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THE READING AND WRITING OF SHORT STORIES

by EUDORA WELTY

I

EXPERIENCE teaches us that when we are in the act of writing we are alone and on our own, in a kind of absolute state of Do Not Disturb. And experience tells us further that each story is a specific thing, never a general thing — never. The words in the story we are writing now might as well never have been used before. They all shine; they are never smudged. Stories are *new* things, stories make words new; that is one of their illusions and part of their beauty. And of course the great stories of the world are the ones that seem new to their readers on and on, always new because they keep their power of revealing something.

But although all stories in the throes of being written seem new and although good stories are new and persist, there will always be some characteristics and some functions about them as old as time, as human nature itself, to keep them more or less alike, at least of a family; and there may be other things, undiscovered yet, in the language, in technique, in the world's body of knowledge, to change them out of our present recognition. Critics, historians, and scholars deal with these affairs — and keep good track of them — while for us, the practitioners, the writing of stories seems to simmer down — between stories — into some generalities that are worth talking about.

Between stories — yes, that's when we can talk.

I think we write stories in the ultimate hope of communication, but so do we make jelly in that hope. Communication and hope of it are conditions of life itself. Let's take that for granted, and not get sidetracked by excitement. We hope somebody will taste our jelly and eat it with even more pleasure than it deserves and ask for another helping — no more can we hope for in writing a story. Always in the back of our heads and in our hearts are such hopes, and attendant fears that we may fail — we

do everything out of the energy of some form of love or desire to please. The writing of a story uses the *power* of this love or hope, of course, and not its simple, surface form such as comes out — rather nicely — in jelly-making.

During the writing of a story, all the energy we have is put to pressure and reaches a changed-over state — so as to act for the sole and concentrated purpose of making our work excellent and to the pattern of some preconceived idea we have of beauty. The diffusion of this energy will, in the long run, prevent our story from communicating, in the degree that it prevents it from being our own.

But the practical problems of the story at hand are, on the whole, minutiae. The little things that plague and absorb us in every story never let up. There, help is possible. And that they are little things explains, possibly, how it is that we can shed such problems so entirely once a story is done. Who remembers afterwards the nuisance of counting the children, or preparing the reader for the murder, or getting the moon in the right part of the sky? They aren't truly important problems, and patience is the answer — time and patience.

To get at general problems we have to go deeper — in fact, the deepest we can go — into the act of writing itself. The whole thing is subjective. All any of us can *know* about writing is what it seems like to us. It's not an imitative process.

Direct connection is all we have with short stories — reading and writing them. It is not ours to note influences, trace histories, and consider trends. We are in the thick of stories by being personally and directly concerned with them. It is from this close, unromantic, perhaps much less sure and much more passionate point of view, that we writers gaze at the art of the short story.

If we learn mostly little things from correction

—from critics—do we learn the big things by doing? I think it the only way, but not an infallible way. That is, there is nothing that will guarantee our writing a better story next time than the one we have just finished. Some first stories remain a writer's best work. We work by the story—by the piece. The next story will always be a different thing. There are no two days alike—time moves. There are no two stories alike—*our* time moves. We were in one story and now we are in another—two worlds—and there are many more, though the thought neither helps nor hinders us any in the one where we now struggle.

2

How do we write a story? Our own way. Beyond that, I think it is hard to assign a process to it.

The mind in writing a story is in the throes of imagination, and it is not in the calculations of analysis. There is a Great Divide in the workings of the mind, shedding its energy in two directions: it creates in imagination, and it tears down in analysis. The two ways of working have a great way of worrying the life out of each other. But why can't they both go their ways in peace?

Let's not, to begin with, deny the powers and achievements of good criticism. That would be smug, ignorant, and blind. Story criticism can seem blind itself, when it is ingrown and tedious; on the other hand, it can see things in large wholes and in subtle relationships we should be only stupid not to investigate. It can illuminate even though, in the face of all its achievements, its business is not: to tell *how*. There is the Great Divide.

