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THE SHORT-SHORT STORY – BREVITY IN A STATE OF POTENTIAL

The so-called general (average) reading public usually associates novels with dull and time-consuming school readings, or at their best, with quickly "swollen" romances and crime fiction. Also, an average representative of the reading public believes that writing a novel requires from an author dead seriousness and an ability to create long and complicated sentences saturated with sophisticated and thus not easily comprehensible vocabulary. To a great extent, readers' respect but not necessarily their warm feelings towards the novel are connected with its length. The assumptions that "length is synonymous with profundity" and "most literature must be large"¹ have been handed from generation to generation in the same manner as, for instance, the tradition of social divisions.

As a matter of fact, class systems established by societies have always had a strong influence upon the development of some hierarchy in literature. The novel was rather promoted by the upper classes, and consequently began to be considered as upper class in the "society of literary genres"². According to Suzanne Ferguson, class strata in literature undergo similar changes to those taking place in societies of people – "classes reorganize themselves, accept new members, and cast old members into the dustbin"³. Within one of such numerous reorganizations among literary genres, the short story had to overcome a lot of obstacles on its way to success, and first of all, to social approval and sincere interest. A great many of those obstacles

¹ Charles Baxter, *Introduction*, in: *Sudden Fiction International*, eds. Robert Shapard, and James Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 19.

² Suzanne Ferguson, *The Rise of the Short Story in the Hierarchy of Genres*, in: *Short Story Theory At a Crossroads*, eds. Suzanne Lohafer, and Jo Ellyn Clarcy (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 176.

³ *Ibidem*.

could definitely be ascribed to the short story's length, or "magnitude". "[L]ike the lyric poem, it tended] to be regarded as less serious and important than a longer work. A small work of art obviously [could not] reflect as much glory on its patron as a large and imposing one"⁴ as for example the novel. Suzanne Ferguson in her essay *The Rise of the Short Story in the Hierarchy of Genres* pays attention to another factor which used to in the past and still does now effect negatively the prestige of the short story. It is the short story's economics which are more complex than those of the novel's. "Like short poems, short stories must be printed with something else to make their circulation profitable. What they come with – other stories or other kind of printed material – may distract readers from perceiving them as discrete works of art"⁵.

In the United States that marketing rule concerning short stories was discovered shortly after the end of the American War of Independence. At that time, due to the lack of copyright control, the American book-market was swarming with easily available and cheap works (mainly novels) of English writers. As a result, local authors could not get their writings published quickly and in the form of individual volumes. Therefore, "the American periodical magazine form, the perfect vehicle for short fiction, arose in part to provide a means for American writers to publish their work"⁶.

At the end of the nineteenth century, W. D. Howells in his collection of essays *Criticism and Fiction* acknowledges the popularity of the short story in the United States, and claims that the development of the form results from the success of American magazines. Howell's statement that "[i]t might be argued from the national hurry and impatience that [the short story] was a literary form peculiarly adapted to the American temperament"⁷ shows that the form's somehow economically forced alliance with the press turned out extremely fruitful. The author's above quoted opinion also emphasizes another very significant factor which has always been present in the process of the short story's rise in the hierarchy of genres. *The national hurry and impatience appears* to play a powerful and at the same time universal role as it can be interpreted both in terms of the result as well as of the reason.

In America, the beginnings of the press were, as in Europe, connected with the development of industry, but perhaps more than anywhere else, with politics (elections, the War of Independence), propaganda and competition. In the newly-proclaimed country competition was marked with hurry and impatience to keep up with other nations in the sphere of politics, economy and the arts. The young nation

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 178.

⁶ W. D. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, in: Charles E. May, *The Short Story – The Reality of Artifice*, (New York: Fine Publishers, 1995), p. 111.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 11.

hurried to win new, still wild, tracts of land, to establish new states, build cities, and generally more and more time and human resources had to be devoted to work, not to leisure. Entertainment was gradually restricted to Sunday and Saturday night. During the week working/middle classes could not absorb large pieces of it at a time, that's why leisure activities such as reading, had to be somehow apportioned. Fun and serious bits of information and entertainment were provided by the growing numbers of newspapers and magazines, easily available and thus adapted to the needs of those having no business time to lose. The short story form turned out, thanks to its brevity, a fine "portion" of text that was likely to be read as a whole. There was the "factor of hurry and impatience" functioning as, in the first place, a consequence of a fast developing economy and then as the reason that led to forming "the American temperament" which, in turn, made that economy develop even faster. In the course of time, however, it's been harder and harder to specify whether it is economy/technology or the human factor – readers' temperament, personality and needs that decide about the "social" position of the short story and other genres in literature. Those two elements seem to gradually be becoming a more and more compact and cyclic combination.

