2
Growth of a genre

From ancient to modern

Observing where something has come from is not the same as defining what it has become. Nevertheless any generic definitions which aim to be precise and complete ought not to be formulated without a long historical perspective in mind. There is room in the present survey for only cursory reference to some early modes of short fiction, but that should be enough to indicate how variable this category is.

If asked to cite an antique example of a brief prose narrative many people would call to mind one of the memorable Old Testament stories, such as those concerning Joseph (Genesis xxxvii – xlvi), Samson (Judges xii – xvi) and Absalom (II Samuel xiii – xviii). These do have stylistic economy, psychological interest and so forth. Yet they are not offered as fictions; they purport to be historically veracious and to justify the ways of God to men. The same is even true of certain well-known passages of narrative in some of the Bible's apocryphal books: to us, the stories of Susannah and the elders or Bel and the Dragon, in which Daniel plays the role of a clever detective, are just that – stories; but they were not conceived as literary inventions, not shaped as contributions to the craft of fiction. So it is also with the New Testament parables, epitomic narratives which, though invented, are strictly governed by an explicit didactic purpose. We have to look beyond the Hebrew scriptures to ancient Egypt for the earliest extant stories, evidently told for their intrinsic value as entertainment. It is still possible to read with pleasure tales such as the Story of Sinuhe, or The Shipwrecked Sailor, which Egyptians wrote down early in the second millennium B.C.

Much the same as these in scope are numerous brief tales which appear in the classical and post-classical literature of Greece and Rome, often interpolated into larger works like the proto-novels of Petronius (the *Satyricon*, first century A.D.) and Apuleius *(Metamorphoses* or *The Golden*

Ass, second century A.D.). (Needless to say, various other sorts of short fiction are to be found in Greek and Latin narrative writings, but these are usually in verse, as for instance in the case of the fables collected by Phaedrus and by Babrius in the first century A.D.; earlier Aesopic gatherings in prose, which do not survive, appear to have been designed for the rhetorical repertoire – rather like some modern Dictionary of Anecdotes for Public Speakers – and not as *belles lettres* in their own right.) Though placed within a larger context, prose tales of the sort included in the *Satyricon* have intrinsic artistic value. Here is a list of what typically constitutes one of these inset narratives:

> It is an imaginary story of limited length, intending to entertain, and describing an event in which the interest arises from the change in the fortunes of the leading characters or from behaviour characteristic of them; an event concerned with real-life people in a real-life setting.
>
> (Sophie Trenkner, *The Greek Novella in the Classical Period*, p. xiii)

When a narrative with those features had also an earthy, pungent quality it was known as 'Milesian', after one of the authors of them, Aristides of Miletus *(c.* 100 B.C.); collections of Milesian tales were made in Greece during the first two centuries B.C. and soon became popular in Latin translations also. Although these are not extant *in toto*, individual tales of the Milesian sort do survive in other works. An example is the neatly turned story of the Widow of Ephesus, related by Petronius, which goes as follows. A married woman of Ephesus, famous for her virtue, was so distraught when her husband died that she began a watch in his sepulchre, weeping inconsolably over the body. Several days and nights passed thus, during which this shining instance of fidelity became the talk of the town. Even the devoted maid who remained with the widow was unable to get her to eat, or to terminate this tearful vigil. Then it happened that some thieves were crucified nearby, a soldier being left on guard beside their crosses to prevent anyone from removing the bodies for burial. Hearing sounds of lamentation and seeing a light among the tombs, the soldier investigated. When he found there a woman of great beauty, sunk in grief, he fetched his supper and tried by various arguments to urge her to break her fast and desist from her profitless mourning. She paid no attention, but her maid could not resist the proffered food and wine. Eventually, since the maid had yielded first, the widow allowed herself to be persuaded too. Further capitulation followed

when the widow grew aware of the soldier's handsome appearance and fine manners. Undisturbed by the corpse, they took their pleasure together in the tomb. Meanwhile, relatives of one of the crucified took his body away; and when the soldier discovered this he rushed back to the tomb and was about to kill himself – whereupon the virtuous widow stayed his hand: declaring she would rather see a dead man hung up than a living one struck down, she ordered that her late husband be affixed to the vacant cross. This was soon done, and all the living were happy ever after.

