern period (early twentieth century) and that it surfaces as an outgrowth of the subjectivism inherent in idealism (and also, despite heroic attempts to eliminate it, in phenomenology). She notes that: "when all we have in the world is our own experience of it, all received knowledge becomes suspect and the very nature of knowledge becomes problematic."<sup>18</sup> This theme of epistemological doubt is a favourite of Jorge Luis Borges in stories such as "The Circular Ruins" and "The Library in Babel".

A slightly different version of Ferguson's point is offered by Fredric Jameson when he points out, working from a base in Russian Formalism, that Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu is based on a conception that understanding via cause and effect (Jakobson's metonymy) is: "a kind of poor substitute for perception, that there is a kind of interference between a purely intellectual knowledge of a thing and some genuine, spontaneous visionary experience of it "<sup>19</sup> (emphasis mine). The point is that, if rationally derived knowledge is inherently suspect, then perhaps it is wiser to rely on knowledge derived from intuition and imagination. Such imaginative depiction of knowledge and the often intuitive understanding of it is an enterprise for which literature is admirably suited; and, since knowledge is multiform and multivalent, short stories are perfectly suited to convey it.



Although phenomenological thinking is the dominant philosophical influence in contemporary short-story theory and practice, there is no unanimity apparent now, nor was there in the early twentieth century when pragmatists such as William James and logical positivists such as G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell denied the claims of phenomenology and instead proclaimed the primacy of intellectual, rational knowledge of being. Their tenets diminished the epistemological influence of imagination, just as Locke's had done, and denied any epistemological function to imagination. Although literature can never entirely eliminate imagination, the rationalistic ethos can be seen in detective fiction and, in more sophisticated, more artful form, in stories such as Henry James' "The Figure in the Carpet", although in this story the structure is an ironic parody of the theme. This rationalism is evident also in the work of some contemporary short-story writers such as Borges, an admitted Aristotelian,<sup>20</sup> in a story such as "Death and the Compass" where the protagonist's conclusions, rationally derived, and blindly followed, result in his death because they obscure the obvious, but not rational, situation. Borges, however, being a phenomenologically inclined rationalist, never neglects to present the other side(s) of the coin; an example in this case being "The Congress" -- a parody of the rational process and the tendency of the young and the deluded old alike to treat it as a religion.

In summary, it is obvious that the relationship between short fiction and the various strains of philosophical thought

is a dialectical one, with the philosophical concepts of their choice being utilised by writers of short stories as a type of intertextuality or as a framing device to circumvent the limitations of the form, such as brevity.

### Psychology

It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the influence that psychology has had on short stories, as on all literature of the twentieth century. One item of consuming interest to psychologists, particularly after the 1899 publication of Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams, is the relationship between the unconscious, the conscious, and dreams. In the writing of short stories this has tended frequently to take the form of a consideration of various types of dream-states. We shall see an overt example of such techniques when we come to discuss Doris Lessing's "Two Potters" in Chapter Three, but they can also be found, in perhaps their most sophisticated form, in the work of Borges, in stories such as "The Immortal" and "The Circular Ruins"

We have previously noted the psychological interests of D.H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield -- both writing in the period immediately following and during Freud's great psychological revelations -- but the continuing interest of contemporary short-story writers in a variety of psychological themes is easily exemplified with reference to the works of such writers as Barth--the strong theme of the emerging identity of the individual in Lost in the Funhouse, for example -- or Barthelme, whose most Freudian work is perhaps his novel The Dead Father,

but whose interest in psychological issues in general is clearly evident in such stories as "Our Work And Why We Do It" or "Views of My Father Weeping". Barthelme's catholic interest in the minutiae of psychology as a means of depicting the human condition is also shared by Nadine Gordimer in such stories as "A Lion on the Freeway" and "Siblings".

The stream of consciousness techniques developed by Joyce and Woolf were, of course, also related to the interest in psychology then permeating the intellectual air of the early part of the century, but one contemporary development of them is the fragmentary forms often used by avant-garde short story writers; Joyce Carol Oates, for example, in "29 Inventions", or Barthelme in "The Glass Mountain" which is composed of one hundred numbered sentences. I do not wish to suggest that stream of consciousness techniques and their psychological underpinnings are the only root of such fragmentary forms -- merely that they are contributing factors.

#### Modernism and Postmodernism

In the section on philosophy we identified one of several kinds of dualism associated with the short story, that of rationalism versus empiricism, but it is instructive also to consider another, more directly literary, type of dualism, that of modernism and postmodernism and the relationship between them. Our purpose is to understand the contemporary concern with the metafictional aspects of fiction which underlie techniques adopted to express what literature has always considered one of its first priorities, the imaginative exploration of being and making.

Manfred Pütz, in an essay entitled "The Struggle of the Postmodern"<sup>21</sup> quotes Ihab Hassan as identifying two strains in modern fiction. The (Nietzschean) distinction is based on an understanding of the Modern period (early twentieth century) as emphasising its Apollonian or rational elements, as exemplified by Eliot, Pound, et al, and allowing to remain latent its Dionysian, or intuitive, imaginative, truly creative, elements.<sup>22</sup> Hassan claims that postmodernism has broken with Apollonian literature and instead is involved in what Pütz calls "expressions of a free, rambunctious, and cheerfully naive creativity"<sup>23</sup> -- a description that easily fits the short fiction of Barthelme ( "Sentence", "Cortés and Montezuma", "Shower of Gold"), and Barth ("Night-Sea Journey", "Glossolalia", or even "Frame Tale"), to name only two postmodern writers. The point of Pütz's argument, however, and an opinion that he shares with Gerald Graff,<sup>24</sup> is that there is no definite break between modernism and postmodernism but rather that postmodernism is simply exploiting the creative freedom implicit in the Dionysian elements that were largely ignored in the earlier era.<sup>25</sup> Postmodernism can thus be seen as a natural evolution of the type often seen in literary history -- best exemplified perhaps by the Pamela/Shamela phenomenon, or by Hopkins' revitalisation of the language of poetry via a judicious raiding of vernacular speech patterns and vocabulary. Because short stories are distillations of fictional form, it is often easier to see changing trends and techniques more clearly in them than in poetry, or longer prose forms, and this is certainly true of postmodernism. Pütz compiles a

list of the identifiable features of postmodernism and it is instructive to see how many of them can be accompanied by the title of a contemporary short story. For example, postmodernism is seen as politically involved, "a new literature engagée" (Barthelme's "The Rise of Capitalism"); modernism is intellectual and detached, but postmodernism is "emotional and involved" (Stanley Elkin's "A Poetics for Bullies"); postmodernism is "increasingly conscious of the body, an 'erotics' of the physical world" (Lessing's "Each Other"); the postmodern period is considered to be a "new period of flux ... endless metamorphoses of protean beings and things" (Borges' "The Immortal"<sup>26</sup> and Barthelme's "Cortés and Montezuma"). In other words, the contemporary short story, because it participates in the flexibility and versatility of the form per se, can be seen to be at the leading edge of current attempts to expand the horizons of literature, an exercise which Pütz describes as an experiment designed to "discover how much form and structure one can negate and still ... have something on the page."<sup>27</sup>

Pütz and Graff argue that there are many aspects of contemporary fiction that do not fit the postmodernist model and that even writers labelled postmodern, such as John Barth, have gone back to a more modern style, and that therefore postmodernism is truly, as Graff claims, a myth. One could probably substantiate a similar argument in the area of contemporary short fiction, but to do so would obscure the facts -- which are, that there are two simultaneously existing strains in contemporary short fiction and that the better writers function

well in both. It is not only the form that is versatile.

There clearly is, therefore, a relationship between short stories and the specifically literary and theoretical aspects of modernism, but short fiction must also be seen against the backdrop of a wider view of modern life in general.

### Mimesis

Several commentators, starting with Poe, have noted that the modern short story, because of its appearance in many different kinds of periodicals and magazines, is probably the most widely read of genres,<sup>28</sup> and also that, as a form, it has many aspects that fit it peculiarly well to reflect modern concerns.

The short story, typically, because of its small dimension, has few characters, and those few, sometimes only a single character, are frequently caught at a critical point in life where the relationship of the individual to everything outside of him/herself is illuminated. In other words what is being considered is the essential isolation of the individual --Coover's "A Pedestrian Accident" is a classic absurdist example of the type. Isolation frequently generates loneliness and fear and what G.H. Bantock has termed "the sense of circumambient violence",<sup>29</sup> and this is one of the recurring themes in contemporary short stories (Gordimer's "A Soldier's Embrace" or Barthelme's "Our Work and Why We Do It"). These emotions often evolve into what Allen has called our appreciation of the "precariousness of society and the mind's susceptibility to obsession, mania,

and fugue "<sup>30</sup> (Ted Hughes' "Snow", Borges' "The Immortal"). The individual who perceives himself to be radically isolated tends, of course, to turn inwards and to become self-obsessed, a factor of modern life exemplified by short-story writers in the psycho-dramas of such stories as Elkin's "A Poetics For Bullies" and Joyce Carol Oates' "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again". Not all short-story writers contemplate modern life in such grim terms, however. Lessing, Gordimer, Munro, Borges, and others frequently write charming, often amusing, satisfied and satisfying, depictions of contemporary living: for example, V.S. Pritchett's "The Wheelbarrow".

Another aspect of modern life particularly well reflected by the form of the short story is the contemporary realisation that experience is not composed of neat bundles. The tendency of contemporary short stories to become increasingly short -- Frederic Brown's "Solipsist" and Borges' 1975 collection The Book of Sand are good examples of the phenomenon -- reflects the contemporary apprehension of experience as fragmentary and of truth as multidimensional and only comprehensible in flashes of insight.<sup>31</sup> Truth in the contemporary short story is an evanescent, flickering firefly, or as Nadine Gordimer puts it:

The short story is a fragmented restless form ... and it is perhaps for this reason that it suits the modern consciousness -- which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight, alternating with hypnotic states of indifference.<sup>32</sup>

Bates puts it in slightly different terms when he avers that it is the plasticity of the short story form that allows it to mirror the contemporary experience so well.<sup>33</sup> Or to phrase it slightly differently, fractional truths are best expressed in fractional fictions.

Yet another facet of the short story per se is its openness -- the way in which the form's metaphoric emphasis rests on an understanding of experience as infinitely extensible, especially when the imagination is brought into play. In other words, the nature of reality is erratic and paradoxical, and such elusive materials and the endlessly changing nature of the relationships between them, are best comprehended metaphorically rather than by the use of reason, since rationality is limited to the laws of cause and effect. Short stories, to an even greater extent than novels or poetry, are eminently suited to capture this fluidity, especially since they can be collected together into groups or cycles designed to give many perspectives on one topic; for example Joyce's Dubliners which illuminates, from several vantage points, the stultifying effects of tradition and a rigid religious creed, or Barth's Lost in the Funhouse with its twin themes of self-discovery in both personal and artistic terms. This capability of the short story is assisted by the fact that its focus may be narrow, but such narrowness enables it to concentrate its resources and depict its chosen topic with clarity and subtlety.

Thus, it is the short story's versatility in both form and content that enables it to reflect faithfully the



multidimensionality of the contemporary experience, despite the claim that its relevance is, like that of the sonnet, limited to an audience of only a few enthusiasts, and that the contemporary experience is best expressed in short T.V. plays,<sup>34</sup> -- an opinion that ignores or devalues the inherent subtlety of written language and the reexperienceability that are considerably more available to the reader than to the viewer. Be that as it may, however, what is important is to realise that the short story is a particularly apposite medium for reflecting the episodic, fragmented, alienated nature of contemporary life, and that it is also the most accessible form of "serious" writing available to the modern reader. By "serious" I mean that it is primarily "poetic" or metaphoric in nature but it lacks the intimidatingly serious aspect that poetry has for the contemporary common reader, a fact which enables it to capitalise on the ability of prose (via its narrative momentum) to lead the reader unsuspectingly and unresistingly into the literary experience.

To allude to the short story's "poetic" nature, however, is to introduce another useful perspective on the genre, that of the demands it makes on its reader.

### The Demanding Gift

Before considering directly the poetic aspect of the short story we should discuss the reasons why readers often comment that it is difficult to read short stories, especially in anthology form.<sup>35</sup>

The primary reason for this, other than the demands of diction, is what Susan Lohafer refers to as the "ontological gap",<sup>36</sup> the switch that the reader must make between the world of his everyday experience and that of the story. The severity of the gap depends on the degree of difference between the two worlds, with fantasy and science fiction being perhaps the most onerous in terms of their demands on the reader's imaginative capacities.

Stories collected in an anthology or even a cycle demand that the reader make the required deviation from "reality" with each story, and, in a cycle, that he identify and retain patterns of imagery and structure that are varied from story to story, but which, as a whole, structure the work. A good example is the bee motif that runs through John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse. It begins with the swarm of bees that disturb Ambrose's mother in "Ambrose, His Mark" but refers also back to the swarming spermatozoa of "Night-Sea Journey", the first story in the collection, and to the bee-shaped mark that gives Ambrose his name via the associative links between ambrosia and honey, and finally to the swarm of humanity on the Atlantic City boardwalk in "Lost in the Funhouse".

It is not only the ontological gap, however, that makes demands on the reader. In a discussion of the audiences for fiction,<sup>37</sup> Peter Rabinowitz notes that there are at least four audiences implied by a work of fiction; the actual, authorial, narrative, and ideal narrative audiences, each of which demands that a reader respond in a different way. He further notes how demanding it is for the reader to play all of these roles simul-

taneously. Rabinowitz's frame of reference is novelistic, but the theory also clearly applies to short fiction, and with particular appropriateness, because the reader has less time to clarify the distinctions between the fields of the various audience response levels which are, in any case, much more highly condensed in a short story than in the representative novel. An example will help clarify the problem.

The first paragraph of Borges' "the Lottery in Babylon" begins thus: "Like all men in Babylon I have been proconsul; like all, a slave. I have known omnipotence, opprobrium, imprisonment."<sup>38</sup> On reading these sentences, and the rest of the opening paragraph, the reader is faced with juggling the reactions of the four audience roles. Firstly, there is the role of the actual audience -- What is Borges' purpose in subjecting me to this barrage of allusions drawn from many sectors of the ancient world, bearing in mind that I am reading the work of a highly skilled story teller? Secondly, we have the role of the authorial audience -- What is the precise significance of the variety of allusions chosen, and are they effective in drawing me into the experience of the story? The role of the narrative audience is also critical -- I know that Babylon existed, and for the purposes of the story I will pretend to believe, for now, that the speaker exists and that he has been and done all of these fantastic things, that is, I will suspend judgement, but retain my right to evaluate as the story progresses. Finally, there is the role of the ideal narrative audience -- I am well aware of the significance of these apparent paradoxes. I will thus listen to what is to come. The allusions made by Borges

in this story are of such variety and are so multivalently evocative that the effort to come to terms with them naturally ensures that the primary role that the reader will play will be that of the authorial audience, the audience that is successfully manipulated by the writer; but if the roles of the other three audiences are allowed to lapse, especially that of the actual audience, much of the import of this story is lost. Even in less demanding stories than this, however, the reader's balancing effort is still considerable.

The reference to the multivalency of the allusions in Borges' story returns us to the topic of the density, or intensity of the short-story form, an attribute that is mentioned without fail by all commentators. The short story's density is a response to its limited length. As previously mentioned, it cannot rely on the accretion of meaning over time and its capacity for the structurally linear patternings of narrative is limited; to compensate it resorts to a high proportion and degree of the vertical form of reference, allusion.<sup>39</sup> Borges' first paragraph, for example, mentions a missing right index finger, a vermilion tattoo on the speaker's stomach, the cabalistic symbols Beth, Aleph, and Gimel, cutting the jugular veins of sacred bulls upon a black altar in a cellar in the half-light of dawn, and being declared invisible in a lunar year. The paragraph ends with the speaker denying deception or recourse to reincarnation in order to experience these things. The ethos of mystery and terror and of entering into a world redolent with atavistic emblemata is inescapable.

A similar, though less exotic, use of the same poetic technique of multi-level allusion occurs in Alice Munro's "Dulse", when the protagonist muses about her illusory hope that she and her lover might possibly have retrieved "with hope, trust, and blank memories ... the undamaged delights with which they'd started before they began to put each other to other uses."<sup>40</sup> The essence of the world of failed love in which togetherness has devolved into other-ness is contained in these few superbly balanced words, words which also draw upon the powerful poetic technique of rhythm. The sentence could easily be re-arranged as free form verse:

to retrieve, with hope, trust, and blank memories  
 the undamaged delight  
 with which they'd started before they began  
 to put each other  
 to other uses.