I feel like saying as a friend, to beginning writers, Don't be unduly worried by the analyses of stories you may see in some textbooks or critical articles. They are brilliant, no doubt useful to their own ends, but should not be alarming, for in a practical sense they just do not bear in a practical way on writing. To use my own case, that being the only one I can rightly speak of, I have been baffled by analysis and criticism of some of my stories. When I see them analyzed—most usually, "reduced to elements"—sometimes I think, "This is none of me." Not that I am too proud to like being reduced, especially; but that I could not remember *starting* with those elements—with anything that I could so label. The fact that a story will reduce to elements, can be analyzed, does not necessarily mean it started with them—certainly not consciously. A story can start with a bird song.

Criticism, or more strictly, analysis, is an impossible way to learn how the story was written. Analysis is a one-way process, and is only good after the event. In the newsreel pictures when the dive is shown in reverse, a swimmer can come back out of the water; the splash is swallowed up, he rises in the air and is safe and dry back on the

diving board. But in truth you can't come by way of analysis back to the starting point of inspiration; that's against some law of the universe, it might almost seem. I myself lack a scientific upbringing; I hear the arrow of time exists, and I feel quite certain, by every instinct, so does the arrow of creation.

Readers of Sir Arthur Eddington—who may be enjoyed even by a reader ill-equipped in science if the reader loves good literature—will remember he explains the term "entropy" as *becoming*. Our physical world is ever in the act of becoming, and not its opposite. You can't undo a dive, you can't put Humpty Dumpty together again or restore unshot the arrow to the bow. Mr. Eddington does not bother with the writing of short stories and does not say, but you can't analyze a story back to its beginning and truly find thereby what the story started out to do, what then modified and determined it, and what eventually made it a superior story and not just a good story. A story is not the same thing when it ends that it was when it began. Something happens—the writing of it. It *becomes*. And as a story becomes, I believe we as readers understand by becoming too—by enjoying.

Let's look at some short stories as writers of stories ourselves and people who like them; let's see a little how they are disposed, watch them in their motions, and enjoy them.

Luckily, we shall have none of the problems of *not* enjoying them. Putting a story in its place—we shall escape that. Putting a story in its place when its place has become the important thing means absolutely not giving over to the story. It also means taking oneself with proper seriousness, keeping close watch not to make a fool of oneself, and watching limbs, lest one go out on a few. Enjoying them, we can go out on many a limb. Yet there is really a tougher requirement for enjoying: flexibility and openness of the mind—of the pores, possibly. For heaven forbid we should feel disgrace in seeking understanding by way of pleasure.

We would be sure of this, I believe, if we asked ourselves, How would we wish a story of our own to be understood? By way of delight—by its being purely read, for the first fresh impact and the wonder attached; isn't this the honest answer? It seems to me too that almost the first hope we ever had, when we gave someone a story all fresh and new, was that the story would *read new*. And that's how we should read.

What bliss! Think how often this is denied us. That's why we think of childhood books so lovingly. But hasn't every writer the rightful wish to have his story so read? And isn't this wish implicit in the story itself? By reading secondhandedly, or obediently as taught, or by approaching a story without an open mind, we wrong its very first attribute—its uniqueness, with its sister attribute of freshness. We are getting to be old, jaded readers

— instructed, advised readers, victims of summaries and textbooks; and if we write stories as victims of this attitude ourselves, what will happen to us? While we read and while we write, let's forget what we're being forever told and find the fresh world again — of enjoyment and pleasure and the story unspoiled, delighted in or hated for its own sake.

By enjoying, I don't mean to be *easy* on a story. Not all melted, the way William Saroyan at times requests readers to be. I mean only not to bother the story — not interrupt and interpret it on the side as if the conscience were at stake. To see it clear and itself, we must see it objectively.

After all, the constellations, patterns, we are used to seeing in the sky are purely subjective; it is because our combining things, our heroes, existed in the world almost as soon as we did that we were able long ago to see Perseus up there, and not a random scattering of little lights. Let's look at a particular story and see it solitary out in space, not part of some trend. It doesn't matter a bit for the moment who wrote it or when, or what magazine or book it appeared in or got rejected from, or how much or how little money the author got for it or whether he had an agent, or that he received letters in the mail when it was printed, saying, "It is found that your story does not reduce to the elements of a story." We're seeing this story as a little world in space, just as we can isolate one star in the sky by a concentrated vision.