Not only has this story frequently been retold (by, among others, John of Salisbury in the twelfth century, La Fontaine in the seventeenth, Voltaire in the eighteenth and Christopher Fry in the twentieth), but it has a certain flavour, a piquancy of tone and plot, that we find in such latter-day writers as Maupassant. It smacks of the modern short story.

While some of this Hellenistic and Roman material trickled through eventually into the reservoir of traditional story-telling from which authors have continued to draw, more important as source and stimulus over many centuries was a rich mass of oriental fiction. From medieval times onwards, several large, mobile tale-clusters infiltrated from Eastern cultures into European literature by various routes. There will be more to say in a later chapter about the form of these loose collections; for the present it is enough to describe them in broad outline. The most indefatigably migratory is the *Panchatantra*. In its original Sanskrit form it dates back at least to the early sixth century A.D.; in a variety of translations it spread through Europe in the Middle Ages; and Thomas North rendered it into English in 1570 – 'from an Italian version of a Latin version of a Hebrew version of an Arabic version of a (lost) Pahlavi [middle Iranian] version of some (lost) Sanskrit version of the original Panchatantra' (according to Franklin Edgerton, *The Panchatantra*, London, 1965, p.13). Similar to it in general shape, provenance and stamina, and even sharing with it a few individual tales, is a miscellany based on the story of Seven Sages whose narrative powers prevent a wrongly condemned prince from being executed. In Eastern versions it is a single philosopher who contrives the stay of execution, not a group of seven wise men, and his name gives those versions their usual title, *The Book of Sindibad*. Belonging to that same family of popular books is *The Book of the Wiles of Women*, a form of *Sindibad* which reached Europe in the thirteenth century and enjoyed a widespread vogue by affecting a moral purpose. (In contrast, the *Thousand and One Nights* had no need to disguise

its fantasies as *exempla* for readers in the West, for although it began to take shape in Persia by the tenth century and was current in Egypt by the twelfth, it did not find a European translator until the eighteenth; its array of *contes arabes*, as the subtitle designated them, could then be enjoyed frankly for their exotic and erotic appeal.)

Apart from dull devotional and instructive pieces, it was not common in the medieval period for short narratives to be written in prose. Heroic episodes such as the *Battle of Maldon* are in verse; the *fabliaux*, low-life comic tales of French origin such as the one told by Chaucer's Miller, are in verse; the Breton *lais*, popularized by the Norman writer Marie de France and represented in English by works like the fourteenth-century *Sir Launfal*, are in verse. When prose is the medium, the usual result is tedium: heavy homiletic considerations dominate, regardless of artistry. There are partial exceptions in Old Norse literature. The *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, written in Iceland in the early thirteenth century, contains some fine myths and legends, succinctly told. But these are part of a treatise on the art of skaldic (courtly) verse of the Viking era. *Edda* means something like 'poetics'; Snorri's primary purpose is to compile a handbook on matters of metrics, diction and style, and the narratives for which we now chiefly prize it he includes merely by way of an introductory survey of ancient Scandinavian mythology and heroic stories. The prose parts subserve the supposedly higher art of poetry. A few of the Icelandic sagas are fairly brief, but though terse in expression they are more like novels than short stories in scope, usually chronicling an extensive series of events. This is true, for instance, of *Hrafnkels saga*, one of the shortest, which runs to about 9,000 words. Nearer to the short story are the *paettir*, episodes set into longer works like *Morkinskinna*, a compendious history of Norwegian kings.