What has come out of such a combination during the last twenty years and especially in economically advanced societies is that "the trend [...] in all things is toward the snack – eat less and eat more often"⁸. On the part of the short story a response to the "times that are a'changmg" was and still is shrinking. Analyzing pieces of short fiction created in the second half of the twentieth century and those written one hundred years ago, a novelist and poet, Alan Broughton came to the conclusion that the "paragraph in our times has shrunk to an average three or four short sentences"⁹ a whole short story takes only from one to four or five pages. The shrinking process, or the tendency towards the snack is explained as a phenomenon having its roots in inability to concentrate on anything for longer periods of time – or in other words - what is blamed are fractured attention spans. Publishers promoting those "shrunk" or very short stories realize that this kind of fiction is produced by and directed to "channel hoppers [who] read a few sentences in a story, get a cup of coffee, read a few more, pick up the latest issue of USA Today, read a paragraph further down the page, call someone on their cellular phones"¹⁰, or to those who just want to read something while on a bus or during a lunch break.

Some literary critics and editors see differences between very short pieces of fiction, and try to accordingly group them into categories. For instance, James Thomas and Tom Hazuka, introduced two terms which differentiate very short stories on the basis of the word limit. The term "sudden fiction" refers to stories

⁸ Alan T. Broughton, *How Short is Short?*, in: *The Writer*, vol. 106, no. 3 (March 1993), p. 15.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

consisting of approximately 1750 words while the term "flash fiction" describes texts of about only 750 words. The labels "twister" and "snappers" suit the stories with a surprise ending. The names "quick fiction", "micro fiction", "postcard fiction" and "short-shorts" stress the stories' size/shortness. The expression "tiny kingdoms" suggests the richness of experience expressed within so small space.

Yet, very short pieces of fiction, particularly those which can be read without even turning a page ("flash fiction", "flashes") are viewed rather as dangerous "signs of cultural decadence" and 'bonbons for lazy readers'¹¹ brought up on television and comic strips. Short-shorts, in their opponent' opinion, discourage readers from making intellectual effort and consequently prevent them from widening their already shrunk attention spans.

In the introduction to an anthology of very short stories *Sudden Fiction International*, Charles Baxter claims that "talking about the short attention span is a form of blaming-the-reader"¹², and provides examples of such respected literary genres as sonnets and haikus whose authors and admirers are not criticized for duration of their attention. Since what really counts in the processes of reading and writing very short fiction is not the length of one's attention but its quality. Although it may sound paradoxical in the case of extremely short texts, their readers (serious ones) spend more time reading them than for example novels. Surprisingly slow reading and comprehension of short short stories comes from the fact that authors are much more careful and artful about each sentence, phrase and word and at the same time build a clear, logical structure consisting of a beginning, middle and end - just like in traditional longer stories. Writers who practice short-shorts believe that "[b]revity in a story is an art of including appropriate silence" and creating some "intelligent intensity"¹³. Therefore, the modern short story is claimed to require a "great deal of personal investment (sophisticated training)"¹⁴ on the part of the reader to truly understand, appreciate and enjoy very short pieces of literature. The effort very often necessary to "decode" meanings hidden in individual words discourages those readers who still associate brevity with instantaneous and above all, easy entertainment, and just put aside texts the reading of which takes more time than they expected. To make matters worse, periodicals and newspapers which in the past became so helpful a medium in promoting the short story – a commercially pioneering literary form – nowadays frequently show reserve and distrust towards the

¹¹ Baxter, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁵ James Thomas, *Introduction*, in: *Flash Fiction, Very Short Stories*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. 13.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Broughton, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁴ William O'Rourke, *Morphological Metaphors for the Short Story: Matters of Production, Reproduction, and Consumption*, in: *Short Story Theory At a Crossroads*, eds. Suzanne Lohafer, and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 203.

short-shorts. According to James Thomas, an editor, in the seventies – when the spirit of literary experimentation evoked a decade earlier still prevailed – "it was most unusual to come across a story under five pages in the respected magazines and literary journals of the country [...] since editors were declining to publish very short fictions, considering them 'slight', if not whimsical"¹⁵.

The similar difficulties connected with promotion and appreciation were experienced by the New Journalism in the sixties. Like very short fiction, it fought to be treated not as a sub-category or a minor literary form. New journalistic works as well as unusually short stories were first rejected by generally nationwide known periodicals. Short-shorts now have a reputation of a controversial novelty formerly ascribed to texts written in the manner of the New Journalism. Both forms can be viewed as perfect and to some point spontaneous responses to the realities of the time in which they emerged. The New Journalism's rise was claimed a new and more effective means to convey the "apocalyptic" mood of the deep and unexpected political and cultural phenomena taking place in America (e. g. the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the drug culture, assassinations of political and social leaders). Very short stories are a product of an imagination formed not only by politics, social changes, development of technology, and natural calamities but perhaps, primarily, by the increasing tempo in which they are all happening. Short-shorts/ashes/quick and sudden fiction is also perceived as a symptom of a "feeling of information sickness, data-nausea, of being surrounded by information at every moment"¹⁶.