3

THE first thing we notice about our story is that we can't really see the solid outlines of it — it seems bathed in something of its own. It is wrapped in an atmosphere. This is what makes it shine, perhaps, as well as what initially obscures its plain, real shape.

We are bearing in mind that the atmosphere in a story may be its chief glory — and for another thing, that it may be giving us an impression altogether contrary to what lies under it. The brightness may be the result of whizzing in a circle. Some action stories fling off the brightest clouds of obscuring and dazzling light, like ours here. Our penetrating look brings us the suspicion finally that this busy object is quite dark within, for all its clouds of speed, those primary colors of red and yellow and blue. It looks like one of Ernest Hemingway's stories, and it is.

Now a story behaves, it goes through motions — that's part of it. Some stories leave a train of light behind them, meteorlike, so that much later than they strike our eye we may see their meaning like an after-effect. These wildly careening stories are in many ways among the most interesting of all — the kind of story sometimes called apocalyptic. I think of Faulkner's stories as being not meteors but comets; in a way still beyond their extrava-

gance and unexpectedness and disregard of the steadier laws of time and space, Faulkner's stories are cometlike in that they do have a wonderful course of their own: they reappear, in their own time they reiterate their meaning, and by reiteration show a whole further story over and beyond their single significance.

If we have thought of Hemingway's stories, then, as being bare and solid as billiard balls, so scrupulously cleaned of adjectives, of every unneeded word as they are, of being plain throughout as a verb in itself is plain, we may come to think twice about it. The atmosphere that cloaks D. H. Lawrence's stories is of sensation, which is a pure but thick cover, a cloak of self-luminous air, but the atmosphere that surrounds Hemingway's stories is just as thick and to some readers less illuminating. Action can be inscrutable, more than sensation can be. It can be just as voluptuous, too, just as vaporous, and much more desperately concealing.

So the first thing we see about a story is its mystery. And in the best stories, we return at the last to see mystery again. Every good story has mystery — not the puzzle kind, but the mystery of allurements. As we understand the story better, it is likely that the mystery does not necessarily decrease; rather it simply grows more beautiful.

Now, of what is this story composed, the one we're sighting? What is the plot, in other words?

E. M. Forster in his book on the novel makes the acute distinction between plot and narrative thread. A story is a "narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality." With a plot, instead of keeping on asking, What next? we ask, Why?

Well, in Hemingway's story, which is "Indian Camp," one of his early ones, Nick goes with his father, a doctor, to see a sick Indian woman. She is suffering in labor and the doctor operates on her without an anesthetic. In the bunk above her head, her husband lies with a sore foot. After the operation is over and the child has been successfully born, the husband is found to have slit his throat because he was not able to bear his wife's suffering. Nick asks, "Is dying hard, Daddy?" "No, I think it's pretty easy," his father says.

The story is composed of this — the inability to endure suffering. The wish to die rather than face pain. Is this a red and blue world? I see it as dark as night — Hemingway's world is again and again a world of fear. Of physical cruelty, pain, the giving of pain, and for a counter the inability to receive it except in propriety — one way. In Hemingway there is only one way, you know. It is a fear-ridden world, in which the only exorcism is ritual — the bullfighter's code, the rules of sport, of warfare. This story is over and over again told with a kind of appetite, gusto; and this paradox of essence and effect is one of the hypnotic and in-

comparable things about Hemingway — his value and his mystery. His imitators lack both value and mystery. Violence in itself is not a story; there is violence and there is the story, or rather the plot, of violence.

How do we get, in Hemingway, that sense of opaqueness? It is not because the stories are stories of action — for action can be radiant, we know — not because they are bare and clean of adjectives and fuss. (Why are feelings and adjectives supposed to be in themselves any more — or any less — illuminating than action and verbs?) To this reader, Hemingway's stories are opaque because they are moralizing stories. And to be moralizing is to be flat-surfaced — to take up your stand behind a shield. The stories aren't really out in the open at all, the outdoors notwithstanding; the arena functions like an ambush, with the author behind taking pot shots at the reader.