In southern Europe, the work which established prose as an attractive option for the literary artist was Boccaccio's *Decameron* (finished in the 1350s). Erich Auerbach, in chapter 9 of his masterly critical study *Mimesis* (1946; English translation by Willard R. Trask, 1953), shows through detailed stylistic analysis how Boccaccio enriches the vernacular by subtle rhetorical treatment, without losing the tone and tempo of oral narration, to produce a language more resourceful than anything used by his medieval predecessors. At the same time Boccaccio freed fiction from the dead hand of didacticism by blending courtly romance elements with low *fabliau* material and by playfully modifying certain pious medieval forms, such as

the saint's legend, parodied in I,1 and III,10, and the *exemplum*, drawn on in IV,2. This latter tale will serve to illustrate the way in which Boccaccio's stylistic achievement involves structural refinement and a tone of genial wit. Pampinea, who narrates the story of IV,2, introduces it with reference to the proverbial truism that a wolf can soon have its way by donning sheep's clothing. The ensuing narrative, says Pampinea, will exemplify this (morally dubious) proposition. But in fact it does not do so, ultimately; though initially successful, the rogue is brought low in the final outcome. Yet the tone in which this outcome is related is far from being that of a sober sermonic *exemplum*. The 'justice' served out to Friar Alberto is less moral than poetic. This comes about through a second twist to the process whereby he has turned someone's folly to his own account. Alberto, a lecherous fellow masquerading as a Friar, discovers through his role as confessor that a certain scatter-brained young woman, Lisetta, has a ludicrously conceited estimation of her charms: her beauty, she declares, 'would be deemed remarkable even in Heaven itself. Alberto makes a pretence of rebuking her sternly for her vanity, but later visits her with the story that he has been severely chastized for his insolence by none other than the Angel Gabriel, who instructed him to seek forgiveness at once from Lisetta; her beauty is indeed heavenly, Gabriel has told him, and moreover Gabriel admires her so much that he wants to spend a night with her – in human form, for convenience. Lisetta is enraptured, and agrees to Alberto's request that she should pray to Gabriel to use Alberto's body for the purpose, since while the Friar's body is angelically occupied his soul will be temporarily in Heaven. All goes according to plan: Lisetta's husband being abroad, Alberto/Gabriel is able to pay regular nocturnal visits to her bedroom, where he 'flies without wings'. But Lisetta cannot resist boasting to an acquaintance that she has celestial connections of an intimate sort, and before long all Venice knows of her gullibility. Her brother-in-laws, hearing the news, resolve to track down this angel and 'see whether he can fly'. When they hammer at her door, Alberto jumps from the bed, takes 'a flying leap' through the window into the canal, swims to the other side, and begs an honest-looking man there to shelter him, spinning a yarn to explain his nude condition. The man agrees, in return for some money which Alberto arranges to have paid to him, and hides the Friar in his house. After hearing from the town gossips how Lisetta's in-laws had entered her house to find that 'Gabriel had flown, leaving his wings behind him', the man guesses whom he is harbouring. He

tells Alberto that, since the in-laws are searching the city for him, his only chance of escaping undetected is by disguising himself and joining a fancy-dress carnival due to take place that very day in St Mark's Square, then slipping away from the crowd afterwards. Alberto allows himself to be dressed as a masked savage, smeared with honey and feathers, and sets out with the honest fellow – who, however, has secretly sent word ahead that the Angel Gabriel will soon be on display in St Mark's Square. And there the wretched Alberto is unmasked and subjected to public ridicule and abuse. What gives this story shape is not any crudely moralistic point but the comic play on metaphorically linked transformations. Having exploited the credulous literalism of Lisetta's flights of vain fancy in order to make his amorous flights, Alberto finds his own imposture literalized in the ironic denouement of the story: he must fly from his pursuers, seeming to elude them only to acquire the feathers not of an angelic creature but of a sub-human one.

Boccaccio's influence on Renaissance narrative was as various as it was palpable. In France, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron (*1558) borrowed the structural formula by which Boccaccio linked and framed his tales. In England, though no translation of *The Decameron* in its entirety appeared until 1620, there were three collections of *novelle*, largely derived from the Italian and French models, in 1566–76: William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, Geoffrey Fenton's *Certain Tragical Discourses*, and George Pettie's *A Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure*. In Spain, Cervantes' *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613) combined Boccaccio's anecdotal liveliness and interest in psychological motivation with a new dimension of moral seriousness. While not 'exemplary' in any narrow didactic sense, the Cervantine *novela* evinces a keen interest in problems of behaviour. In 'The Jealous Extramaduran', for instance, the husband's jealousy is not (as it is typically in *fabliaux)* an excuse for his wife's infidelity, but the story's epicentre, a symptom of insecurity more basic than sex.