This is an interesting and instructive exercise in view of Mary Colum's characterisation of short stories as "free verse or polyphonic prose."<sup>41</sup>

Poe claimed that the short story was the next best thing to poetry,<sup>42</sup> and later commentators have all agreed, but as Sartre notes, all writing is a demanding gift from the writer to the reader,<sup>43</sup> and the most can only be got out of it when the reader rises to the demands made of him by the work. Sartre's insight is particularly apt for a concentrated, distilled form like the short story.

Simply because it is a concentrated form, however, the short story is heir to those dangers Poe described as epigrammatic -- a designation that will bear further scrutiny.

### Epigrammatism and Metafiction

Because of length limitation, the short story tends to be concerned with very small slices of life, and because of the previously mentioned fact that some contemporary short-story writers are writing very short stories, there is a great danger that some of these stories will degenerate in to mere anecdotes, as do most of Borges' "Parables", lacking a satisfyingly formed aesthetic structure. Such stories can and do rely on the poetic techniques just discussed to extend their range, but the result too often is a story with a texture like porridge and with a similar degree of interest. Even if the reader manages to summon up enough interest to follow the over-loaded images he may well become lost in a vast amorphous, structureless morass of endless allusion without shaping artistic structure and without aesthetic value. Such stories are characterised by Umberto Eco as "museums of déj`à vu" and as recitals of "over-coded literary commonplaces."<sup>44</sup> A good example of the problem is the writing of John Updike in such stories as "A & P" and "The Lifeguard".

Borges notes that his "ficciones" fall somewhere between essays and stories,<sup>45</sup> but because of his great skill as a story-teller, the reader is rarely aware, at an overt level, of the element of theorising that is always present in his stories. Some other writers, however, lacking Borges' skill in creating gripping narratives, tend to display great virtuosity of technique, but little content. As O'Faolain puts it, it is a great bore when: "short story writers display an endless virtuosity and at the end of their performance the silk hat is

as empty as it was at the beginning."<sup>46</sup> In other words there is a danger, particularly prevalent in the work of short-story writers who are greatly interested in metafictional and self-conscious literary techniques, that what results is all glitter and no gold, or, to put it in Rabinowitz's terms, in fictional works that are highly conscious of their status as artifact, "it is difficult to get involved ... and for many readers ... such works are generally unmoving, witty and brilliant as they may be."<sup>47</sup> An excellent example of the problem is Robert Coover's "A Pedestrian Accident" in which contemporary literary techniques are manipulated with great skill, but in the end the reader is unmoved as a dog tears out the guts of the still living protagonist.<sup>48</sup>

The rather paradoxical ending of Coover's story is only one of many paradoxes (both real and apparent), anomalies, and just plain oddities that abound in the area of short fiction studies. We will examine some of the more important of these in the next section.

### Anomalous Paradoxes

In his essay "The Language of Paradox", Cleanth Brooks mentions a quotation from Coleridge that seems tailor-made to characterise the paradoxical<sup>49</sup> aspects of the short-story genre as a whole. Coleridge notes that metaphysical poetry generates its effects:

in the balance or reconcilment of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative;

the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with a more than usual order.<sup>50</sup>

Or to put it very succinctly, as Herbert Gold does, short stories are "true lies".<sup>51</sup> But then the very concept of approaching truth through fiction is paradoxical, unless one is willing to share with Poe the conception of fiction as sublime, that is, as being capable of transcending its roots in empirical reality and of generating an intuitive moment of apprehension -- in Joyce's terms, an epiphany. The short story does this very well because its brevity prevents it from becoming hopelessly mired in the mundane.

A further paradox is generated when one considers that, due to its intensity, the short story is both poetry and not poetry. In its metaphoric dimension it is fully as powerful an allusive force as poetry, but it simultaneously operates on the metonymic or linear narrative plane. Both together create the illusion of simultaneous synchronic and diachronic "movement" and the combination forms one of the short story's most powerful armaments in the form's battle to involve the reader in the experience of co-creating his own fiction, as we shall see in the next chapter. An offshoot of this particular anomaly is the realisation that the short story, like all fiction, is both static and dynamic. The text -- the words on the page -- is static, but the reader's participation generates a dynamic relationship between the words and the reader's active, processing mind. Since short stories are perhaps the literary genre which demands most



of the reader in the way of response, it is important to acknowledge that at the root of the response is an anomalous relationship between text and reader which is basic to all reading of fiction.

This anomaly is basic, furthermore, to yet another paradox. As previously noted the short story and fiction in general, reflects "reality" only in the sense that reality is perceiver-determined; the short story, inasmuch as it is fiction, is thus a mirror of the mind of the perceiver, that is, the reader, but perception is both ordered and not ordered. In other words, the mind perceives both impressionistically and rationalistically, and it is this fact that enables the metaphor/metonymy phenomenon to function.

This phenomenon also accommodates another anomalous occurrence, one which Susan Lohafer calls "deferred cognitive closure".<sup>52</sup> The implications of this will be considered in detail later, but briefly, it consists in saying that the reader both knows and does not know what a given sentence means. On the level of "immediate cognition" there is usually no problem, but until the reader reads further, the significance of the sentence to the overall meaning of the story is not known.

The final matter to be considered in terms of paradox is the structure of the short story. It is simultaneously both tight and loose. As Propp and Todorov have shown, short stories of the type they consider (Propp's folktales; Todorov's study of Boccaccio's Decameron)<sup>53</sup> are highly organised and tightly structured, and despite the warning issued by Jakobson and

Bogatyrev<sup>54</sup> with reference to the generic differences between folklore and other kinds of fiction, it seems empirically valid to extend this evaluation to contemporary short stories. It is a critical axiom, however, and also easily verifiable in pulp fiction, that the heavy-handed short story fails utterly; it falls within Eco's category of a boring recital of overcoded literary commonplaces, and fails to excite either response or interest in the reader. The good short story thus may be a creature of paradox, but it also dances lightly through the reader's mind bearing the fairy dust of imaginative insight.<sup>55</sup>

There is yet another paradoxical aspect to short fiction, an aspect which has ramifications important enough to be considered in a separate section: it is the short story's both convention-free and convention-determined status.

### Beyond the Banal

The short story is not nearly so convention-bound as either of its closest literary relations, the poem and the novel,<sup>56</sup> but let us admit at the outset that a truly convention free literary form is an impossibility. As Alter notes:

The act of literary communication can take place only by virtue of certain tacit contractual agreements between writer and reader -- about the meaning and nature of words, about typography and pagination, about chapter divisions, about characterisation and motivation, about cause and effect in narration, and much more.<sup>57</sup>

There is, however, a spectrum of opinion with reference to the influence of convention on short stories. We have, at the one

extreme, accompanying Alter, Sean O'Faolain and Laurent Jenny,<sup>58</sup> and at the other, Frank O'Connor claiming that each new story holds within it "the possibility of a new form."<sup>59</sup> Between these extremes lie many shades of opinion and perspective, including my own contention that the short story is relatively more convention free than either the poem or the novel.

The first factor affecting the relatively convention-free status of the short story is the somewhat paradoxical one of a combination of critical neglect and the marginal status of the genre. Most of the characteristics used to define the various recognised genres are generated, not by writers but by critics. Because the short story has received relatively little serious critical attention, it has remained quite free of the limiting effects of critical strictures. Also, because it is considered by most academics as rather light and not worthy of serious consideration, it has maintained a rather marginal status, somewhat akin to that of science fiction relative to mainstream fiction. This marginality has allowed a considerable degree of artistic freedom to the short-story writer, freedom to experiment with both form and content, freedom that he has taken full advantage of, especially in the contemporary period. The other implication of this is, of course, that the marginality allows not only freedom but license to experiment -- short fiction has lately become, I think, an accepted forum for trying out experimental techniques. This probably accounts for some of the innovative, but flawed, short stories to be found in anthologies of short fiction: for example, Toni Cade

Bambera's "The Lesson" and Doris Lessing's "Report on the Threatened City". The short story's brevity, of course, also lends itself to experimentation in the pragmatic sense, in that a failed story has not involved the "waste" of several years of a writer's life, as is generally the case with a novel.

Freedom is also generated by the short story's medial position relative to other literary genres. Like all print media, the short story has borrowed cross-cutting and zoom techniques from film, but is not restricted by that medium's difficulties with displaying the internal functioning of minds; from drama it has taken techniques for generating the illusion of dynamic interaction between characters, but is not limited by the physical parameters of the stage. Most of the borrowing, however, is done from poetry. Although borrowing allusive techniques from poetry poses few problems of convention, the fact that rhythmic techniques are also taken, in order to offset the limitations of length, would appear to entail involvement in the restrictions of artificiality alluded to by Poe.<sup>60</sup> To some extent this is true, as overtly poetic passages in short fiction tend to foreground themselves (although this is not always a disadvantage), but the tendency is considerably limited by the fact that the short story is a prose form and is therefore heir to the most definitively powerful attribute of prose, namely, narrative momentum. Despite the critical commonplace of the short story's poeticality, I would argue that most readers, when they open a book of short fiction, or when they read a story in a magazine, switch on their narrative-reading, not their poetry-

reading faculties. This situation allows the form to exploit, with a great deal of freedom, the advantages of both the poetic and the prosaic forms, while remaining relatively unrestricted by the disadvantages of either.

Although accepted conventions of form are a necessary background to all fictional communication, their disadvantage is that they tend to determine what we in fact see, by controlling our expectations -- what we expect to see. Stanley Fish recounts an amusingly anecdotal instance of the phenomenon that he instigated by putting on the blackboard the following list:<sup>61</sup>

Jacobs-Rosenbaum

Levin

Thorne

Hayes

Ohman (?)

It is in fact a list of the names of some linguists, but a group of students, whose frame of reference was seventeenth-century religious poetry, engendered out of it a highly persuasive version of a religious poem in hieroglyphic form. Fish's point is well and amusingly made, but we must recognise that we all, as readers, exhibit this tendency to obscure what is there by seeing only what we expect to see. If we adhere to the traditional, stereotyped view of short stories this is an ever-present danger. The short story in the contemporary era, however, is relatively free of this problem because of its status as a recognised field for experimentation. It is this factor that

allows William Burroughs, for example, to make a serious point with his cut-ups.<sup>62</sup>

It is virtually definitive of the characteristics of the artist that although he acknowledges the necessity of conventions of form as communication aids, as Alter notes,<sup>63</sup> he refuses to be bound by the strictures of convention, and literary artists are no exception. In other words, the writer must first acknowledge the existence of a convention before he can challenge it, but once he has challenged it he becomes, in a sense, free of its restrictions (although this is by no means a radical freedom), because by his action he has demonstrated that the convention is not immutable; it can be, to some extent at least, transcended. Thus the writer of a novel, for example, benefits from the existence of all of the conventions associated with the novelistic form, but he can, if he chooses, challenge some of the conventions, as Calvino does in If On A Winter's Night A Traveller when he obscures the narrative conventions between each section, or as D.M. Thomas does in the last section of The White Hotel where he challenges the notion of the separation between life and art. Because of the relative critical neglect of short fiction as a genre, the short story has less well-defined conventions than the novel. This is both advantageous and disadvantageous for the short-story writer. It is difficult, for example, to write an outrageous short story that will be perceived as deliberately challenging convention, but conversely, it is relatively easier to write an insightful, subtle, "unconventional" short story

because the strictures of convention are fewer and less rigid than they are in the novel. As we noted at the end of the previous section, the short story's both convention-free and convention-determined status is one of the more paradoxical elements of the genre. This is a paradox, however, that is to some extent shared with the novel and with all art forms, but it is the weakness of specifically short-story conventions that allows us to argue that, despite its necessary inability to escape entirely from (and what can be seen from some perspectives as the undesirability of) such a project, the genre is less convention-restricted than the more formally rigid art forms. Whichever side of the paradox one contemplates, however, it seems clear that the short story's flexibility as a genre allows and encourages us to characterise it as being in continuing and multiformic evolution. Eichenbaum, for example, writes a convincing study of O. Henry's short fiction, the thesis of which is that Henry's style is a parody of the literary conventions of his time, and that his writing encouraged and enabled the evolution to the next stage in American short-story writing.<sup>64</sup>

Contemporary short-story writers can be seen to be engaged in a similar exercise. It is interesting to contemplate some of the ways in which contemporary short-story writers are maintaining their relatively free status: for example, Barthelme's quirky manipulations of time and space in "Cortés and Montezuma", and Borges' more serious use of a similar device in "The Circular Ruins", "The Book of Sand", and "The Garden of Forking Paths". We could also mention Oates' manipulation of character identi-

fiction and fragmentation of form in "29 Inventions", Peter Taylor's attempts to meld poem and prose in prose poem form in "The Hand of Emmagene", Julio Cortazar's consideration of the interpenetration of reality and fiction in "Continuity of Parks" which the reader tends to finish with a surreptitious glance over his shoulder, Barthelme's parody of transformational-generative grammar in "Sentence", and his inclusion of photographs and drawings in "Eugenie Grandet", and John Barth's "Frame Tale" which parodies both the conventions of tale-telling and those of conventional framing itself. It is interesting to note, with reference to the issue of whether or not conventions can be transcended, that most of these "modern" devices can also be found in Tristram Shandy which was first published in 1759-1767! Mention of Tristram Shandy, however, also raises the issue of the possible distinctions to be made between the short story and the novel as genres.

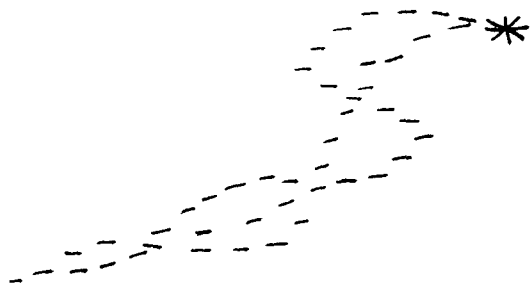
#### The Battle of the Books Recuperated

Some of these differentiations we have already considered in more appropriate places; for example, the short story as more poetic than the novel, the fact that a symbiotic relationship between part and whole is more critical to the more finely balanced short story than to the novel. We have discussed the ways in which the short story is more difficult and demanding for the reader (and for the writer too<sup>65</sup>) and therefore in a sense more rewarding in terms of effort expended. There is, however, one other important distinction between the forms,

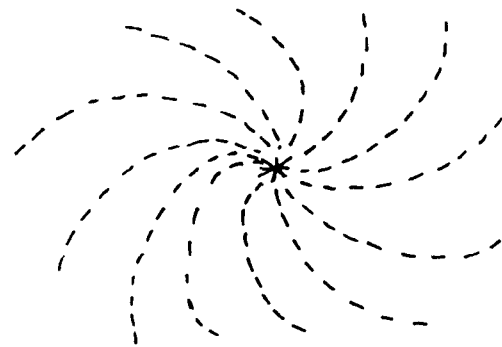


that of a generic difference in structuring.

Despite the fact that narrative linearity is operative in both short story and novel, in the latter it is a much stronger force than in the former. As a result, structural patterning is a more diverse and leisurely activity, for both reader and writer, in the novel. Conversely, in the short story, structural patterning must be closely related to allusive patterning, especially since, in many short stories, even the contemporary ones, there is a point at which structure and allusion coalesce into insight. A diagram will perhaps make the point clearer.



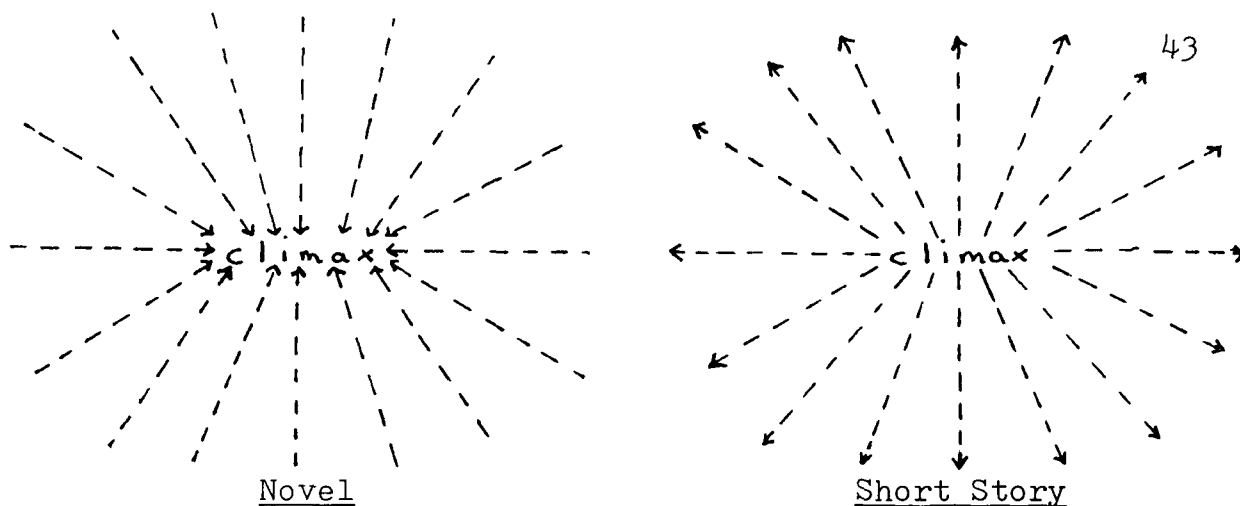
Novel



Short Story

As we can see the novel builds linearly to its climax but in the short story the narrative movement tends to organise into a concentric spiral shape as it swirls around the climax.