The major advocate of the new journalistic trend, Tom Wolfe, resembles, in his active and uncompromising attitude, E. A. Poe who as a "publicist and practitioner of a new form [the short story]" struggled "to stake out unclaimed theoretical territory for it". Both Poe and Wolfe "sought justifications of their respective forms in order to make them fashionable and profitable"¹⁷. So far, supporters and adversaries of very short stories have succeeded in making them fashionable and controversial - the form is analyzed in terms of its origin, the most suitable terminology, human perception and attention span as well as its present and future status in literature. Besides, the fact that such conveniently brief texts are mostly "produced and consumed by those whose time is valued"¹⁸ does not account for their popularity with a majority of readers. As to being profitable, the form is definitely bringing money to small (also academic) presses and journals which address their publications to that narrower but culturally influential and opinion-forming section of the reading public.

¹⁵ James Thomas, *Introduction*, in: *Flash Fiction, Very Short Stories*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. 13.

¹⁶ Baxter, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁷ O'Rourke, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 203.

At the end of the 1990s some of those engaged in defending and promoting very short stories (for example James Thomas, Robert Shapard and Tom Hazuka) optimistically and hopefully observe that short-shorts "appear not only in anthologies but more and more regularly in larger numbers of larger-circulation magazines"¹⁹ in the United States. Others believe that the chance for very short fiction to spread and prosper will be gradually and constantly increasing "as the demands on pages once allocated for fiction grow, a writer's ability to use this demanding but space-saving story form can be a marketing advantage"²⁰.

Actually, in recent years the exceptional shortness of the short-short story has made it somehow less dependent upon the requirements imposed by periodicals and publishers. Very brief stories, unlike multi-page texts, are perfectly suitable to be read on a computer screen. Moreover, their authors, by using the Internet, can radically reduce the period of time they usually have to await for their works to be made available to the public.

The development of the short-short story form does not, by any means, reflect an exclusively American experience but rather the world's rush towards the coming century. The anthology *Sudden Fiction International* is a piece of evidence that very short fiction is a cross-cultural, universal phenomenon, and that's why it should be treated more seriously by literary critics, publishers, school syllabuses, and readers. Next to the texts written in the United States (by e.g. Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, Stuart Dybek, Richard Brautigan) one can find in the anthology stories from South America (Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala), Asia (China, Japan), Africa, Australia, and various regions of Europe - from Wales through the former Soviet Union to Cyprus. Poland is represented by Sławomir Mrożek's not so recent story *Słoń* (*The Elephant*). Yet, the global tendency towards brevity has been confirmed by the latest (1997) work of Czesław Miłosz. The author, undoubtedly effected by the "fragmentary and cinematic nature of our modern culture"²¹ made his *Piesek przydrożny* (*The Roadside Dog*) a collection and combination of short forms. He confessed that he enjoyed, like most readers nowadays, opening a book and reading just one page. *The Roadside Dog* appears, then, another literary response to the changes taking place in the perception of man shaped by the fast-moving pace of life, more technologically advanced production, intensified consumption and ruthless competition which has also reached Central and Eastern Europe. The very title of Miłosz's stories may become the next accurate defining term, placed alongside "micro fiction", "blasters", "short-shorts" etc., referring to the new literary genre of very short fiction.

¹⁹ Robert Shapard, James Thomas, *A Note From the Editors*, in: *Sudden Fiction (Continued)*, eds. Robert Shapard, and James Thomas (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 12.

²⁰ Marian Bates, *Point of View In the Short-Short Story*, in: *The Writer*, vol. 106, no. 9 (September 1993), p. 19.

²¹ Lisa Meyers, *Tiny Kingdoms*, in: *The Los Angeles Times*, Books (September 1996).

The perspectives of that literary form, and the question whether it is a genre at all are on the agendas of many critics, authors, publishers, theoreticians and practitioners of the short story – both advocates as well as opponents of its shorter and younger version. Some suspect that this "form is not about to be summarized by any one person's ideas about it [...], as a form [it is] open, and exists in a state of potential"²². The short-short may, however, like the short story proper "by persistently trying to move into the prestige circus of the genres, by marrying characteristics of several sub-genres [of the short story] with characteristics of drama, poetry, and its own accommodating prose c[o]me into its own "social" success"²³.

²² Baxter, op. cit., p. 25.

²³ Ferguson, op. cit., p. 192.²² Baxter, op. cit., p. 25.