For about two centuries after Cervantes there were few developments in European fiction worth noting here. Individual writers like Diderot did keep alive the narrative possibilities which Boccaccio, Cervantes and others had broached so vigorously. But the eighteenth century generally was not notable for any sustained or adventurous exploration of the 'new' form, the *novella* or short story. Some writers toyed with the oriental tale; it was used occasionally, for example, by Addison and Steele as a kind of decorative appendage to essays in *The Spectator*, and by Voltaire for light satire in

Zadig. The 'character', a fictional portrait-essay sketching a representative personality-type in the manner of Theophrastus and La Bruyere, also enjoyed some currency in the periodicals, but gave no scope for either psychological complexity or plot interest. After the Renaissance *novella*, the next upsurge of short fiction came as part of the swelling tide of Romanticism. Germany, France, Russia and America saw the most energetic initiatives.

In Germany the *Novelle* quickly became during the early nineteenth century a highly developed literary form, taken up by numerous talented authors and subjected to serious theorizing. Its complex evolution has been thoroughly charted by Johannes Klein in *Geschichte der Deutschen Novelle*, by E.K. Bennett and H.M. Waidson in *A History of the German Novelle*, and by others. A point worth emphasis, however, is that the emerging *Novelle* was not the only kind of short prose fiction to attract German writers of the Romantic period. This was, after all, a time of interest in German folk-lore, as two famous collections testify: *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1805–8), consisting of songs gathered by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, and the *Kinder- und Hausmarchen* (Childhood and Household Tales) assembled by the brothers Grimm (1812–23). The same interfusion of natural and supernatural, mundane and marvellous, which occurs in this folk material was conjured up also in numerous *Kunstmärchen* ('Art' Tales) composed by sophisticated writers like Tieck, Brentano and Hoffmann. The *Novelle*, it is often said, presents events as being logically and causally interconnected; very often the *Kunstmarchen*, on the other hand, indicates no rationally explicable motivation for the actions and situations it depicts. Works such as Tieck's 'Der blonde Eckbert' (Blond Eckbert, 1797) or Hoffmann's 'Der goldne Topf' (The Golden Pot, 1814) evoke a sense of the mysterious within the field of everyday reality. Strange encounters and metamorphoses may happen – or seem to happen: nothing is objectively verifiable – anywhere, at any time, in a Dresden cafe as well as down some country byway. A full-length study of the *Kunstmarchen* available to English readers is Marianne Thalmann's *The Romantic Fairy Tale: Seeds of Surrealism*, translated by Mary B. Corcoran. Something of the impulse behind the *Märchen* entered the *Novelle*, and the two forms are less clearly distinguishable than theorists sometimes suggest. Even the austere *Novellen* of Heinrich von Kleist, for instance, implicitly subvert the notion that events always follow a rational pattern. Not until mid-century, with the work of Stifter, Keller, Storm and others, did German narrative prose turn into more soberly realistic channels.

In France the art of the short story was firmly established in 1829–31 with the magazine publication of a dozen *contes* by Merimee, Balzac and Gautier, though the substantial developments came much later: the pastoral freshness of Daudet's *Lettres de Mon Moulin* (1869), the cool, meticulous objectivity of Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (1877), and the more styptic naturalism of Maupassant's prolific output in the 1880s. Not the least important tendency of those latter writers was their predilection for rural subjects and simple folk. Mostly it could be left to the novel to delineate those large-scale social patterns which were so amply extended in urban life; the short story seemed especially suitable for the portrayal of regional life, or of individuals who, though situated in a city, lived there as aliens.