When we come to consider the allusively based structure however, it becomes obvious that yet another anomaly exists. Again, a diagram may be of assistance.



In the novel, when we reach the climax, which may or may not coincide with the ending in both forms,<sup>66</sup> there is a sense of completion, that everything that has been tending to fall together has done so. In the successful short story, however, although the concentric narrative elements have coalesced, as in the novel, the form's inherent limitations demand that there be a further outward movement from the climax, a movement that takes place in the reader's consciousness, in order to allow the form to generate significant meaning, that is, to enable it to avoid the dangers of epigrammatism and anecdotal simplicity. We can call this movement the resonance factor, and its importance will become clear as we discuss the reading process in the next chapter. It can, of course, be argued that the novel too is "open" in this sense and that therefore it is not possible to differentiate between the two forms on this basis. In the novel, however, there is no necessity for an open ending. The novelist can, if he chooses, write a self-contained, self-sufficient work because the extended length and internal flexibility of the genre allow him to include within the structure all of the themes and ramifications that he wishes.<sup>67</sup> The short-

story writer, however, having relinquished the luxuries of length in favour of the pleasures of intensity and impact, must compensate for the loss by incorporating into his text the demand that the reader take the text itself as raw material to be completely formed only retrospectively in his own mind. Thus the distinction being made here between novel and short story is that between choice and necessity.

The foregoing is the only one of several important aspects that differentiate the novel from the short story that there is space to consider in detail, but some others must at least be mentioned; there is the close connection between intensity and sustainability in the short story, as opposed to the novel; the techniques of concentration and distillation that are implicit in the short story versus those of elaboration that typify the novel; and the metaphorical images that have been used to illuminate the differences, for example, William Carlos Williams characterises the short story as a brush stroke and the novel as a picture,<sup>68</sup> Frank O'Connor claims that the difference is that between pure and applied story telling,<sup>69</sup> and Eichenbaum calls the story a climb to a vantage point and the novel "a long walk through various localities with a peaceful return return trip assured."<sup>69</sup>

The point to be gathered from all these differentiations is, first, that it is not merely length that separates the forms, but, more importantly, that the differentiating factors are mainly structural in nature and primarily connected with the metaphoric or allusive dimension.

The OED defines an anthology as "a choice collection of passages from literature" and gives its etymology as, in part, "Gk. anthologia (anthos, flower -- logia, collection)." The foregoing has thus been a survey of some of the choice pieces of short-story criticism, along with my own assessment of many varied aspects of the short story, offered in the firm belief that the best way to begin the examination of a genre as elusive as the short story is to try to develop an appreciation of, and respect for, its versatility by viewing it from as many diverse perspectives as possible. I have not attempted to emphasise any particular theory as better than any other because I would also argue that excessively taxonomic critical efforts are self-defeating in the area of short fiction studies, as they simply erect overly rigid structures which, in the first place, do not reflect the fluid nature of the medium, and in the second, allow the elusive story to melt through the grids and back into inscrutability.

Having completed this overview, however, it is time to narrow the focus, to consider the genre from the specific viewpoint of contemporary critical theory which has generated some critical tools that are peculiarly well fitted to extend our detailed knowledge of the internal functionings of the short story.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>H.E. Bates, The Modern Short Story (Boston: The Writer Inc., 1972 (first published 1941)).  
 S. O'Faolain, The Short Story (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1951).  
 F. O'Connor, The Lonely Voice (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1963).  
 W. Allen, The Short Story in English (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>O'Connor, p.14.

<sup>3</sup>Like O'Connor, most commentators trace a dual lineage of modern short stories in Europe and America, with the European branch originating with Gogol and continuing through Turgenev, Chekhov, Maupassant, Flaubert, Balzac, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Kafka, and the American with Poe or Washington Irving, and continuing with Hawthorne, Melville, Bierce, O. Henry, James, Anderson, Hemingway, and through to the contemporaries. A sub-branch of the European exists in Irish short fiction and contains names such as Moore, Joyce, Yeats, O'Faolain and O'Connor. The list of English short-story writers of note is quite short, consisting principally of Walter Scott, R.L. Stevenson, H.G. Wells, A.E. Coppard, and D.H. Lawrence prior to the contemporary period. The reasons for this anomaly are related both to Britain's relative cultural isolation from Europe and America, and from the Celtic and Roman Catholic cultures of Southern Ireland, and also to the overwhelming influence and popularity of the Victorian three-volume novel.

<sup>4</sup>Allen, p.7.

<sup>5</sup>E.A. Poe, "Hawthorne's Twice Told Tales" in M. Timko ed., 38 Short Stories (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 622-624. All subsequent references to and quotations from Poe refer to this edition.

<sup>6</sup>The significance of this point will be explained in Chapter Two.

<sup>7</sup>T.A. Gullason, "The Short Story: Revision and Renewal", Studies in Short Fiction, 19,3 (Summer 1982), p.221.

<sup>8</sup>Allen, p.22, and A.W. Litz, "A Preface", Modern Fiction Studies, 28,1 (Spring 1982), pp. 3,4.

<sup>9</sup>S.H. Brown, "Dimension and Genre: Towards a Theory of the Short Story" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981), p.7.

<sup>10</sup>A particularly detailed chronology of the American short story can be found in Richard Kostelantetz, "Notes on the American Short Story Today" in C. May, ed., Short Story Theories (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976) pp.214-225. An equally valuable chronology of the lyric story occurs in Eileen Baldeshweiler, "The Lyric Short Story: A Sketch of a History", pp.202-213 in the same volume.

<sup>11</sup>Actually O'Connor's point does hold if one considers the French, as many Europeans do (although on somewhat nebulous grounds), "different".

<sup>12</sup>Allen, p.24.

<sup>13</sup>Allen, p.22. It would be an interesting project to study the evolution of short fiction in literary magazines and its impact on the evolving nature of short stories in general. For example, Henry James' ecstasy on wringing out of the editors of the Yellow Book a commitment that they would not restrict the length of his stories (The Complete Tales of Henry James, Volume IX, ed. Leon Edel, p.7) is indicative of the extent of the influence of editorial policy on the forms of short fiction. There are other avenues too to pursue, such as the prevalence of journalese in the followers of Hemingway and Anderson. These issues cannot, unfortunately, be pursued in this thesis.

<sup>14</sup>R. Alter, Partial Magic (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1975), p.x.

<sup>15</sup>Alter, p.38.

<sup>16</sup>See T. Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p.77.

<sup>17</sup>M. Rohrberger and D.E. Burns, "Short Fiction and the Numinous Realm", Modern Fiction Studies, 28,1 (Spring 1982), P. 12.

<sup>18</sup>S. Ferguson, "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form", Modern Fiction Studies, 28,1 (Spring 1982), p.16.

<sup>19</sup>F. Jameson, The Prison House of Language, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp.54-55.

<sup>20</sup>G. Plimpton, ed., Writers At Work: Series Four (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), p.145.

<sup>21</sup>M. Pütz, "The Struggle of the Postmodern: Books on a New Concept in Criticism", Kritikon Litterarum, 2 (1973), pp. 225-237.

<sup>22</sup>Hassan does not deny creativity to the modern writers, but claims that they used it to impose a rational order on the flux of being.

<sup>23</sup>Postmodernist writers, such as Barthelme, Coover, Elkin, and Barthes are obviously not naive in the accepted sense of the word, but there is evident in their work a deliberate and conscious commitment to loosening themselves as much as possible from the restrictions of a tradition that they see as stultifying. In this sense it is possible to term them deliberately, artfully, rather than artlessly, naive. The term, as used by Pütz, bears a close relationship to William Blake's second stage of Innocence.

<sup>24</sup>G. Graff, "The Myth of the Post Modern Breakthrough" TriQuarterly, 26 (Winter 1973), pp.383-417.

<sup>25</sup>Pütz's argument is considerably more subtle than this brief summary indicates, and very convincing.

<sup>26</sup>Much of Borges' writing does not fall into my chosen period, but he was simply ahead of his time and is therefore included.

<sup>27</sup>Pütz, p.227.

<sup>28</sup>V.S. Pritchett, ed., "Introduction" to The Oxford Book of Short Stories (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.xiii.  
I. Reid, The Short Story (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1977), p.1.  
H.E. Bates, The Kenyon Review, 30,2,1 (1970), p.107.

<sup>29</sup>G.H. Bantock, "The Intellectual and Social Background" in B. Ford, ed., The Pelican Guide to English Literature: Volume 7 "The Modern Age" (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 81

<sup>30</sup>Allen, p.134. Allen's reference is to Conrad Aiken but I think it can be fairly extended to cover the concerns of contemporary short-story writers.

<sup>31</sup>The postmodern conception is quite different from that of Joyce's epiphany which assumes the possibility of apprehension of the truth. The postmodernist assumes that only a

truth, one of many possible "truths" can be known, and that only fleetingly.

<sup>32</sup>N. Gordimer, "The Flash of Fireflies" in May, ed, p.21.

<sup>33</sup>H.E. Bates, "The Modern Short Story: A Retrospect" in May, ed., p.76.

<sup>34</sup>E. Hyams, Untitled article in The Kenyon Review, 32,1 (1970), p.91.

<sup>35</sup>As noted in the Introduction, short stories are often used to introduce readers to literature because they are considered easy to read and easily comprehensible, but my present concern is not with beginning students, but with the experienced reader able to identify the intricacies and subtleties typically used by the short-story writer.

<sup>36</sup>S. Lohafer, Coming To Terms with the Short Story, (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p.125.

<sup>37</sup>P. Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences", Critical Inquiry, 4 (1977), pp. 121-142.

<sup>38</sup>J.L.Borges, "The Lottery in Babylon" in Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, eds., Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings of J.L. Borges (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1962, 1964), p.30. All other references are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>39</sup>It also relies to a considerable extent on intertextuality, but this will be considered later.

<sup>40</sup>A. Munro, "Dulse" in The Moons of Jupiter (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, Canada, Ltd., 1983), p.56.

<sup>41</sup>M.Colum, "The American Short Story" in May, ed. (annotated bibliography), p.237.

<sup>42</sup>It is interesting that many short-story writers tried and failed at poetry first, for example Nikolai Gogol, William Faulkner, and James Joyce, and many poets are also short-story writers, for example, William Carlos Williams, D.H.Lawrence, Ted Hughes, and Dylan Thomas.

<sup>43</sup>J.P.Sartre, "Why Write?", in H. Adams, ed., Critical Theory Since Plato (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch Inc., 1971), p.1064.



<sup>44</sup>Umberto Eco, The Role of the Reader (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1979), p.38. By "overcoded" Eco, here, means words or phrases which are forced to bear the weight of too many allusions.

<sup>45</sup>Plimpton, p.143.

<sup>46</sup>O'Faolain, p.169.

<sup>47</sup>Rabinowitz, p.139.

<sup>48</sup>It is of course part of Coover's point that the grotesquerie and banality of modern life have robbed us of our power to be moved (hence the deliberate ambiguity of the title) and that the reaction generated in the reader should be a world-weary, intellectual acknowledgement of the truth of Coover's point. The care that he devotes to this display of his virtuosity, however, tends to detract from the artistic intent of the story.

<sup>49</sup>I am using "paradox" here in the New Critical sense of items which appear on the surface to be anomalous.

<sup>50</sup>Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chapter xiv, quoted by C. Brooks, "The Language of Paradox", D. Lodge, ed., Twentieth Century Literary Criticism, p. 307.

<sup>51</sup>H. Gold, Untitled article in The Kenyon Review, 30,4 (1968), p.452.

<sup>52</sup>Lohafer, p.43.

<sup>53</sup>Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1968) first published Leningrad: 1928 ).  
Tzvetan Todorov, Grammaire du Décameron (The Hague: Mouton and Co. N.V., 1969).

<sup>54</sup>R. Jakobson and P. Bogatyrev, "On the Boundary between Studies of Folklore and Literature" in Matejka and Pomorska eds., Readings in Russian Poetics (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1971), p.91.

<sup>55</sup>See Paul Valery's essay "Poetry and Abstract Thought" in Adams, ed., pp.915-926, for a differentiation of standard and poetic language that can be extended to allow the short story to be considered as "dancing" -- an activity which has its destination in its own act.

<sup>56</sup>The short story is also closely related to <sup>non-fictional</sup> prose, poetry, and drama (particularly the one-act play), and to film,

since the accomodation it makes to surmount its limitations as a form demands that it borrow techniques from other media on a fairly consistent basis.

<sup>57</sup>Alter, p.33. See also Mukařovský "Standard Language and Poetic Language" in Adams, ed., pp.1050-1059, with reference to the norms of standard language and how they influence freedom from convention.

<sup>58</sup>O'Faolain, p.147.

L. Jenny, "The Strategy of Form" in T. Todorov, ed., French Literary Theory Today. (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.34.

<sup>59</sup>O'Connor, p.21.

<sup>60</sup>Poe, p.623.

<sup>61</sup>S. Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 323.

<sup>62</sup>William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, The Third Mind (London: John Calder Ltd., 1979), pp.25-38.

<sup>63</sup>Alter, p.45.

<sup>64</sup>B. Eichenbaum, "O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story" in Matejka and Pomorska, eds., pp.227-272.

<sup>65</sup>Bates, p.7.

<sup>66</sup>Some contemporary short stories resolutely refuse to reach a climax, but even in these it is the lack of climax that is the point and therefore the resonance factor is not undermined.

<sup>67</sup>I do not mean to suggest that the novel is generically less "open" than the short story, but rather that the contemporary short story is more frequently deliberately constructed to be definitively incomplete without the reader's participation and that the tendency is for the limitations inherent in brevity to impose such necessities on short-story writers.

<sup>68</sup>William Carlos Williams, quoted in Brown, p.55.

<sup>69</sup>O'Connor, p.27.

<sup>70</sup>Eichenbaum, p.232. I do not think Eichenbaum's characterisation holds good for many contemporary avant-garde novels, for example, D.M.Thomas' White Hotel or Italo Calvino's If On A Winter's Night A Traveller, but generically, I think the distinction still holds.

## Chapter Two

### An Exercise in Non-Definition

A book is more than a verbal structure or a series of verbal structures: it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes on his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory.... A book is not an isolated entity: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships.

J.L.Borges "A Note on (towards) Bernard Shaw."

When we examine works of literature from the perspective of genre, we engage in a very particular enterprise: we discover a principle operative in a number of texts, rather than what is specific about each of them.

Tzvetan Todorov, The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre.

In the previous chapter the short story was discussed from many diverse perspectives, a process that should have made obvious the fact that the problem involved in definition of the genre is precisely that it can be seen from so many viewpoints; even Poe's "definition" can be, and has been, extended in many different directions. The problem, for Poe and for those who have proposed "refinements" of his criteria, has been that no matter how the definition is deepened and extended, a story can always be found that will refute the definitive characteristic in question. For example, to refute the much quoted claim that

short stories deal only with moments of crisis in life, one need only cite Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Illych", or Borges' "Funes, The Memorious", "The Circular Ruins", or even Barth's "Menelaiad", all of which deal with the whole of the protagonist's life span. Similarly the accusation that characters in short stories are two dimensional is totally rebutted when the reader encounters Gabriel Conroy, Joyce's richly uncommon common man in "The Dead", Paul the rocking horse rider in D.H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner", Laura, the protagonist (agonist?) of K.A. Porter's "Flowering Judas", Fred Danderlea, the adolescent rapist of Doris Lessing's "Mrs. Fortescue", or Stanley Elkin's Push the Bully ("A Poetics for Bullies") who has to be experienced to be wondered at. The issue of a definitive set of criteria for the form has been disruptive enough that one critic has decided that short stories are definitively undefinable,<sup>1</sup> and another has denied any value to the whole enterprise of definition.<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me, however, that the problem has its roots in how the story is seen. Historically, attempts at definition have been made on the basis of providing a precise set of criteria for what the story is; a more fruitful proceeding, I would argue, is to view the story from the perspective of what it does. What it does, superbly, is elicit a high quality of reader response:<sup>3</sup> a response that is of higher quality than that of the novel, because the experience of reading a short story is more concentrated both temporally and spatially, and more intense than that of poetry because the short story's relatively

convention-free status allows the reader to operate outside of the conventions that, in reading poetry, require him to slot poetic items into, or relative to, their custom-determined positions. In other words, the short story demands that the reader think for himself to a greater extent and with greater lucidity.