Be stoic. We are taught by Hemingway, who is *instructive* by method, that there is a way we had better be. The world is full of fear and danger, says he. We say, All right — it is that. He says, I give you the ceremony. Better not look any closer, but keep to your places. So braveness and fear, instructions and ceremonial to-do, step in front of reality just as surely as sentimentality can. Our belligerent planet Mars has an unknown and unrevealed heart.

But we have to go on from there. For what comes of it? Part of Hemingway's power comes straight out of this conditioning he imposes on his stories. In San Francisco there's a painting by Goya, who himself used light, action, and morality dramatically, of course. The bull ring and the great tossing wall of spectators are cut in diagonal half by a great shadow of afternoon. There lies the wonder of the painting — the opaque paired with the clear, golden sun; half of the action, with dense, clotting shade. It's like this in Hemingway's plots.

In the same way, one power of Hemingway's famous use of conversation derives from the fact that it's often in translated or broken sentences — a shadow inserted between the direct speakers. It is an obscuring and at the same time a magical touch; it illuminates from the side. It makes us aware of the fact that communication is going on.

As we now picture Hemingway's story, isn't it something like this — not transparent, not radiant from the front; but from the side, from without his story, from a moral source, comes its beam of light; and his story is not radiant, but spotlighted. Don't we feel the kind of excitement from reading his stories that we more usually feel at a play?

4

AS WE all have observed, plot can throw its weight in any of several ways, varying in their complexity, flexibility, and interest: onto the narrative, or situa-

tion; onto the character; onto the interplay of characters; and onto some higher aspects of character, emotional states, and so on, which is where the rules leave off, if they've come with us this far, and the uncharted country begins. Let's look at further stories, still not seeking to evaluate their authors or the stories among others of their authors, but taking them up where we find them as they bring out some aspect or another of plot.

Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" tells a story of situation; it is a playful story, using two situations, like counters.

Jack Potter, the town marshal of Yellow Sky, has gone to San Anton' and gotten married and is bringing his bride home in a Pullman — the whole errand to be a complete surprise to the town of Yellow Sky. "He knew full well that his marriage was an important thing to his town. It could only be exceeded by the burning of the new hotel."

And in Yellow Sky another situation is building up in matching tempo with the running wheels. A messenger appears in the door of the Weary Gentleman saloon crying "Scratchy Wilson's drunk and has turned loose with both hands." "Immediately a solemn, chapel-like gloom was upon the place. . . . 'Scratchy Wilson is a wonder with a gun, a perfect wonder, and when he goes on the war-trail, we hunt our holes — naturally.'" Scratchy enters town, pistols in both hands. His "cries of ferocious challenge rang against walls of silence. And his boots had red tops with gilded imprints, of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England. . . . He walked with the creeping movement of the midnight cat. As it occurred to him, he roared menacing information. . . . The little fingers of each hand played sometimes in a musician's way. . . . The only sounds were his terrible invitations."

All this is delightful to us not only for itself but for its function of play, of assuring our anticipation; the more ferocious Scratchy is, the more we are charmed. Our sense of the fairness, the proportion of things is gratified when he "comfortably fusiladed the windows of his most intimate friend. The man was playing with this town; it was a toy for him." This plot of situation gives us a kind of kinetic pleasure; just as being on a seesaw is pleasant not only for where we are but for where the other person is.

The train arrives, Jack Potter and bride get off, and Jack's emotion-charged meeting with Yellow Sky is due; and Scratchy Wilson turns out to be its protagonist. They come face to face, and Potter, who says, "I ain't got a gun on me, Scratchy," takes only a minute to make up his mind to be shot on his wedding day.

"If you ain't got a gun, why ain't you got a gun?" Scratchy sneers at the marshal. And Potter says, "I ain't got a gun because I've just come from San Anton' with my wife. I'm married."