Something similar emerged also in Russia, where, after Pushkin had initiated imaginative work in short prose fiction, Gogol and Turgenev gave it a particular direction. Pushkin's *Tales of Bjelkin* (1830) brought bareness and concision into Russian literature; in pieces like 'The Shot', all padding is removed and an interest in narrative perspective becomes central. But Pushkin's fictive world is still an aristocratic one, whereas what makes Gogol notable is not just that he was intent, even more than Pushkin, on stripping narrative prose of fuzzy embellishment, but also that he wrote of ordinary people, apparent nonentities, with an attentiveness capable of revealing deep currents of emotion beneath petty surfaces. The details of peasant life in the Ukraine or of the pathetic tribulations of a copying clerk in Petersburg could be, he showed, as compelling as any intrigues of the salon or gaming table. 'He took the short story some way back to the folk-tale', remarks H.E. Bates in *The Modern Short Story*, 'and in doing so bound it to earth.' Gogol's stories appeared in the decade up to 1842, when the most influential of them, 'The Overcoat', was published. Its seminal importance for later writers was acknowledged by Turgenev: 'We have all come out from under Gogol's "Overcoat".' Turgenev's own volume, *A Sportsman's Sketches* (1846), augments the efforts of Gogol, both in its way of compacting into a few casual phrases the essence of a person's experience and in its focusing on society's misfits and underdogs – in this case the Russian serfs.

Of nineteenth-century English-language writers it was not the British, preoccupied with the expansive novel, who turned to the short story, but the Americans. Even in America it took some time for this form to be clearly identified. Fred Lewis Pattee, in his historical survey *The Development of*

the American Short Story, points out that the term 'short story' itself, used generically to designate an independent literary form rather than just a story that lacks length, is as recent as the 1880s. Washington Irving, author of 'Rip Van Winkle' and 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow', called his writings 'sketches' or 'tales', and the latter term was preferred by Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. Indeed, 'tale' is apt for the kind of fiction these writers were mostly producing in the '30s and '40s, with its stylized characterization, detachment from normal social behaviour, and tendency towards allegory. While their work undoubtedly has a prominent place within the comprehensive history of the short story, it is distinguishable from what some critics regard as the short story proper, a more 'realistic' sort. In a recent article, 'From Tale to Short Story: The Emergence of a New Genre in the 1850s', Robert F. Marler traces the decay of the tale after mid-century by examining American magazine fiction in which 'the comparatively balanced effects of Irving's sentimentalism, Poe's sensationalism, and Hawthorne's moralism were … heavily emphasized, distorted, and unconsciously parodied'. These excesses led to a reaction during the 'fifties. Surveying critical commentary in periodicals of that decade, Marler detects 'dissatisfaction with the conventional tale' and the growth of 'opinion that was congenial to the development of the short story.' Although no explicit classification was made at the time, a separation of the two kinds of narrative was in process. This background, Marler argues cogently, is reflected in the increasing advocacy of realism, of depicting ordinary experience plausibly, of keeping 'vividly true to daguerrotype-like studies of life', as one magazine editor put it in 1858. (The excitement resulting from the invention of photography was still very strong then, and no doubt partly explains the increasing prestige of realism in art.) Stories began to emerge which aimed at an impression of actuality: regionalist vignettes, for example, and fiction of such psychological subtlety as Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener' (in contrast to the same author's romantic tales, like 'The Bell-Tower'), and humorous yarns. Folk humour was especially important in registering and reinforcing the shift in public taste away from distended tales towards realistic stories. Popular Southwestern humour gained access to literary magazines in the East at about that time, and even in its most extreme forms (so-called 'tall tales', where 'tale' denotes consciously ludicrous distortion) this was usually characterized by a kind of irony and authenticity which ran

counter to the emotive inflation of the decadent kind of tale. Marler makes this observation:

> The tall tale, having received the East's stamp of approval, was a force for realism because the colloquial teller (as opposed to the narrator in the frame) was often convincing as a personality and because many such narratives relinquished their humour for the serious treatment of human foibles.

One of the most successful writers of that period was Bret Harte, author of The Luck of Roaring Camp' and other local-colour stories of the Californian goldfields. Looking back later at the development of American fiction during his time, Harte remarked that the most important formative influence on it was humour:

> Crude at first, it received a literary polish in the press, but its dominant quality remained. It was concise and condensed, yet suggestive. It was delightfully extravagant, or a miracle of understatement …. It gave a new interest to slang …. It was the parent of the American short story.