The reader-response perspective provides a focus which allows us to understand why short stories are "poetical", unified, static, self-contained, and why they are also "prosaic", discrete and open. It also provides a loose descriptive framework for the critic without causing him to become a proscriptive tyrannical force whose strictures tend towards limitation and control rather than growth and experimentation.

The short story, as an entity specifically designed to provoke a high quality of reader response, can also be seen to evolve out of Poe's comment that "during the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's command". What Poe realised was that since the short story is brief enough to capture the reader's complete attention for the short time necessary to read it, it is possible to sustain a high level of attention and response from the reader. This response, however, as Poe also realised, can only be sustained if all the parts of the story -- form, content, structure-- and all of their component parts in turn are specifically organised towards this one purpose of eliciting that response. Thus it seems that in Poe's original definition there lies latent a means of "defining" the short story in a way that is not proscriptive, although this "definition" should more accurately be termed a "non-definition",

since it is specifically designed to be open-ended and non-delimiting.

Robert Adams, in a highly detailed and perceptive history of reader-response criticism,<sup>4</sup> notes that "One way of recognising the shift in the relation of readers and writers ... would be to define it as the decision of writers to tantalize in order to entertain their readers."<sup>5</sup> and he further comments on "the continuing appeal of the literary puzzle"<sup>6</sup> which requires the active participation of the reader for its solution. The tendency to equate activity and energy with entertainment points to what has become virtually the current dominant ethos in contemporary society: that the age of the spectator has passed, that active involvement is the best vehicle for enjoyment. In literature, perhaps the best, certainly the most delightfully outrageous, example of the phenomenon is Barthes' The Pleasure of the Text, in which bliss, or sexual pleasure (jouissance) is derived from the activity of the reader in the process of making meaning and is described in orgasmic terms.<sup>7</sup> Short stories are well suited to participate in this milieu because of their previously mentioned ability to generate an active experience in the reader. Furthermore, following Barthes' metaphor of orgasm, the activity of co-creation of the fiction by the reader, as we shall see later, is a very intense one, and it is therefore, as Poe recognised in insisting that the short story be short, a self-limiting one. This concept of brevity as both resulting from and promoting intensity of experience is another

factor contributing to my "definition" of the short story as primarily a generator of reader response.

As previously mentioned, it is no accident that in recent years there has been a proliferation of theoretical work which has focussed on the short story,<sup>8</sup> not as its subject, but as the vehicle which best accommodates the highly detailed type of criticism necessary to illustrate and exemplify contemporary theories of literature. The work of such theorists also circumvents a difficulty noted by Thomas Leitch,<sup>9</sup> that of "establishing a critical vocabulary" sufficiently precise to discuss contemporary short fiction in such a way as to generate new insights. Rabinowitz also points out that literary critical arguments (such as that over the best definition of the short story), although they often "clarify and enrich the works around which they centre", when they are unresolved, reveal:

a fundamental inadequacy in the way we talk about literature. Not only can't we resolve the differences between the critics, but lacking the terminology to explain the disagreement fully, we are left with the sense that we don't even understand just what it is about or why it has occurred.<sup>10</sup>

It is an impasse of this type, the effective hiatus in new short-story criticism since Poe,<sup>11</sup> that contemporary reader-response criticism allows us to bridge.

Before discussing the work of contemporary critics it will be advantageous to review the characteristics of the contemporary short story, and, as Rohrberger and Burns have

provided a succinct summary which places the contemporary story on a continuum, it seems ungracious not to take advantage of their generosity:

Based in myth and fairy tales, the early stories were characterised by a traditional plot line, extraordinary surface events, and a use of common symbols involving plots, characters, settings, events and objects in such a way as to yield multivalence. The early moderns, for the most part, moved away from the traditional plot line, the extraordinary surface, and the common symbol, providing instead a plot that moved to a climax and hovered; an ordinary, indeed commonplace surface; and use of symbols whose meaning derived more from context than from tradition. Contemporary writers often seem to eschew any kind of plot, to use both extraordinary and ordinary surfaces, sometimes surrealistically mingled or fused, and to bring to the surface meanings that have been traditionally suggested by symbols.<sup>12</sup>

As will become obvious in Chapter Three, this characterisation of the contemporary story fits the avant-garde version, such as that written by Barthelme, Elkin, and Coover better than the more traditional type written by Gordimer, Lessing, Alice Munro, and V.S. Pritchett, although, as we shall see when we analyse Doris Lessing's "Two Potters", surreal elements are often present in more traditional stories too.

It is interesting that many of the writers who have generated critical tools that can be used to explicate the nature of the short story work from a base in semiotics and structuralism, which Terence Hawkes defines as:

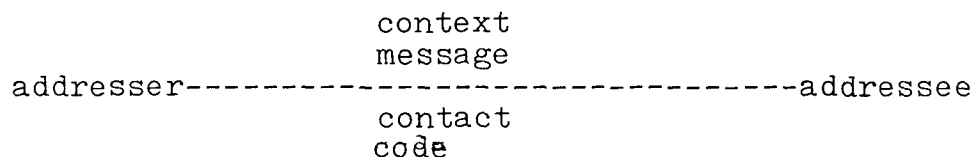
fundamentally a way of thinking about the world which is predominantly concerned with perception and description of structures.... Such perception involves the realisation that despite appearances to the contrary the world does not consist of independently existing objects whose concrete



features can be perceived clearly and individually. In fact every perceiver's method of perceiving can be shown to contain an inherent bias which affects what is perceived to a significant degree. A wholly objective perception of individual entities is therefore not possible; any observer is bound to create something of what he observes. Accordingly the relationship between observer and observed achieves a kind of primacy. It becomes the only thing that can be observed.<sup>13</sup>

Since a critical element in this dialectical model of perception is the observer, or perceiver, it follows that as much as possible must be learned about the ways in which he in fact perceives. In the case of literature, this involves examination of the reading process of the type engaged in by Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco. This work, however, rests on the model of communication developed by Roman Jakobson.

Jakobson claims that there are six constituent factors in each communicative act -- addresser, addressee, context, message, contact, and code -- and provides a diagram demonstrating their relationships.<sup>14</sup>



Hawkes provides a clear, succinct account of these relationships:

All communication consists of a message initiated by an addresser, whose destination is an addressee. But the process is not as simple as that. The message requires a contact between addresser and addressee which may be oral, visual, electronic, or whatever [in the case of literature, textual]. It must be formulated in terms of a code: speech, numbers, writing, sound-formations etc. And the message must refer to a context understood by both

addresser and addressee, which enables the message to make sense --as (we hope) the context of the present discussion enables individual words and phrases to be meaningful where otherwise (uttered at, say, a football match) they would not.

Hawkes further notes that:

The central point to emerge from Jakobson's account ...is that the 'message' does not and cannot supply all the 'meaning' of the transaction and that a great deal of what is communicated derives from the context, the code, and the means of contact. 'Meaning' in short resides in the total act of communication.<sup>15</sup>

Wolfgang Iser, in The Implied Reader and The Act of Reading, chooses to concentrate on the role of Jakobson's "addressee", in terms of a detailed account of the acts he performs in the process of receiving and interpreting the message, which, in the case of the short story, he receives in the form of the text of the story. Iser's approach is a phenomenological one, and for him phenomenological observation demonstrates that meaning is generated via the interaction of text and reader. It is for this reason that he distinguishes between the text and the "work", the latter being "the convergence between text and reader".<sup>16</sup> By pointing out that "this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed but must always remain virtual",<sup>17</sup> Iser demonstrates that the "work" is not an unchanging object, as is the text, but a relationship. The reference to virtuality alludes to the fact that one term of the reading equation, the reader, is an active, dynamic, inherently changeable entity, and that therefore the relationship is an inherently dynamic and changeable one. It is this

factor that allows the meaning of a text to change as it is read, but in order to understand why this is so we must digress somewhat and return to Jakobson's concepts of metaphor and metonymy which were mentioned briefly in Chapter One.

Jakobson posits his division of all language into the categories of metaphor (selective/associative, synchronic, vertical, "poetic") and metonymy (combinative, syntagmatic, diachronic, horizontal, linear, "prosaic") on the basis of an empirical study of aphasic patients<sup>18</sup> and uses it to explain that poetic language -- he claims that all language is poetic to a greater or lesser extent -- means more than is said because it draws on the processes of selection and combination in order to extend meaning. Hawkes gives a simple example:

When I say "My car beetles along" I select 'beetles' from a storehouse of possibilities which includes, say, 'goes', 'hurries', 'scurries', etc., and combine it with 'car' on the principle that this will make the car's movement and the insect's movement equivalent.<sup>19</sup>

In this way, as Jakobson himself puts it, "similarity superimposed on contiguity imparts to poetry its thoroughgoing symbolic, multiplex, polysemantic essence."<sup>20</sup>

It is against this background that Iser claims that the sentences of a text are not the sum total of the text itself.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the sentences of a fictional text are poetic, or metaphoric in the Jakobsonian sense, and it is the reader's capability of selection and association that enables poetic language to mean more than it says because it

is the reader who "sees" the connections that are both actually made by the text and those which are implied by it too. Since the short story is a highly metaphoric type of fiction, it is evident that it both elicits and relies upon a high degree and quality of reader response.

It is not only on the metaphoric dimension, however, that the sentences in a literary text operate. Iser notes that on the metonymic, or linear, dimension, what is literary about the sentences in a literary text is that they always "aim at something beyond what [they actually say]... they are always indicators of something that is to come, the structure of which is foreshadowed by their content."<sup>22</sup>

This insight is the root of the short story's propensity, shared with the contemporary novel, but utilized more intensively, to experiment with manipulation of form as a supportive adjunct to meaning. Again, however, it is the reader's participation which facilitates this process; it is the reader's imagination that shapes the "work".

In order to describe this process Iser posits the existence of "sentence correlates"<sup>23</sup> which are the mental equivalents of the sentences in the text, but with the critical difference that, because they are not static textual objects, but dynamic perceptions, they are capable of projection into the future as expectations generated by the textual sentences and capable, retroactively, of modification in the light of subsequent knowledge acquired in the process of reading the text. This inter-active process of modification is essential

to the overall process the reader uses to generate meaning out of a text, and it is explained by Iser in terms of "blanks" and "indeterminacies".

He points out, quite correctly, that the more a text fulfils the expectations raised by it the less satisfied we are by its success as a literary experience, especially if, for the literary value it substitutes a didactic purpose, "so that at best we can only accept or reject."<sup>24</sup> This is especially true for the short story where there are, typically, fewer comforting factors available for the reader to use to console himself for the complete fulfillment of his expectations. In order to avoid this problem, a version of what Eco will later call the problem of the "closed text", the writer constructs a text which incorporates into its structure blocks and indeterminacies -- textual items whose purpose is unclear -- in order to create reader interest by drawing the reader into an active interaction with the text. The reasons for this are often two-fold: first to necessitate the reader's application of his imagination,<sup>25</sup> to make the experience both more enjoyable and more "real"; and secondly, especially in contemporary texts, to make the reader more aware of his capacity for metaphoric and metonymic association, so that he will come to realise that it is in fact he who, in part, co-creates the fiction.<sup>26</sup> This second purpose is related to a more general philosophy of life that we will consider in more detail when we come to discuss Roland Barthes. In the service of making the reader more aware of his capacities, however, the expectations or hypotheses

generated by the indeterminacies are often blocked so that the reader has to find ways of circumventing them. The paradigmatic instance of this phenomenon is Finnegans Wake, but a more modern example would be Italo Calvino's If on a Winter's Night a Traveller.

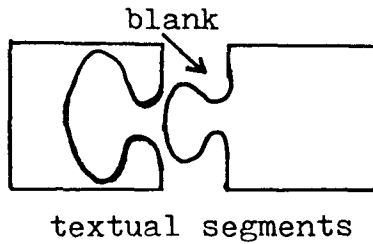
In Iser's theory, blanks operate on the narrative linear, micro-processing level. In other words, they are a part of his description of how the meaning of a sentence is arrived at as the reader moves through it from word to word, and each word is modified by subsequent ones until the meaning of the whole is clear. This is the process Lohafer describes as "immediate cognitive closure",<sup>27</sup> and both theorists emphasise that, although the blanks generated by the incomplete sentence are successively and progressively modified, the total meaning cannot be known until the whole sentence has been read and all the modifications completed, all the blanks closed. A particularly complex sentence may have to be re-read before the meaning is clear.

A similar phenomenon occurs at the macro-processing, metaphoric level, where the "indeterminacy" is the matching strategy to the blank at the sentence level. At the macro-processing level, however, the process of reading is much less rule-determined and thus the indeterminacy is a much more versatile and subtle device than the blank, although the basic procedure is the same -- projection from text generated anomalies and the polysemantic possibilities of language, and retroactive modification in the light of subsequent information.

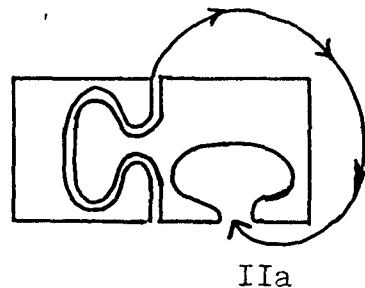
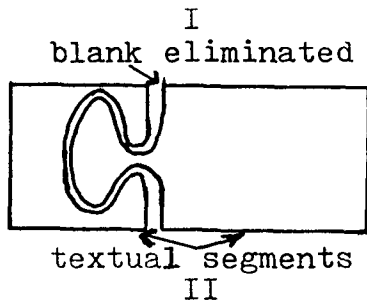
At this level, however, because of the polysemous nature of both language and textual structuring, there is a multitude of possible factors to be taken into consideration in making projections and evaluating them retroactively;<sup>28</sup> thus "the reader will strive, even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern."<sup>29</sup> A diagrammatic representation of the process can be seen in Fig. I.<sup>30</sup> This is a process which, as we shall see, contemporary avant-garde short-story writers often try to frustrate in order to make the story a truer reflection of existence (in which consistent patterns are hard to come by) so that the reader will come to realise that consistency is illusory.

In terms of the reading process, however, consistency building and illusion recognition balance each other.<sup>31</sup> A consistent pattern is built up and subsequent information reveals it to be an illusion, so a different consistency pattern is adopted, and so the process continues; but it is important to note the existence of a phenomenon that Iser calls "latent disturbance".<sup>32</sup> When the consistent pattern is proved illusory the eliminated parts of the original consistency are not in fact "eliminated"; they are re-attached to another consistency pattern, like the pieces in a kaleidoscope, or they are submerged and often remain unnoticed, or, latent, until a further reorganisation of the patterning, one often instigated by their latent existence, causes them to re-emerge and be recognised as important. This kind of strategy of foregrounding the unimportant and backgrounding the important is very common in

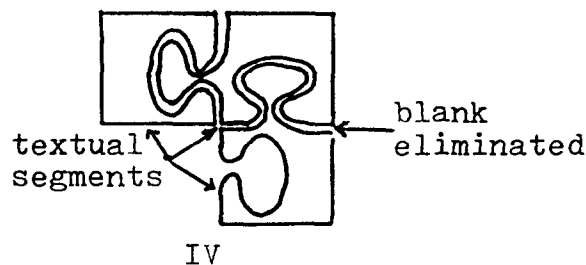
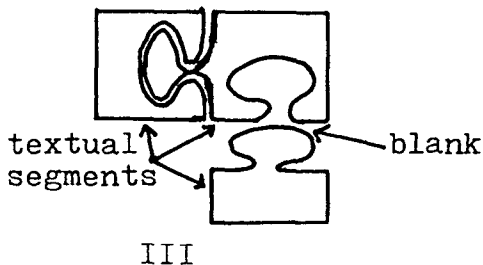
Wolfgang Iser's Description of the Reading Process



The blank is designed to spur the reader to make the connections necessary to allow the textual segments to fit together.



The blank is not actually eliminated; it is squeezed out of its original position and occupies an new activity-inducing position relative to the now completed original theme. This factor, plus new textual information, provides the impetus required to encourage the reader to continue to make connections. It is the position of the new blank relative to the theme and the next textual segment that controls the pattern of connections made by the reader, that is, ensures that it is not arbitrary, although this degree of control is limited by the author's limited knowledge of the reader's own connective tendencies.



Such structures as II, II<sub>a</sub>, III, and IV are themes, that is, foci for the reader's perspective, and, because each time a blank is eliminated, or moved, the shape changes, the reader's perception of each piece of the puzzle and of the puzzle as a whole is altered. In other words, the pieces are not only reciprocally modifying but also retroactively modifying; thus the two segments of I are viewed from the perspective of IV as merely elemental, whereas viewed from position I, they appeared to be initially individual, and then mutually complementary in the formation of a theme.