"Married?" asks Scratchy — he has to ask it several times, uncomprehending. "Married?"

"Seemingly for the first time, he saw the drooping, drowning woman at the other man's side. 'No!' he said. He was like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world. . . . 'Is this the lady?'"

"'Yes; this is the lady,' answered Potter.

"'Well,' said Wilson at last, slowly, 'I s'pose it's all off now.'

"'. . . He was not a student of chivalry; it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains. He picked up his starboard revolver, and, placing both weapons in their holsters, he went away. His feet made funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand."

So, in Crane's story, two situations, two forces, gather, meet — or rather are magnetized toward one another, almost — and collide. One is vanquished — the unexpected one — with neatness and absurdity, and the vanquished one exits; all equivalents of comedy.

5

IN Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill," there are only one character and only one situation. The narrative is simple, Miss Brill's action consists nearly altogether in sitting down; she does nothing but go and sit in the park, return home and sit on her bed in her little room. Yet considerably more of a story is attempted by this lesser to-do than Crane attempted in "Yellow Sky"; its plot is all implication.

"Miss Brill" is set on a stage of delight. "Although it was so brilliantly fine — the blue sky powdered with gold, and great spots of light like white wine splashed over the *Jardins Publiques* — Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur. . . . [She] put up her hand and touched her fur. Dear little thing!" We see right off that for Miss Brill delight is a kind of coziness. She sits listening to the band, her Sunday habit, and "Now there came a little flutey bit — very pretty! — a little chain of bright drops. She was sure it would be repeated. It was; she lifted her head and smiled."

Miss Brill has confidence in her world — anticipation: what will happen next? Ah, but she knows. She's delighted but safe. She sees the others from her little perch, her distance — the gay ones and then those on benches: "Miss Brill had often noticed there was something funny about nearly all of them. They were odd, silent, nearly all old, and from the way they stared they looked as though they'd just come from dark little rooms or even — even cupboards!" For she hasn't identified herself at all.

The drama is slight in this story. There is no collision. Rather the forces meeting in the *Jardins Publiques* have, at the story's end, passed through each other and come out the other side; there has not been a collision, but a change — something much more significant. This is because, though there is one small situation going on, a very large and complex one is implied — the outside world, in fact.

One of the forces in the story is life itself, corresponding to the part of Scratchy Wilson, so to speak. Not violent life — life in the setting of a park on Sunday afternoon in Paris. All it usually does for Miss Brill is promenade stylishly while the band plays, form little tableaux, separate momentarily into minor, rather darker encounters, and keep in general motion with bright colors and light touches — there are no waving pistols at all, to storm and threaten.

Yet, being life, it does threaten. In what way, at last? Well, how much more deadly to Miss Brill than a flourished pistol is an overheard remark — about her. Miss Brill's vision — a vision of love — is brought abruptly face to face with another, ruder vision of love. The boy and girl in love sit down on her bench, but they cannot go on with what they have been saying because of her, though "still soundlessly singing, still with that trembling smile, Miss Brill prepared to listen.

"'No, not now,' said the girl. 'Not here, I can't.'

"'But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there? . . . Why does she come here at all — who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?'"

"'It's her fur which is so funny,' giggled the girl. 'It's exactly like a fried whiting.'

"'Ah, be off with you!' said the boy in an angry whisper."

So Miss Brill, she who could spare even pity for this world, in her innocence — pity, the spectator's emotion — is defeated. She had allowed herself occasional glimpses of lives not too happy, here in the park, which had moved her to little flutters of sadness. But that too had been coziness — coziness, a remedy visitors seek to take the chill off a strange place with. She hadn't known it wasn't good enough. All through the story she has sat in her "special seat" — another little prop to endurance — and all unknown to her she sat in mortal danger. This is the story. The danger nears, a word is spoken, the blow falls — and Miss Brill retires, ridiculously easy to mow down, as the man with the pistols was easy to stare down in "Yellow Sky," for comedy's sake. But Miss Brill was from the first defenseless and on the losing side, and her defeat is the deeper for it, and one feels sure it is for ever.

(To be continued)

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