(Quoted by H.E. Bates, *The Modern Short Story*, p.49)

In this context, 'humour' includes not only what is seen as amusing but also what is seen as wry, poignant, disillusioned. Constance Rourke's excellent book, *American Humor* (New York, 1933) traces this varied nineteenth-century comic tradition with particular reference to three central figures of American folk-lore: the shrewd itinerant Yankee pedlar, the audacious roving backwoods frontiersman, and the resilient displaced Negro slave. Why these character-types and the strand of native humour they represent found expression chiefly in the short story form is a question that Rourke does not consider; but part of the answer presumably lies in the fact that each of those three figures is a wanderer, and whereas the conventional nineteenth-century novel normally accommodates the processes of a dense, ordered society, the short story has been, in Frank O'Connor's words, 'by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent' *(The Lonely Voice*, p.21).

The Romantic impulse

O'Connor's observation is suggestive. Short stories do frequently focus on one or two individuals who are seen as separated from their fellow-men in

some way, at odds with social norms, beyond the pale. In this respect short stories can properly be called romantic, as O'Connor proposes, or even Romantic by virtue of their affinity with those works by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Nerval and others through which move wanderers, lonely dreamers, and outcast or scapegoat figures. Indeed, since the emergence of the short story as a fully fledged genre in Europe and America coincides, as already noted, with the burgeoning of that protean cultural phenomenon known as Romanticism, there would seem to be a broad basis for the common remark that the short story is in essence a Romantic form: *the* Romantic prose form. In its normally limited scope and subjective orientation it corresponds to the lyric poem as the novel does to the epic. That the brief, personally expressive lyric is the paramount kind of Romantic poem, in contrast to the predominantly discursive modes of Augustan verse, is a point that needs no emphasis; and its brevity was often regarded as its primary quality. Poe's essays go as far as to assert, repeatedly, that the 'degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length'; and by the same token, he argues, a short prose narrative which can be read at one sitting is *ipso facto* superior to any novel. That view is extreme, but there is more plausibility in the related point that the short story, like much characteristically Romantic poetry, tends to concentrate on some significant moment, some instant of perception. Just as Wordsworth records in *The Prelude* certain 'spots of time', and Keats celebrates in his Odes the intense sensation or insight that transcends time, so one could say that the short story typically centres on the inward meaning of a crucial event, on sudden momentous intuitions, 'epiphanies' in James Joyce's sense of that word; by virtue of its brevity and delicacy it can, for example, single out with special precision those occasions when an individual is most alert or most alone.

That the thrust of Romanticism was one of the main forces propelling the nineteenth-century short story into the salient position it came to occupy is undeniable, as is the fact that the genre has continued in the main to exhibit 'Romantic' attitudes of the kind just mentioned. A few reservations should be noted, however, because its development cannot be explained solely and sufficiently in a context of literary culture. Even a superficial comparison of English and American literature, for example, makes that very clear: English writers were affected quite as much as Americans by the Romantic impulse, yet their output of short fiction during the nineteenth century was virtually

negligible. Two broad explanations have been adduced to account for this, one in terms of social structures and one in terms of the magazine market. In the first place it is pointed out that, unlike the novel, which was urban, urbane and bourgeois in its origins and which was concerned chiefly with manners, marriage and money, the short story found its province more often than not among small groups of working men, especially in those many areas of the American continent which by the early nineteenth century had come to consist of regional settlements still lacking social cohesion. As for the market factor, it issued chiefly from the absence of international copyright regulations and the consequent proliferation in America of cheap reprints from overseas. Since British novels could be pirated so simply and profitably, American publishers were seldom keen to sponsor work by local novelists, a costly luxury. The short story, on the other hand, could find a ready public through the gift annuals and periodicals, which became increasingly popular after about 1830. Among those whose fiction appeared in these 'slicks' were such eminent writers as Poe and Hawthorne.

One further reservation needs to be attached to any description of the short story as an essentially Romantic form: while it may be true that in its nineteenth-century development the short story normally incorporated such Romantic features as the singling out of a significant moment of awareness, it does not follow that any such features are essential to the genre. We shall pursue this point in the final chapter.