From the perspective of position IV, positions I, II, and III have been backgrounded, and position IV is, for the moment at least, in the foreground.

Fig. I



stories with trick endings, such as those of O. Henry, and it is interesting to trace a sophisticated use of it on re-reading Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence At Owl Creek Bridge". Eco traces another intriguing use of the technique in discussing Alphonse Allais' "Un drame bien parisien" in the final chapter of The Role of the Reader. The device is less common in contemporary stories, but is still used to some extent.

This oscillation between consistency and illusion Iser calls a balancing operation and claims that it constitutes the aesthetic experience per se,<sup>33</sup> because if it ever ceases, that is, if a finally consistent pattern emerges, the experience is over. In other words, in order that a story be a satisfying aesthetic experience it must keep the reader constantly off-balance and therefore actively in search of an inherently elusive consistency.

A considerable amount of space and time has been spent on rendering a detailed account of Iser's description of the reading process because his account is both detailed and basic, and necessary as background, background on which subsequent theorists have based their elaborations and refinements of the theory of the reading process.

Umberto Eco's main contribution to the field of reader-response theory is the distinction he has made between open and closed texts. The open text actively involves the reader in its production, while the closed text holds the reader at

bay and evokes only a limited, predetermined, response. The open/closed differentiation, however, is not a definitive one; all texts are either more or less open depending on the author's skill and purpose.<sup>34</sup>

Eco's description of the text is that it is a "syntactic-semantic-pragmatic device"<sup>35</sup> in which "the reader, as an active principle of interpretation, is a part of the picture of the generative process of the text."<sup>36</sup> In other words, the text is an entity in which the author deliberately and strategically uses the grammatical and lexical potential of language in full consciousness of the fact that he is manipulating the potential reception of his work. Furthermore, in recognition of the active participation of the reader, the text is also structured in such a way as to be inherently incomplete until completed by the reader. The author's control of the reading process is, therefore, limited. Eco points out that Jakobson's model of communication is incomplete in that it does not allow for extra-textual influences (socio-cultural differences between reader and writer for example), which may influence the reader's interpretation, especially in the area of identification of a common code.<sup>37</sup> Thus the author's control over reader response is "imprecise".<sup>38</sup>

Eco's description of the reading process posits the existence of a textually inferred Model Reader who "is supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way that the author dealt generatively with them."<sup>39</sup> There are

two different Model Readers, however, the one for the closed text and the one for the open text.

In the closed text the author writes only for a specific Model Reader and ignores the probability that the text will never be read by anyone who matches the Model Reader of his conception. What happens is that such texts "that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers ... are in fact open to any possible 'aberrant' decoding."<sup>40</sup> But because the author's textual strategy is to elicit a precise reaction in each reader-seen-as-Model-Reader, he tries to close off the potential multi-dimensionality of any and all textual elements in the service of making his one point. Since it is, in fact, impossible for such a controllable Model Reader to exist, what happens is that the text is interpreted in all sorts of ways that the writer did not intend. He, thus, in trying to exert complete control, loses what little control he can legitimately expect to command.

The writer of the open text, on the other hand, utilises the multivalency inherent in metaphoric language (in both the conventional and the Jakobsonian senses) to confer a freedom on the reader which, although apparently limitless, is in fact circumscribed by the text's artful choice of strategies. These are designed to lead the reader to explore the multivalent possibilities, but within certain predetermined, although wide, limits. Hence the Model Reader for open texts is con-

ceived of as much more sophisticated, more open to subtle suggestion, than that for the closed text. The short story reader is, one could argue, the paradigmatic Model Reader for open texts.

The main difference between the open and closed text is that the author of the open text more realistically understands that his limited degree of control can only be maintained in a dialectical sense, that is, via a dynamic relationship of the reader with a text specifically designed to generate in the reader (whose actual character cannot be known to the author) a propensity to make "correct" choices, those which the author wishes to effect. This process is one of allowing the reader to choose the most likely, most pleasing, most imaginative, most chilling, most ... (depending on context) alternatives from a wide selection made possible by the multivalency of the textual strategies employed. In this way the open text promotes and encourages a common consensus on meaning between itself and the reader, but does not stridently insist on only one "true" meaning which eliminates all other possibilities capable of being generated out of the dialectical relationship between the text and what Eco calls the reader's "encyclopedia".<sup>41</sup> Eco is insistent that a distinction be made, therefore, between "the free interpretive choices elicited by a purposeful strategy of openness and the freedom taken by a reader with a text assumed as a mere stimulus."<sup>42</sup> The difference is between a well-crafted, tight, but loose, structure written in full awareness of itself as structured, and a story written

by a naive or unsophisticated writer who either imparts no structure (out of ignorance) or too much (out of lack of faith in his potential reader's capabilities).

To illustrate the point about how the structure of an open text allows the reader to explore its multivalency Eco constructs what he calls a "subajacent metonymic network" or "meandertale" out of the word 'neanderthal' in Finnegans Wake in order to show how:

the reader of Finnegans Wake, controlled by the text, is in fact led into a game of associations that were previously suggested to him by the co-text (which means that every text, however "open" it is, is constituted, not as the place of all possibilities, but rather as the field of oriented possibilities).<sup>43</sup>

In Chapter Three we too will construct a "meandertale".

One could argue that the short story is virtually the definitive open text in Eco's terms, because its brevity determines that its control must be both sure and light, but also that the short-story writer's conception of his Model Reader must be, necessarily, an open one, given his knowledge of the "market" in which the short story participates. I do not mean market primarily in the usual sense, although the lability of the market for short stories is certainly a factor in their structure,<sup>44</sup> but rather, in the sense that since the perception by readers is of the short story as infinitely flexible and versatile, there is a sense of the short story genre as offering a wide range of possibilities. In such a situation the most the writer can realistically hope for is to direct rather than control.

Eco, in his explication of the reading process identifies many textual strategies, some of which will be mentioned briefly here and discussed in more detailed form in the next chapter. One of the more interesting is the concept of "bracketed extensions" which is a more precise description of the phenomenon referred to by Iser as continual modification and indeterminacies. What actually happens, according to Eco, is that readers consciously or unconsciously set aside textual anomalies for consideration later. In other words, they operate on the assumption that further illuminative information will be forthcoming. He notes that this process is being used in contemporary philosophy, in "multi-value logics" which incorporate "indeterminacies" as valid stepping stones in the "cognitive process".<sup>45</sup> As previously noted, however, contemporary short-story writers often exploit this tendency to expect completion in order to frustrate the reader and delay the appearance of the final consistency pattern. It is characteristic of many short stories that the consistency pattern can only appear after the text has been read, or reread, and in the resulting "brain wave"<sup>46</sup> or resonance factor generated by the open ending which refuses to resolve the difficulties for the reader.

Eco also stresses the importance of intertextuality in literary communication,<sup>47</sup> a factor which is of great importance in short-story writing and one which is frequently used as a means of circumventing the limitations of brevity. He also, following the Russian Formalists, divides his description of

the text into fabula and sujet -- the sujet being the text as it proceeds narratively across the pages, that is, the story as it is read linearly, and the fabula being the story as it is understood by the reader, utilising the various devices designed to generate meaning out of the text (for example: consistency building, bracketing extensions, and what he calls "inferential walks"). An inferential walk is another strategy used by the reader to try to fit anomalous textual items into a pattern. It is often used to try to determine the nature of future patterns based on inferences garnered from information already provided by the text. Again Eco is concerned to emphasise that:

inferential walks are not mere whimsical initiatives on the part of the reader, but are elicited by discursive structures and foreseen by the whole textual strategy as indispensable components of the construction of the fabula.<sup>48</sup>

Eco encapsulates all of these textual and reader strategies under the umbrella of the open text as a "pluriprobability" device<sup>49</sup> specifically designed to elicit multiple responses from the reader.

In the middle stages of his writings that will concern us here,<sup>50</sup> Roland Barthes expands upon yet another element of Jakobson's model of communication, that of the code,<sup>51</sup> which the addresser and the addressee must share if the content of the message is to be communicated. Or, to put it in Rabinowitz's terms, "we cannot read a novel properly until we have joined the narrative audience".<sup>52</sup>

Barthes' work on coding rests on a conception of experience as radically coded. Hawkes comments that: "The notion that we encode our experience of the world in order that we may experience it, that there exists, in general, no pristine range of experiences open to us, comes directly from the work of Sapir, Whorf and Lévi-Strauss."<sup>53</sup> These three are linguists and anthropologists who, in the course of their studies of primitive peoples discovered that human perceptive processes naturally function by apprehending what is perceived in the form of codes. Barthes first employed these insights in Mythologies (published in French in 1957, translated in 1970), a series of essays termed "demystifying" by Hawkes,<sup>54</sup> in which he demonstrated how the French mass media exploited the powerful affective and emotive potentiality of coding to its own, somewhat nefarious, ends. He later developed his ideas on coding further and applied them, in S/Z, to analysis of a literary text, Honoré de Balzac's "Sarrasine".

Coding is also, for Barthes, based on a Marxist-oriented conception of the value of praxis, of writing as praxis, that is, literature as "work". "The goal of literary work ... is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text."<sup>55</sup> Or, to put it in Sartre's terms, "the author's whole art is bent on obliging me to create what he discloses." [emphases his]<sup>56</sup> Barthes is concerned to identify what constitutes "writing" and claims that the "writerly" text, which he opposes to the "readerly" text, is infinitely open and does



not impose meaning on the reader, but allows him to create it endlessly for himself out of the text's "galaxy of signifiers".

The value of a text for Barthes is related to its proportion of writerliness, its plurality, and he explains that the maximum proportion of plurality can be extracted by appropriate techniques of analysis, which are, it goes without saying, not the traditional ones. He claims that "we must renounce structuring the text in large masses.... There will be no construction of the text: everything signifies ceaselessly and several times."<sup>57</sup> Thus he separates "Sarrasine" into what he calls "blocks of signification", into "brief contiguous fragments which we shall call lexias, since they are units of reading."<sup>58</sup> He notes that the size of each lexia will be arbitrary and that it will "suffice that the lexia be the best possible space in which we can observe meaning."<sup>59</sup> The lexias in S/Z vary in size from a few words to several sentences. The value of this procedure of close reading of very small segments of text is that it offsets the tendency identified by Brown, of prose readers to "underread".<sup>60</sup> Or, to put it in Barthes' terms, it makes it possible to see "across these artificial articulations [that is, the lexias] the shifting and repetition of the signifieds."<sup>61</sup> Signifieds in the semiotic triad of signifier, signified, and sign are concerned with connotation and thus, in conjunction with the others, with meaning.

Once the lexia is identified, the appropriate code or codes is applied to it.<sup>62</sup> Barthes describes the process of coding

in terms of the five main codes that he identifies in "Sarrasine" -- the hermeneutic (truth), proairetic (empirical), reference (science), seme (person), symbol (self-explanatory) -- as follows:

The five codes create a kind of network, a topos through which the entire text passes (or rather, in passing, becomes text). Thus if we make no effort to structure each code, or the five codes among themselves, we do so deliberately, in order to assume the multivalence of the text, its partial reversibility. We are, in fact, concerned not to manifest a structure but to produce a structuration. ... Hence we use code here not in the sense of a list, a paradigm that must be reconstituted. The code is a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures: ... so many fragments of something that has always been already read, seen, done, experienced: the code is the wake of that already. Referring to what has been written, i.e., to the Book (of culture, of life, of life as culture), it makes the text a prospectus of this Book. Or again: each code is one of the forces that can take over the text ... one of the voices out of which the text is woven. Alongside each utterance, one might say that off-stage voices can be heard: they are the codes. 65

Since identification of the codes is activated by reading the text it follows that for each text and for each reader a new set of codes will be generated, each supported by the multivalency inherent in the text itself. In his interpretation of "Sarrasine" Barthes also supplements the coded lexias with interlocutions which expand upon themes identified by the coding procedure. Because it uses density to counteract the limitations of brevity the short story makes great use of the kind of complex patterning best suited to analysis of the type Barthes uses in S/Z, as we shall see in Chapter Three.

There is one more technique of contemporary critical theory that seems relevant to our purpose of identifying critical tools which are particularly applicable to the analysis of short stories, and this is Tzvetan Todorov's concept of "adaptation".<sup>64</sup> This term refers to the writer's attempt to make the fantastic more natural or realistic, as Kafka does in "The Metamorphosis", where Gregor Samsa, despite the initial shock of waking up one morning to discover that he has turned into a giant insect, merely reacts by trying to find a rational explanation. As Todorov notes, "the most surprising thing is precisely that absence of surprise with regard to the unheard-of event that has befallen Gregor Samsa".<sup>65</sup> It is this lack of surprise, a deliberate backgrounding of fantastic elements by Kafka that Todorov calls "adaptation". Lawrence Venuti notes that:

surrealists and playwrights of the absurd deliberately try to shock their readers or spectators, usually in an effort to revise his concept of what constitutes reality and to discredit cherished modes of rational thinking and language. To achieve these effects, these writers especially avoid any technique which would minimise the marvellous or absurd quality of their writing [a technique easily identifiable in contemporary short stories, Robbe-Grillet's "The Secret Room" or Borges' "The Aleph", for example]. Fantasists who resort to adaption, on the other hand, reject such shock tactics and subtly remove the distinction between their inventive fantasy and the reader's reality, actually making him believe that the most fantastic actions can occur in his world [see, for example, Barthelme's "The Balloon"] .<sup>66</sup>

We shall see how Donald Barthelme's "Cortés and Montezuma" adopts an intriguing mélange of the two.

We have now discussed some theoretical techniques of reader-response criticism that are particularly applicable to short-story criticism, on the basis that the short story is best "defined" in terms of what it does rather than what it is. It remains only to demonstrate the validity of this non-definition by applying the techniques of reader-response criticism to particular short stories in order to show that they are indeed literary entities whose most basic quality is their ability to generate a high quality of reader response. The stories chosen are very different in both structure and ethos and have been selected to accommodate the two strains in contemporary short fiction, the traditional and the avant-garde.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>W. Allen, The Short Story in English (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981), p.7.

<sup>2</sup>H.E.Bates, "The Modern Short Story: A Retrospect" in C. May ed., Short Story Theories (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), pp.73-75. In these pages Bates also discusses various attempts that have been made at definition.

<sup>3</sup>A fair number of critics (Bates, p.78, Gullason in "The Short Story: An Underrated Art" in M. Timko, ed., 38 Short Stories [New York: Alfred Knopf Inc., 1979], p.638, A.L.Bader, "The Structure of the Modern Short Story" in S.K.Kumar and K. McKean, eds., Critical Approaches to Fiction [New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1968], p.71) have mentioned the fact that short stories are reader-response oriented but they have failed to investigate the implications of this and have gone on to define the form in terms of what it is. Susan Ferguson in "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form", Modern Fiction Studies, 28,1 (Spring 1982), pp.13-24 also provides a list of terms in which short stories have been defined: in terms of unity (Poe, Brander Mathews and others), techniques of plot compression (A.L.Bader, Norman Friedman, L.A.C. Strong), change or revelation of character (Theodore Stroud), subject (Frank O'Connor), tone (Gordimer), 'lyricism' (Moravia [and Baldesweiler]).

<sup>4</sup>R.M.Adams, "Writer and Reader: A New Relationship." D.Daiches and A. Thorlby, eds., Literature and Western Civilisation: The Modern World, II, Realities (London: Aldus Books Ltd., 1972), pp.491-507.

<sup>5</sup>Adams, p. 492.

<sup>6</sup>Adams, p.493.

<sup>7</sup>Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). Originally published in French, Paris: 1970, p.19, and Introduction, p.vi. Compare also Pütz's "erotics of the physical world" (Chapter I, p.13.).

<sup>8</sup>R. Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). Originally published in French, Paris: 1970.

T. Todorov, "The Structural Analysis of Literature: The Tales of Henry James" in D. Robey, ed., Structuralism : An Introduction (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1973), pp.73-103.

-----Grammaire du Décameron (The Hague and Paris: Mouton N.V., 1969).

B. Eichenbaum, "O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story" in L. Matejka and K. Pomorska, eds., Readings in Russian Poetics, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1971), pp.227-272.

U. Eco, "Lector in fabula--Pragmatic [ sic ] Strategy in a Meta-narrative Text" in his The Role of the Reader (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup>T. Leitch, "Donald Barthelme and the End of the End", Modern Fiction Studies, 28,1 (Spring 1982), p.140. Leitch's reference is to Barthelme's "unfinished fictions" but it is also applicable to the whole area of contemporary short fiction.

<sup>10</sup>Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences" in Critical Inquiry, 4 (1977), pp.121-142.

<sup>11</sup>This is not strictly true. Russian Formalists of various stripes, for example, Shlokovsky, Eichenbaum, Tynyanov, Propp, had done interesting and perceptive work in the short story in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but their work was unknown in the West until it was translated in the 1960s by people like Todorov, Matejka and Pomorska, and Lemon and Rice.

<sup>12</sup>M. Rohrberger and D.E. Burns, "Short Fiction and the Numinous Realm: Another Attempt at Definition", Modern Fiction Studies, 28,1 (Spring 1982), pp.5-6.

<sup>13</sup>T. Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p.17, emphasizes his.

<sup>14</sup>R. Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" in T.A. Sebeok, ed., Style in Language (New York and London: The Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1960), p.353.

<sup>15</sup>Hawkes, p. 83, emphasis his.

<sup>16</sup>W. Iser, The Implied Reader (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p.275.

<sup>17</sup>Iser, p.275.

<sup>18</sup>Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, Fundamentals of Language, pp.69-96. Quoted in Hawkes, p.76.

<sup>19</sup>Hawkes, p.79, emphases his.

<sup>20</sup>Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" in Sebeok, ed., p.358.

<sup>21</sup>Iser, p. 279.

<sup>22</sup>Iser, p.277, emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup>Iser, p.277.

<sup>24</sup>Iser, p.279.

<sup>25</sup>Iser, p.283.

<sup>26</sup>Iser, p.280.

<sup>27</sup>S.Lohafer, Coming to Terms with the Short Story (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), pp.50-51.

<sup>28</sup>Lohafer discusses this in terms of "thick" and "thin" sentences in Chapter Two of her study.

<sup>29</sup>Iser, p.283. Susan Brown conducts a fascinating discussion, well-documented from sociological and psychological studies, of the psychological reasons for and the mechanics of this phenomenon in terms of long-term and short-term memory, and local and global processing, and explains how the structure of short stories is ideally designed to exploit these psychological norms.

<sup>30</sup>W. Iser, "Interaction Between Text and Reader", S.R.Suliman and I.Crosman, eds., The Reader in the Text (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp.106-119.

<sup>31</sup>Iser, Reader, p.284.

<sup>32</sup>Iser, Reader, p.290.

<sup>33</sup>Iser, Reader, p.286.

<sup>34</sup>The author's purpose cannot, of course, be known, but it can be inferred from the text.

<sup>35</sup>Eco, The Role of the Reader (London: Hutchinson and Co.Ltd., 1979), p.3.

<sup>36</sup>Eco, p.30.

<sup>37</sup>Eco replaces Jakobson's model of communication with a greatly expanded version of his own (pp.3-40), but it must be remembered that Jakobson's model is a general description of the communication process in all fields and is therefore not designed specifically to portray literary communication as a particular species in the general field.

<sup>38</sup>Eco, p.4.

<sup>39</sup>Eco, p.7.

<sup>40</sup>Eco, p.8.

<sup>41</sup>Eco's concept of "encyclopedia" refers to the reader's own personal store of knowledge and sensibility, that which he has developed over a lifetime and which is unique to each individual. Because each reader's sensibility is unique, his response is unique, which is why Eco points out that the Model Reader is inherently unknowable. The fact that he will probably react in a way that is partly predictable allows the writer to use textual strategies generatively, but always in the realisation that it is ultimately the reader's encyclopedia that will determine what is, in fact, his response.

<sup>42</sup>Eco, p.40.

<sup>43</sup>Eco, p.76.

<sup>44</sup>The writer who is targetting his story at a particular market, for example, a particular magazine, say Omni, has a clearer conception of the type of reader who reads glossy science-fiction magazines, but he still can know very little about the actual individual who will read his story, and therefore his conception of that individual must still, definitively, remain that of the Model Reader of the open text. It is for this reason that I have characterised the short fiction market as "labile".

<sup>45</sup>Eco, p.58. Since he is a philosopher by training it seems likely that Eco has been influenced by contemporary phenomenologists, such as Husserl and Scheler who, as noted in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Vol.III, p.140), describe objects as phenomena only after they have "bracketed existence" or "suspended belief in the existence of objects". The reader, in Eco's description, does a similar thing in suspending the anomalous textual feature from his consideration until subsequent events allow it to be reinstated.

<sup>46</sup>William Pater, quoted by Iser, Reader, p.285.



<sup>47</sup>Eco, p.42. Eco distinguishes intertexts from frames -- both are conventional understandings that allow for interpretation, but a frame is drawn from life and an intertext from literature.

<sup>48</sup>Eco, p.32.

<sup>49</sup>Eco, p.34.

<sup>50</sup>In particular R. Barthes, S/Z.

<sup>51</sup>It should be noted that the conceptions of "code" and "convention" are quite different. Coding is a neuro-psychological description of how the perceiver perceives experience as ordered, and convention is a sociologically determined ordering of codes into groups of various kinds.

<sup>52</sup>Rabinowitz, p.136.

<sup>53</sup>Hawkes, p.106.

<sup>54</sup>Hawkes, p.110.

<sup>55</sup>Barthes, p.4.

<sup>56</sup>J.P.Sartre, "Why Write?", H.Adams, ed., Critical Theory Since Plato (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanowitch Inc., 1971), p.1066.

<sup>57</sup>Barthes, p.13.

<sup>58</sup>Barthes, p.23.

<sup>59</sup>Barthes, p.13.

<sup>60</sup>Brown, p.29.

<sup>61</sup>Barthes, p.14.

<sup>62</sup>The codes are actually identified by reading the text and generating out of it significant codes, which are then, in turn, used to identify the lexias, the blocks of textual material used by the author as the building blocks of the patterns of meaning in which the codes can be identified. It is not as circular a proceeding as this summary makes it seem because the codes and the lexias operate dialectically and complement each other in the analytical process of identifying the structure of the text. We should note in passing that the word Barthes uses is "interpretation" rather than analysis. He uses it in the Nietzschean sense that "to interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free)

meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it." (S/Z, p. 5, emphases his.)

<sup>63</sup>Barthes, pp.20,21.

<sup>64</sup>T.Todorov, The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973). Originally published in French, Paris: 1970. ~~See~~ p.172.

<sup>65</sup>Todorov, The Fantastic, p.169.

<sup>66</sup>L.Venuti, "Dino Buzzati's Fantastic Journalism", Modern Fiction Studies, 28,1 (Spring 1982), p.79.

## Chapter Three

### A Practical Exercise in Theoretical Criticism

He [Joyce] takes for granted that the work of art is a rack on which the sensibilities of the reader must, with his active consent and even complicity, be stretched. As it happens the process has revealed unexpected resiliences and elasticities in modern readers; perhaps even created them.

R.M. Adams, "The Writer and Reader: A New Relationship."

Short stories, like all fiction, can be analysed and interpreted in many ways, none of which, including the essentially semiotic methods to be employed in this chapter, are exclusive of the others. Just as there are some methods, however, that suit some stories or novels best, there are some methods that suit particular genres better than others: reader-response oriented criticism is particularly suited to analysis of short stories because it allows the critic to take into account the multivalency and simultaneity inherent in this very complex, very dense form of literature. As Robert Adams points out:

The practice of reading a book or a poem as a series of cross-connected points of energy that are experienced more or less simultaneously (as one sees a physical pattern), rather than consecutively (as one tells a story), is the direct consequence [of the shifts in emphasis between reading and writing] .<sup>1</sup>

Semiotic and hermeneutic criticism allows the critic to identify and explicate the perceived pattern in terms of the structures of which it is composed.

The two stories chosen to substantiate my claim that short stories are primarily reader-response vehicles are, deliberately, quite different. "Two Potters" by Doris Lessing<sup>2</sup> is an instance of the traditional species of story: that which does not indulge in the formal or thematic exhibitionism characteristic of the avant-garde story. The reason for this choice is to demonstrate that the "non-definition" can be successfully applied to the traditional type of story as well as to the more overtly contemporary story, such as the one under consideration in this chapter, Donald Barthelme's "Cortés and Montezuma".<sup>3</sup>

Not all of the techniques identified in the previous chapter will be used on each story, and some of those which are susceptible to differing applications, such as Barthes' coding, will be demonstrated differently in each of the stories. In order to facilitate a degree of consistency in what is inherently a somewhat fragmenting procedure, each story will be considered separately.

### "Two Potters"

The most important task for all writers who, in any form or genre of literature, are intent on generating active reader response, is to get the reader involved. It is no surprise to realise that this is particularly important for the short-story writer because of the brevity of the form. In "Two Potters" Lessing

achieves this to a large extent by her skilful use of metaphoric language. An example of this technique is the name of the real potter, Mary Tawnish, who is described in terms of "bright brown clustering hair, and brown eyes" (p.280), and later as a "dark changeling in the middle of her gingery freckled family" (p.288). The connotation of "tawny" is much richer than that of "bright brown", bearing as it does associations of lions, yellow eyes, and hot dusty lands, all of which serve to associate Mary with the dream potter; the richness also reflects obliquely the richness and complexity of Mary's personality. The multivalency attached to "play" is yet another example of Lessing's skill with metaphoric language. "Play" is the rough play of the children (p.289), the play of the putative child of the letter scenario who would take the rabbit (p.287), the "ridiculous play" (p.291) that is the charade of mutual apology played out between Basil Smith and Dennis Tawnish, and the somewhat patronising play that Mary indulges in in making the rabbit to conform with the details of the dream country (p.290); it is also the images of play generated in the reader's mind -- of play as drama, of the play of water over the clay of the dream potter's pots and the dream child's face (p.292), of the play of light in Mary's eyes (p.280), and of the interactive play between the reader's and the writer's minds. An adaptation of Eco's meandertale device is a good means of demonstrating pictorially the play of meaning generated metaphorically.

In Meandertale II, as we shall see, all of the words in the diagram are to be found in the story. In Meandertale I,

Meandertale I  
Superadjacent Metaphoric Network

The words in parentheses are those not found in the text.

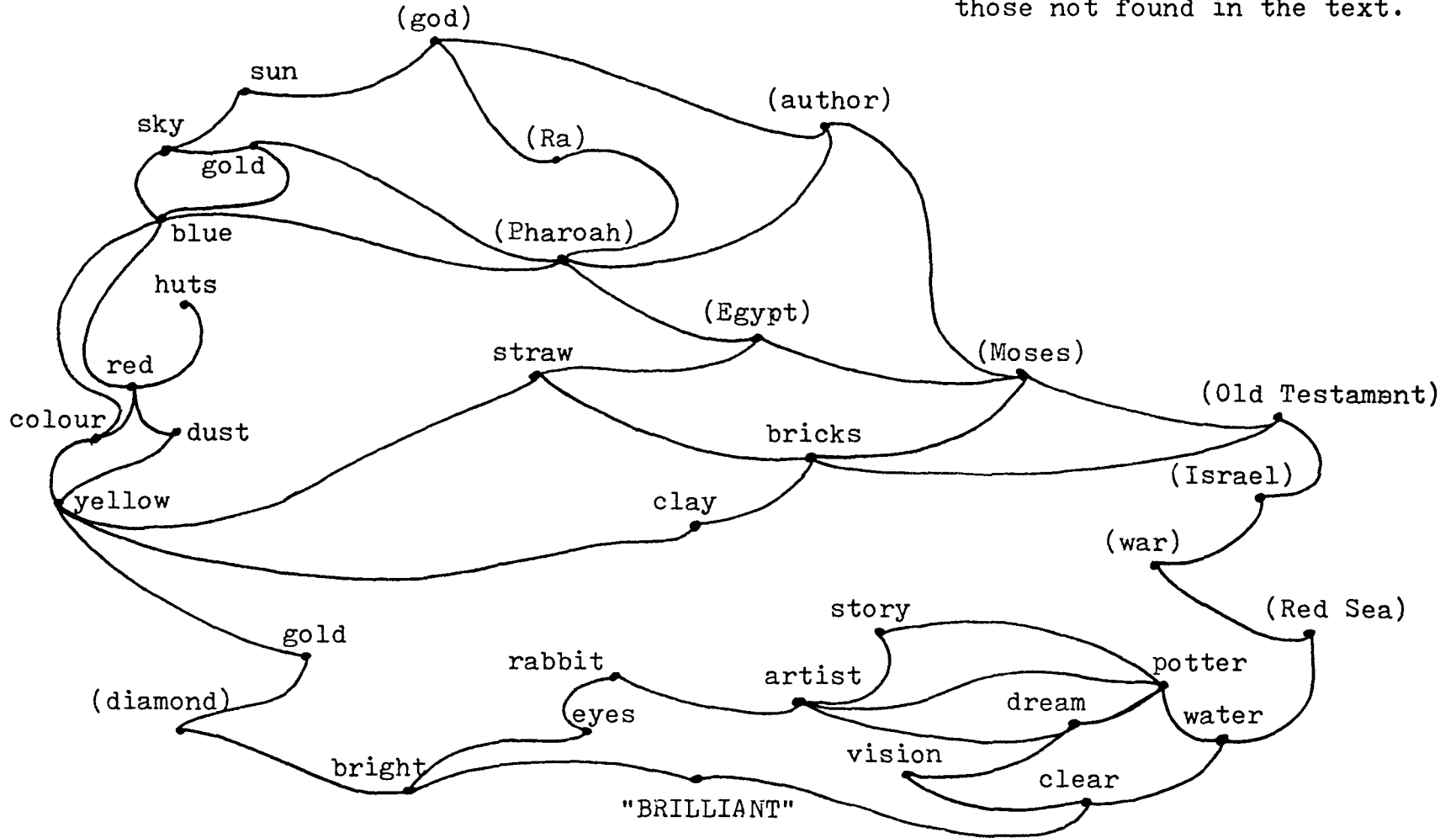


Fig. I

however, the reader starts from a single word or phrase and lets the imagination run free. Thus, despite the fact that the diagram contains lots of words that are found in the story, it also contains many that are not found there. The purpose of the diagram is to demonstrate the potential multivalency of language and how it tantalises the reader into joining in the experience of exercising the imagination. It might well be argued that "Israel", "war", and "diamonds", have little to do with the theme of "Two Potters", but in fact they do -- they are the result of a creative process very similar to, although less disciplined than, that required to write a story. They are the child of what can be called the "what if" philosophy of literature, which is clearly a concern of Lessing's in this story, as can be seen when the narrator suggests fantasies of the "what if" variety to Mary Tawnish (pp.286,287).

A tangential aspect of the metaphorical use of language is what Lohafer refers to as "thick" and "thin" sentences and discusses in terms of impetus to and resistance to closure.<sup>4</sup> The following is a thick, that is, dense, sentence:

He held it in his left hand, scattered water on it with his right, held his palm down toward the littered dust, and the creature jumped off it and away, with quick jerky movements, not stopping until it was through the huts, clear of the settlement, and against a small outcrop of jagged brown rocks where it raised its front paws and froze in the posture Mary had created for it.  
(p.292)

As the reader progresses through this sentence, that progress is facilitated by the impetus of narrative, especially in clauses

four to seven, but impeded by the series of embedded clauses whose presence both causes him to read more slowly and to pay more attention to the construction of the sentence and the way in which its complexity supports the complexity and subtlety of meaning.<sup>5</sup> The point will become clearer if we examine the sentence clause by clause, a proceeding that will also enable us to see how Iser's blanks facilitate our understanding of movement and meaning.

1. "He held it in his left hand"

connotation : left hand as inferior to right; not the working hand

intertext: left hand of God

Left Hand of Darkness

2. "scattered water on it with his right"

modification: the left hand is indeed secondary but not pejoratively so

connotation: conferring benediction

water as baptismal

water as life-giving

intertext: the right hand of God

blank: which connotation of water is the appropriate one?

3. "held his palm down toward the littered dust,"

modification: movement from water to dust

movement from hand to the more specific "palm"

downward movement from above to below

connotation: dust related to soil, earth, clay



"palm" both open-handed and the fruitful desert  
plant which lives in sand (dust)

blank: moved downward with what intention?

4. "and the creature jumped off it and away,"

modification: the downward movement was to allow the creature  
to jump off

blank: why and how did the creature run away?

5,6,7. "with quick jerky movements, not stopping until it was  
through the huts, clear of the settlement, and against a small  
outcropping of jagged brown rocks,"

modification: the creature's mode of running  
the fact that it stopped when clear of the  
settlement

connotation: this is not a panic-stricken flight  
this is a wild, not a domestic, creature

blank: why did it stop?

is the colour and shape of the rocks significant?

8. "Where it raised its front paws and froze in the position  
Mary had created for it."

modification: the rabbit stopped in order to return to its  
former status as symbol

connotation: since it was formerly clay the rabbit has returned  
to its essence

intertext: the burial service --dust to dust -- (one wonders if  
this is intended or, more probably, evidence of Lessing's fail-  
ure to notice this possible intertext, in other words, an instance  
of what Eco would call the closed-ness of the text)

inference: the interpenetration of dream and reality

blank: intratextual -- what will the hands do now?

metatextual -- was this rock formation in the form of  
a rabbit the genesis of the story?

This exercise demonstrates the complexity of such "thick" sentences in terms of the relativity of their component parts, each of which is dependent for its full meaning on its modification by subsequent segments. The reader's activity is required to enable the connection to be made, and his perceptive participation is necessary for the revelation of the nuances and subtleties of these associations to be obvious.

We previously noted some instances of intertextuality, mainly references to the Bible, but there is relatively little intertextual referencing in this story. There is, however, a great deal of framing, which, as Eco notes, is related to life not literary experience.<sup>6</sup> In this story the device of framing is used in a straightforward way, as a means of reducing the need for long, involved passages of description and rationalisation which the short story cannot afford. But this technique also, because of its epigrammatic quality, necessitates the reader's active and perceptive participation in order to evoke what is latently contained in the frames -- yet another example of the short story as a form specifically designed to evoke reader response. One instance of the device in this story is that the reader is informed that William Tawnish is a teacher of physics and biology. It is thus unnecessary to digress at

great length on the reasons why he should find his son's insistence that he has destroyed the obviously unharmed Smith house (p.288) literally incredible. His occupation entails his rationality and his frustration with the irrational, without the need for further explanation on the part of the author.

In this story the strategies of backgrounding and foregrounding, or to use Eco's somewhat hyperbolic terminology, narcotizing and blowing up,<sup>7</sup> are frequently used to impart texture and to provide impetus for re-reading. The fact that Mary Tawnish had a child who died (p.280), for instance, is not overly significant on a first reading, but on subsequent readings it takes on added significance relative to the chance of her "losing" another child to illusion and hallucination. Similarly, the description of Mary's square flat dish as "slipped out of whack" (p.282) gains unexpected relevance in the light of Dennis' "slipped" conception of reality and the tangential relationship of dream to waking and fiction to reality.

In applying Barthes' coding procedure to "Two Potters" we are concerned to demonstrate the way in which a variety of codes can be generated out of one story. To this end we will examine only the first few paragraphs -- up to the end of the first dream (p. 281) -- although assuming knowledge of the entire story. This procedure is valid on the basis that the kernel of a story can often be found in its opening sentences, an assumption that is particularly germane in short stories in view of the critical importance of openings in such a brief form.

Codes

1. Illusion? -- concerned with the interpretation of reality and dreams, with what is and is not illusory: its underlying concern is the interpenetration of reality and fiction.
2. Making -- concerned with the conception of experience or being as something "made" -- pots, huts, "square flat dishes", rabbits, children, stories.
3. Geography -- the influence of place -- London, English village, dream village, childhood country, being displaced in both time and space, out of one's element, the collision of cultures.
4. Metafiction -- the elements in the story which are meta-fictional references to its status as story and hence to the story as a commentary on the art of fiction.

The technique of coding is a more sophisticated analytical tool than its closest traditional critical relative, theme criticism, because it accommodates and encourages comparison not only between particular sets of textual items, but between classes of items, between, for example, looking at the ways in which the theme of dreaming in this story is developed and considering dreaming as only one of a series of themes concerned with the metafictional ethos of the story. Coding is also consistent with Barthes' insistence that the reader create the fiction, since the codes are generated out of the reader's reading of the story. They also, however, implicitly accommodate Eco's contention that control of the reading is split between reader and text.

"Two Potters" forms an interesting example of the problem of determining the relative degree of openness or closedness of a text. In the sense that it is closely structured and designed for a sophisticated reader, especially in the area of multivalency of diction, it is an open text. Structurally, however, its narrative linearity is dominant and conventional; its fabula and sujet run on parallel tracks. In this area it makes few demands on the Model Reader. In terms of surface meaning it falls into the category of those stories which Rohrberger and Burns describe as "mov[ing] to a climax and just hover[ing]." <sup>8</sup> The subsurface theme, however, is very open: it poses such questions as: "Where are the boundaries between dreaming and waking?"; "Do they in fact, exist?"; and analogously, "What are the boundaries between fiction and reality?"; and "What is the status of mimesis?" These questions resonate and are not answered for the reader no matter how often he reads the story. In Lohafer's terms, in this story, cognitive closure is inherently and indefinitely deferred.

#### "Cortés and Montezuma"

Simply by looking at the text on the pages the reader is aware that this is an overtly, self-consciously, contemporary, post-modernist story. Through its construction in short segments, it foregrounds its structure; it advertises itself as fragmented and, as the reader quickly realises by reading the first two pages, non-linear, in terms of connections between segments. It

is a literary puzzle which achieves its perplexing effects by subjecting the reader to a barrage of "special effects" which effortlessly keep him hopelessly off balance to the point that his reaction on reading the final words might be, "What stone?", although only one re-reading is required to make him realise what a silly question that is. What, then, are the textual strategies used to achieve this effect?

"Cortés and Montezuma" nicely exemplifies Rohrberger and Burns' characterisation of the short story as surrealistic. It controverts conventional notions of time and space. By writing the entire story in the present tense and the active voice Barthelme forces the reader to treat a historical incident, the conquest of Mexico, as if it were happening here and now. The technique is rather like the third-person omniscient narrator as sportscaster. This impression is underscored by the segment on page 335 which begins "In the kindest possible way ..." and which reads like a cross between the script for a prime-time detective drama and the lyric of some eighteenth-century ballad re-cycled by a punk rock group. This juxtaposition of various milieux contributes to the generalised disorientation felt by the reader.

Barthelme's use of intertextuality in this story is, like his use of many other relatively standard techniques, somewhat idiosyncratic. There are really only two major intertexts in this story, the Bible, and Del Castillo's The True History of the Conquest of New Spain,<sup>9</sup> from which come the historically

accurate details of the conquest of Mexico. But the entire panoply of literary techniques is the true intertext here, a factor which makes this a radically metafictional story. Barthelme merely invokes the literary techniques, however, in order to defuse their effects parodically, thus signalling his awareness of the fact that contemporary writers simultaneously both rely upon literary convention and are committed to its contravention. The achievement of this parodic purpose, however, depends on the participation of an active and literarily sophisticated reader. We have already mentioned the way in which he undermines the conventions of the historical treatise, and he performs a similarly amusing hatchet-job on the conventions of the epistolary novel -- there is something rather wickedly funny in the Montezuma who gleefully declares "I am the State" (p. 335) writing to Mummy to complain, somewhat petulantly, about the outrageous behaviour of his aristocracy. In the same section (p.330), it is hard to avoid hearing in Montezuma's complaint that they "are all tired of having to deal with [the] manifold deceptions, of the nobility, of uncovering their places of concealment, of keeping track of their movements -- in short of having to think about them, of having to remember them " (p.330), a subtext of metafictional criticism of the intellectual and technical excesses of modern fiction. There are other examples of this technique in the story, but perhaps the most successful is the almost scatological parody of the conventional use of mirrors as symbols, in the incident where each member of the council wears a pair of mirrors, as appropriate to his rank, "affixed

to his buttocks." The fact that these council members are made of pottery merely underscores the absurdity and emphasises the parody.

The general disorientation of the reader in this story is further enhanced by the author's use of anachronisms such as the limousines of the Aztec nobility (p.239), the roaches as big as ironing boards (p.330), and the characterisation of Aztec spies as "detectives" (p.331). No attempt is made to disguise these anachronistic elements and they automatically foreground themselves, a move which is consistent with the generally parodic tone of the story; but they also, more subtly, contribute to the unbalancing of the reader, simply because they are essentially unimportant and yet they insistently draw attention to themselves. Conversely, important items are narcotized. For example, despite the typographical emphasis the reader gives little attention to the short sentence "*She looks tired*" (p.329), partly because it seems innocuous although puzzling, and partly because, even at this early point in the story, he is wary of assuming the obvious, which, in this case, is that the sentence is in italics and therefore important. It is not until four segments later, during which time we learn that Sanchez has been overturning idols, Cortés has been bitten by a poisonous insect, Montezuma has written to his mother, and a group of lords hostile to Montezuma has met, that the reason for Doña Marina's tiredness is mentioned, casually, in passing. Through this process the reader learns that he was correct in not trusting the italics because the sentence is not important -- except as a parody of conventional literary



patterning devices, which is, however, an important theme in this story. In other words, the "trick" to understanding this very tricky story is to assign the various elements to their places in the various strands that are intertwined to compose the whole. Each element, however, has a different function and a different level of importance relative to the role it assumes in each strand. Doña Marina's fatigue, for example, functions in some of the following ways: metafictionally, as previously noted -- as a parody of conventional patterning devices; humorously -- Cortés as cuckold; structurally -- her confession of her adultery forms the starting point of the detective strand; and ironically -- as both a commentary on the naiveté of the Spaniards and the similarity between Aztec and contemporary North American societies. Or, as Adams puts it in a comment that refers to Finnegans Wake but which seems equally pertinent to this story: "Everything is significant, everything is insignificant, what doesn't make sense in one context may do so in another, and to see the biggest pattern possible as resourcefully as possible is the responsibility of the reader."<sup>10</sup>

The same italicised sentence can also be understood in terms of blocking and indeterminacy. Because its relevance is unclear, it frustrates the reader's attempts to insert it into a consistency pattern, so it becomes an item that can be characterised in Eco's terms as a "bracketed extension." Thus it is eliminated, temporarily, from the "real world" of the story until further information clarifies its position and purpose. In other words, it functions as an indeterminacy whose presence,

via the mechanism of latent disturbance, impels the reader actively to try to fit it, at some point, into the overall consistency pattern -- if such a pattern exists for this story.

Inferential walks too are encouraged strategically in this story. In the case of Doña Marina's fatigue, not much textual material is as yet available, and any hypothetical walking done at this point tends to be speculative rather than inferential. At a later point in the story, however, say, the final segment, where Cortés' and Montezuma's ghosts walk hand in hand, there is much textual evidence available to use in inferring the reason why the two protagonists have spent so much time "hand in hand": is this a homosexual liason? (Aztec society is certainly more likely to tolerate such a relationship than self-righteous Catholic Spain); is this a hands-across-the-sea symbol? (possibly, in conformation with the initial quality of the meeting between Cortés and Montezuma, but unlikely in view of the rapid deterioration that historically occurred in the relationship -- but this is a fiction, Barthelmean fiction, not history, and in this story the relationship seems to survive in spite of basic disagreements about idols and gold); is it a symbol of the essential humanity of man, despite cultural differences such as language barriers and religious conflict? (quite possibly, given the underlying serious intent of the story, the point being, with reference to this symbol, that even if it is a homosexual relationship, it is a relationship which outlasts the barriers bent on destroying it). In other words, the symbol is almost certainly parodic, but parody, like satire, usually has a serious purpose.

The inferential walk thus leads the reader to a conclusion that, although not conclusive, is at least, in the absence of any subsequent evidence to the contrary, one probable meaning in the story.

All meaning in this story is, however, relative: relative in the structural sense of association. Eco's Meandertale device (Fig. II), this time unchanged from his original use of the model as a diagrammatic representation of metonymic chains of association, provides an excellent means of demonstrating the complex associations and relationships that underlie the apparently radical fragmentation of this story. I have, however, taken one slight liberty with Eco's original conception. Since "Cortés and Montezuma" does not provide a convenient pun,<sup>11</sup> I have substituted the names of the two protagonists and the reason for their collision (gold) as a focus for the model; the point, thus, remains valid.

The purpose of the meandertale is to demonstrate Eco's contention that the reader is controlled to some extent by the text and that the text is not a "wholly open place of all possibilities, but rather ... a field of oriented possibilities."<sup>12</sup> The meandertale is a pictorial representation of that field, and it shows how each word is connected by winding chains of association with the other words so that the story is finally seen as a unity, at least on this metonymic level. It is important to note, however, that the unity is a submerged one. The surface structure, as in this story, may be profoundly fragmented, but one of the purposes of the textual strategy

Meandertale II  
Subadjacent Metonymic Network

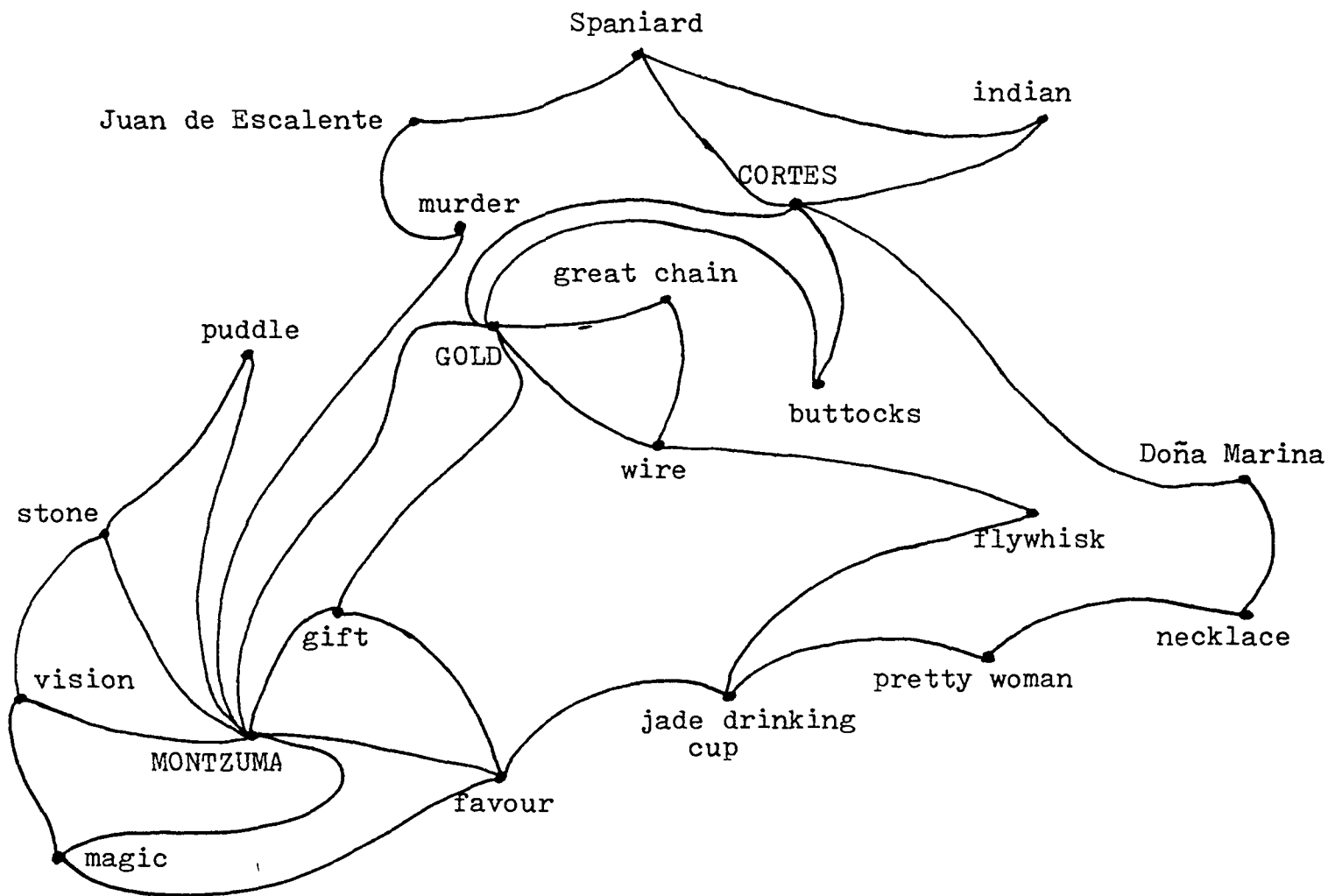


Fig. II

of fragmentation is to draw the reader into making associations of the type diagrammed by the meandertale.

Barthes' coding procedure also is designed to elucidate associative patterns, but it is more productive than the meandertale inasmuch as it not only notes the existence and shape of the associative patterns and where they occur, but expands upon both the mechanisms that accommodate the associations, and the macro-patterns -- the elements of the fabula -- that result from them. The codes also operate on both metaphoric and metonymic levels. In order to demonstrate Barthes' methodology, in this case, we will trace one single code as it can be identified over the entire length of the story.

Code: epistemological (EPI) -- concerning what it is to know; the various relationships between knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth.

1. "Because Cortés lands on a day specified in the ancient writings, because he is dressed in black, because his armour is silver in colour ... for these reasons, Montezuma considers Cortés to be Quetzalcoatl" (p.328).

EPI: false causality -- the failure of rationality when it does not take all circumstances into account; the power of "knowledge" derived from superstition.

2. "Montezuma receives new messages, in picture writing, from the hills. These he burns, so that Cortés will not learn their contents" (p.329).

EPI: inference -- knowledge can be acquired from spies even if one does not know the language.

3. "Doña Marina, the Indian translator" (p.329).

EPI: Cortés knows only Spanish, Montezuma only Aztec; because of her knowledge of both languages Doña Marina can operate in both worlds.

4. "Overturning idols ... yes, he does that, everywhere we go." (p.329).

EPI: false belief -- that overturning idols prevents people from worshipping the gods of their choice.

5. "This flagrant behaviour is ... welcome. For we are all tired of having to deal with their manifold deceptions ... of having to think about them, of having to remember them." (p.330).

EPI: to think, to remember -- both necessary in order to gather and to retain knowledge, especially of what is deliberately being concealed.

6. "Many people here are of the opinion" (p.330).

EPI: to have an opinion, to speculate, is not necessarily to know the facts.

7. "Then, too, we have the Spaniards ... " (p.330).

EPI: erroneous assumption -- the reader has presumed, wrongly, that the plague is the Spaniards -- the dangers of invoking the wrong set of conventions.

Interlocution: Contravention of convention.

The bit of trickery involved in lexia #7 rests on the accuracy of the writer's assessment of the reader's response. Barthelme

assumes that the reader will fall into the trap of invoking the conventional assumption that primitive peoples (which the Aztecs were not but are generally assumed to be, since they pre-date the technical era) use metaphoric language. Thus in conformation with this convention, devils  $\equiv$  Spaniards. We should note that the text, although it does not say that Montezuma considers the Spaniards to be devils, has subtly encouraged the reader to indulge in this erroneous assumption by previously noting that Montezuma had considered Cortés to be a god -- if god, why not devil? This technique is an example of the "closed" aspect of this text -- the Model Reader for this segment must match the writer's image of him if the device is to work.

8. "Cortés' men break through many more walls" (p.330).

EPI: false assumption -- that gold in large quantities is hidden behind walls.

9. "Cortés has employed a detective to follow Montezuma ....

'There are only five detectives of talent in Tenochtitlan' says Montezuma, 'There are others but I don't use them. Visions are better than the best detective.'" (p.331).

EPI: i) knowledge can be acquired by detective work, all that is required is to put the pieces together.

ii) to see visions -- the belief that knowledge can be acquired in other than rational, empirical ways. Note the similarity between this belief and the Christian faith-generated beliefs that are also satirised in this story.

10. Montezuma was "a very religious man, a good student -- I'll wager that's what they talk about, Montezuma and Cortés, Theology" (p.331).

EPI: to study, religion -- that religious knowledge is acquired by study, not by faith.

11. "Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who will one day write The True History of the Conquest of New Spain" (p.331).

EPI: i) -- is it ever possible to write the truth of anything, especially something as complex as the "Conquest of New Spain"?

ii)-- can anyone intimately involved in a situation ever be objective enough to know its truth?

iii) -- can del Castillo, who asked for and received favours from Montezuma, even pretend to be objective?

12. "I especially like the Holy Ghost. Qua idea" (p.332).

EPI: what is the value of abstract thought, the separation of phenomenon from essence?

13. "Montezuma observes, of Bernal, that 'he seems to be a gentleman'"

EPI: to seem --deceptive appearances.

14. "... the ending or at least what you know of the drama's probable course" (p.332).

EPI: probability as a contributing factor to knowledge, but limited by the predictor's degree of knowledge -- knowledge from such a source may be little more than guesswork.

15. "... so that I may attempt to manipulate it ... with the application of ... magic " (p.332).



EPI: i) knowledge plus magic allows manipulation.

ii) what is magic? If it allows manipulation it must be controllable by the manipulator, who is a human being. If it is controllable, is it magic? What is magic?

16. "Father Sanchez confronts Cortés with the report of the detective he has hired to follow Doña Marina.... Cortés orders that ... Father Sanchez be sent back to Cuba in chains." (p.333).

EPI: i) refusal to acknowledge truth in facts.

ii) inferred, a questioning of the truth-value of facts.

iii) inferred, that there is a higher level of truth than that of facts.

17. "At the end of a long hallway he sees a group of functionaries" (p.334).

EPI: to see -- is such ordinary vision reliable?

18. "They are pottery" (p.335).

EPI: the limitations of ordinary vision, what is seen is not necessarily so.

19. "'I am the State!' shouts Montezuma, and Cortés shouts, 'Mother of God, forgive this poor fool who doesn't know what he's saying!'" (p.335)

EPI: Who is closest to the truth -- Montezuma, who in his role as sole ruler is, metaphorically, accurate, or Cortés, who appeals for justification to a "person" who may or may not have had historical existence, who, even if she did exist, may have been the victim of a hallucination in believing either that her child was God, or that God exists, and who, even if she were

correct on both those counts, cannot be assumed to have inter-  
cessory powers with Him?

20. "'What do the omens say?'

'I don't know. I can't read them anymore.'" (p.335).

EPI: i) knowledge comes from mystical sources

ii) knowledge as enigma.

iii) to lose one's power to interpret the enigma -- inference;  
such power is a gift. Is knowledge a gift?

21. "'Our Lord Jesus Christ loves you.'

'I'll send Him chocolate.'" (p.335).

EPI: all knowledge is not intercommunicable.

22. "'I did what I thought best,' says Cortés, proceeding  
with gaiety and conscience." (p.336).

EPI: action based on knowledge involves interpretation by the  
possessor of the knowledge. Appropriate action depends on the  
actor's ability to think well and with integrity.

23. "'I am murdered.' says Montezuma" (p.336).

EPI: i) What is Montezuma's assessment of Cortés' ability to  
think well and with integrity?

ii) the severity of the consequences of believing that you have  
all the knowledge necessary to proceed "with gaiety and con-  
science".

Interlocution: "What is truth?" said jesting Pilate and did not  
stay for an answer.

If true knowledge is not apprehensible via facts, visions, omens,  
study, sight, cause and effect, translation, belief, opinion,  
detective work, abstract thought, or magic, then Pilate did not

wait, for the excellent reason that the question is unanswerable. But this leaves open only the position of radical scepticism and one quickly realises that this logically entails radical paralysis -- an inability to do anything at all. Since this is inconceivable if one is to go on living, a compromise is necessary at some point in the entrammelling chain of scepticism. The question is, where? There is, however, another alternative: deny the power of logical entailment, consistency, and cause and effect, and write a story like "Cortés and Montezuma" in which none of these tiresome strictures is in effect.

As we have seen, the coding device allows us to identify each of the different perspectives the writer occupies in his effort to make the reader see the subtleties and nuances involved in the situation under consideration, in this case, the relationship between truth, knowledge, and fantasy. It also allows us to identify, in this case, the great degree of openness in this story. The question posed by Barthelme is in one sense unanswerable, but in another sense, it is in fact answered by each person in his own individual way. The individual decides for himself where he will make the compromises or if he will "deny" the strictures of rationality, but since the choice is a subjective rather than an objective one, it is de facto open to change. Thus, there is, in fact, no final closed answer to the question posed by the story.<sup>13</sup>

This story is not only open, however; it is multiply resonant. It has to be read several times before all of the

various types of textual strategies can be identified and its brevity accommodates this necessity. Even when this identification has been accomplished, however, the story can still be read with pleasure in order to appreciate the sheer brilliance of a virtuoso literary performance.

The allusion to pleasure leads us to another point with reference to the short story as an entity for evoking a superior quality of reader response. A large element of the appeal of this story is that it is, quite simply, fun to read. There is a great deal of humour in contemporary short stories as a genre; for example, the performance of Charity Grundy in Coover's "A Pedestrian Accident", the hilarious bee swarming incident in Barth's "Ambrose, His Mark", the dauntingly humorous demeanor of the aunts in Alice Munro's "Chaddeleys and Flemings", or the structure of Frederic Brown's "Solipsist", which is simply an extended shaggy dog story. The primary purpose of such stories is usually to entertain; as Barthes asserts, the co-creation of literature should be pleasurable, should be bliss. This tendency to emphasise the entertainment potential of literature, however (noticed also by Pütz, as was previously mentioned), is largely a reaction to the overly intellectual and serious demeanor that fiction and criticism had retained as a legacy from the Modernist and New Critical eras respectively, and it is something that contemporary fiction chooses to undermine parodically. There is, however, a serendipitous side effect to the humour. If the contemporary conception of

entertainment involves activity, and if the purpose is to get the reader involved, then he is much more likely to do so if the process, as well as the fulfilment, is enjoyable. The short story is particularly suited to this philosophy of involvement through entertainment because humour, like sublimity, tends to be self-limiting -- a joke is only funny for so long, and an absurd situation, if it is extended too long, is no longer amusing, but only tedious.<sup>14</sup>

The final perspective from which I wish to view this story is that of adaptation.

In his study of fantastic literature Todorov discusses works ranging across times and continents -- dating from as early as the Decameron -- from the perspective of the necessary characteristics of the fantastic as a genre. In this process he comments on the difference between the traditional devices used in fantastic literature -- those which are designed to foreground themselves and thus shock the reader -- and the more contemporary techniques of backgrounding the fantastic elements by having the characters in the story treat them as either normal or as something simply to be accommodated in their continuing existence. In "Cortés and Montezuma" Barthelme employs both of these devices. The anachronisms foreground themselves and deliberately shock the reader out of his complacent assumption that he knows what constitutes reality. The adaptation technique, however, can be seen in the very matter of fact way in

which cannibalism (p.328) and other exotic Aztec customs and excesses, having one's arms supported by courtiers, pricking one's ears with a cactus thorn until "the blood flows" (p.331) for example, are presented in this story. Perhaps the most subtle example of the technique occurs in the final three segments (pp.385-6) where Charles V is suddenly transported from Spain into the story to walk and talk with Cortés and Montezuma on the dock. Montezuma's status in the penultimate segment is not clear, however -- is he still alive or already a ghost? In the final segment both Cortés and Montezuma are ghosts, Charles V has disappeared again, and the events of the story have already been carried over intact into the world beyond death. These are adaptation devices because, in the case of Charles V, we know from historical data that he did not ever visit the New World and therefore his presence, although taken as a matter of course in the story, is fantastic in actuality; and in the case of Cortés' and Montezuma's ghosts, what is fantastic is that the world beyond lacks any fantastic elements -- it is just as "normal" as this world. Given the degree of disorientation that has been achieved in this story, the reader tends to accept the final segments as "normal", and it is not until he re-reads and re-thinks that he realises how much Barthelme has, in the compass of this very short fiction, re-arranged his conception of "normality".

In this chapter we have been concerned to demonstrate that techniques of reader-response criticism can be applied particularly well to explicate the closely structured, densely patterned entity that is the typical contemporary short story, because this brief fictional form is today frequently specifically structured to elicit a high quality of response in order to transcend the limitations of brevity. A critical methodology which recognises and focusses on the existence and ramifications of response in the reader as a vital intra- and extra-textual component of the criticism naturally has the potential for a symbiotic relationship with a genre specifically aimed at generating such a response.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>R.Adams, "The Writer and Reader: A New Relationship" in D.Daiches and A. Thorlby, eds., Literature and Western Civilisation: The Modern World II; Realities (London: Aldus Books Ltd., 1972), p.494. In this essay Adams traces an increasing awareness of, and interest in, the reader's response from roots in the eighteenth-century interest in the sublime.

<sup>2</sup>D. Lessing, "Two Potters" (1957), To Room Nineteen: Collected Stories, Volume I (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1978), pp.280-292. All further references will be in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup>D. Barthelme, "Cortés and Montezuma" (1979), Sixty Stories (New York: E.P.Dutton Inc., 1982), pp.328-336). All further references will be in parentheses in the text.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Lohafer, Coming to Terms with the Short Story (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), pp. 40-50.

<sup>5</sup>I do not wish to claim that the reader notices all of these technical considerations during the reading of the story; merely that they are effective as described whether or not the reader is aware of the technical machinations that underlie the effects, or affects.

<sup>6</sup>This distinction would not hold for those theorists who view life as one great intertext, but it is germane for our purposes.

<sup>7</sup>U. Eco, The Role of the Reader (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1979), p.23.

<sup>8</sup>Rohrberger and Burns in "Short Fiction and the Numinous Realm: Another Attempt at Definition" in Modern Fiction Studies, 28,1 (Spring 1982), pp.5-12.

<sup>9</sup>Bernal Dias del Castillo, The Bernal Dias Chronicles: The True Story of the Conquest of Mexico, trans. and ed. by Albert Idell (first edition) (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956). Barthelme's oblique, tongue-in-cheek reference on p.332 to his own Freudian novel The Dead Father can hardly be counted as major.

<sup>10</sup>Adams, p.506.



<sup>11</sup>Eco, p.76.

<sup>12</sup>Eco, p.76.

<sup>13</sup>Since we have only identified one of, conceivably, several codes that could be generated by this story, this one code tends to achieve an unwarranted prominence. The associations we have identified are only one set of several which are operative, and some of the others, the code of humour, for instance, would, and does undoubtedly, dilute the overly serious cast that consideration of only this one code imparts to the story.

<sup>14</sup>This is why humorous novels are usually episodic in structure, because the focus has to be frequently changed if the humour is to remain fresh.

## Conclusion

The author today proclaims his absolute need of the reader's cooperation, an active, conscious, creative assistance. What he asks of him is no longer to receive ready-made a world completed, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work -- and the word -- and thus to learn to invent his own life.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Time and Destiny"

The methodological perspective of this study has been the phenomenological one which claims that what is required to have any knowledge of the phenomenon under consideration -- short fiction as a genre, in this case -- the observer must examine it in as much detail as possible in as "objective" a manner as possible. Superimposed upon this tenet has been the structural and semiotic insistence that what can be observed is not the static object, but the relationship between perceived items, and that such relationships can only be perceiver-determined.<sup>1</sup> In the case of literature, the perceiver is the reader. It is for this reason that this study has been carried out from the perspective of the reader's response.

Reader response is, however, a feature in all literature,

since it is safe to assume that all writers expect to generate some response in their readers, but in the case of short fiction, I wish to argue, there is a particular reason to pay added attention to the matter of the reader's response. Whether one believes that the topic, in some mysterious way, determines its own form, or that the writer chooses to write on a particular subject in a short form, the fact remains that despite its advantages, brevity also has some disadvantages, such as its limited capacity for accommodating literary devices that impart their meaning by accretion over time and space. In order to transcend such limitations, the writer of the short story must pay particular attention to textual strategies designed to circumvent the problem. Such devices usually compensate for limited length by increased density and complexity of patterning, and it is for this reason that the short story has traditionally been defined in terms of density and complexity. What I have argued, however, is that it is not the density that is primary, but that this characteristic is merely the result of a prior, and fundamental, aspect of the form, its brevity, which necessitates a commitment to generation of textual strategies designed to elicit an active and very high quality of reader response. Unless it can elicit such a response, a story cannot succeed artistically, no matter how dense, patterned, poetical, or complex it may be. It is because of this contention that I have chosen to define the short story as a literary entity whose primary characteristic is its commitment to generating just such an active, high-quality response in the reader.

Such a definition, however, is really a "non-definition" in that it allows the critic to describe the form in open-ended, non-delimiting ways. Any and all textual strategies can be interpreted in terms of how they influence the reader's response, rather than how they do, or do not, fit into a predetermined format that circumscribes the composition of the literary form known as "the short story".

As we have seen, the claim that short fictional forms are primarily reader-response oriented can be substantiated when the techniques identified by theorists of reader response are applied to the analysis of particular short stories. It would be difficult, of course, to find a theory that could not support itself with examples, but I think that this exercise of practical criticism does substantiate my claim that the symbiotic relationship that exists between reader-response theory and short fiction rests upon the short story's commitment to exciting a high quality of response in the reader, and that furthermore, this perspective allows us to identify the patterns and interrelationships which underlie the surface structure of the story. In other words, if the critic is looking for the elements that influence the production of a particular response rather than the elements of a particular pattern of imagery, he may well identify relationships that the latter procedure would either not allow him to see, or not encourage him to see as significant. The reader-response perspective preserves the conception of the short story as a dynamic entity necessarily

involved in a dialectical relationship with the reader to a greater extent than is necessary for the novel, the poem, or the play.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>As we have seen, especially in the case of Eco, the critics considered in this study do not ignore the influence of the author on the generation of meaning in the reader's mind, but they prefer to concentrate, for the purposes of theory, on the concrete evidence of the text. The term "textual strategy", however, infers the existence of a strategist, whose intentions can be inferred from the strategies that he chooses to employ. Since inference is a less certain mode of understanding, however, the reader, especially if he is a theorist, is on safer ground when dealing with the concrete entity that he can, in fact, perceive and describe -- the text.

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