

The publication of *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories* in 1986 brought an interesting variation to the world of American letters in an age when fiction tended to be categorized along the divergent streams of fabulation and realism. Among the anthology contributors are Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, both associated with hardcore postmodernism, Joyce Carol Oates and Grace Paley, on and off aligning with this dominant trend of the late 1960s and the 1970s, and Raymond Carver, perhaps the most celebrated practitioner of experimental realism in the 1970s and the 1980s. But realism of a more orthodox kind is also presented by the hand of Tennessee Williams, John Cheever, Bernard Malamud and John Updike, a group of writers we associate with the 1950s. As long as dissonance is taken for the governing logic, the volume also accommodates other contributors, famous for the role they played in their own time as is the case of Langston Hughes and Ernest Hemingway, the former an icon of the Harlem Renaissance, the latter of American modernism. Caught in the interplay of so many styles, *Sudden Fiction* thrives on a singular sort of unity announced in its title and exclusively resting upon the short extension of the different stories. It obviously provides a good illustration of what I believe is a distinctive feature of the American short story, inextricably related to its experimental nature.

But before further speculation, let us consider what makes the *Sudden Fiction* pieces different from their postmodernist experimental predecessors where the short story traditional conventions were subverted by resistance to referentiality and canonical models of the individual self, by preferences for abstraction and irrealism. I quote Robert Shapard who, Jamesian-like, concludes his introduction to the anthology by stating that the essence of the stories is life. But then, almost as a Poesque afterthought, he adds that

* Teresa F. A. Alves is Associate professor of American Literature and Culture and coordinator of Research Group 5 at the University of Lisbon International Center for English Studies - ULICES. Her published work reflects her interest in contemporary American literature and culture, Portuguese American literature and in Autobiography. She is the author of *Cânone e Diversidade Um Ensaio sobre a Literatura e a Cultura dos EUA* (Lisbon, 2003); and co-author of *Feminine Identities*, (Lisbon, 2002); *Literatura Norte-Americana* (Lisbon, 1999). She co-edited *And gladly wolde [s]he lerne and gladly teche": Homenagem a Júlia Dias Ferreira* (Lisbon, 2007); *From the Edge: Portuguese Short Stories / Onde a Terra Acaba : Contos Portugueses* (Lisbon, 2006); *Ceremonies and Spectacles: Performing American Culture* (Amsterdam, 2000); *Walt Whitman: "Not Only Summer, But All Seasons"* (Lisbon, 1999); *Colóquio Herman Melville* (Lisbon, 1994). Her published scholarly essays include "A Poetics of Disquietude for Gaspar's Tales of the Soul" (New York: 2011); "Between Worlds: A Convergence of Kindred Lives" (Lisbon, 2009); "Women's Autobiographies: Twentieth-Century American Inscriptions" (Amsterdam, 2006); "Auto-Retrato a *chiaroscuro* em fundo de crise" (Lisbon, 2005); "George Monteiro Through José Rodrigues Miguéis's Looking Glass". (Providence, RI (2003-2004). She is a current Board member of the *Society for the Study of the Short Story* — SSSS

“short-shorts”, a designation for the “new” fiction, are formal constructs which substantiate as “highly compressed, highly charged, insidious, protean, sudden, alarming, tantalizing” (xvi). Life as represented by everyday reality has returned the narrative universe to the artifice of mimesis which postmodernist anti-story had banned. Brought again into storytelling, ordinary experience restored character and plot to their conventional functions, but the retrieval of the mimetic code proscribed neither the mythic mode nor the leaning toward fabulation that characterized previous postmodernist practice. The very title signals the formalist concerns at the heart of the anthology and, again, Shepard found the right words, if not the most orthodox of descriptions, to emphasize it by recourse to etymology and dramatic punctuation: “Sudden. Without warning, from the Latin *subire*, to steal upon. Unforeseen, swift. Sudden” (1986: xvi).

Located before the table of contents and the introduction, Robert Coover’s “A Sudden Story” inaugurates the volume, functioning like a frontispiece with variant engravings of a singular “arabesque”. The fairy tale-like opening “once upon a time” is immediately followed by the phrase “suddenly while it still could, the story began”, the subversion of the world of make-believe by the agency of the whole-powerful narrator setting the tone for the remaining narrative. In competition with the hero and the dragon, the omniscient narrator turns out to be the real protagonist of the eleven-line parody of a quest that effectively invites self-conscious awareness about the process of fiction-making. Whether the story takes the reader into “enchanted forests, endless deserts, cities carbonized by dragon breath” or not is irrelevant. As long as he participates in the language-game highlighted by the repetition of the word “sudden” or derivatives, he is responding – not as a passive voyeur but as the active encoder of meaning. On the one hand, the awareness of the text as process provides the clues for the metafictional exercise which pulls (but simultaneously expands) “A Sudden Story” in opposite directions. On the other hand, the reduction to the miniaturist scale and the recurring leitmotif enforce the flash-like, momentary effect by which the narrative announces, however briefly, the experimental orientation of the coming pieces.

“A Sudden Story” also reveals the artist in search of an *eidós* that might do justice to the variety of the anthologized stories. By compressing his narrative in one hundred and ninety six words (title included), Robert Coover highlights what is distinctive in this collection of stories, drawing Poe’s fondness for brevity to the limit. A master at word-games, he uses them to support a literary agenda in which one fiction appears to be as good as the other, making use of defamiliarization as a strategy that enforces

the writer's god-like freedom as fabulator. His is a postmodernist imagination shaped by a sense of multiplicity and also by habits of literary transgression and of blurring of boundaries between literary modes. The twist at the end of the narrative shows how miniature, in spite of its tiny dimensions, may faithfully render issues of magnitude like freedom and memory. An expert at stylization of conventional plot and character, Robert Coover deconstruction of the fairy tale by parody erodes, nevertheless, narrative stability while making the reader aware of the imaginative process at work. It is on such an account a proper frame for diversity and a strategy that hints at the protean nature of the short story, in general, and of the anthologized pieces in particular.

Cohering around short extension, these particular stories diverge in the form and styles by which they produce a unified aesthetic effect. But, as illustrated by Coover's miniaturist narrative, strategies like context variation and governing repetition alter the traditional involvement of mimesis with the representation of common experience, and align it with fundamentally experimental directions. Such strategies show again the influence of postmodernist minimalism and of its preference for the use of a small number of themes and motifs, which in new language contexts allows the reader to see things afresh and, simultaneously, exposes exhausted fictional conventions. The minimalist attempt to create the world anew by resorting to fragmentation and collage cancels, however, the unexpected turn, the element of surprise so important in *Sudden Fiction* and so often found in the short story as a genre.

The concern with the (re)invention of language, such as voiced among others by Robert Coover, William H. Gass or Ronald Sukenick, is, however, of the same order, if not of the same stylistic nature, as John Barth's metafictional endeavor in "Autobiography" (1968), a piece that flouts the rules and conventions of the romantic and realistic short story, self-reflexively examining the nature and status of fiction itself. As we observed, the miniaturist "A Sudden Story" achieves a similar effect by creating a dialectics between the memory of a fable and the process by which the fable is made, offering a new imaginative grasp of the literary universe. Metafiction and minimalism are not, however, the exclusive trends of the 1960s and the 1970s, even if, in retrospective, we must acknowledge how influential they were and how much they contributed to our contemporary grasp of fiction, in general, and of the shorter forms in particular. "Anti-story", "surfiction" or "superfiction", as the then "new fiction" was generically labeled, also resorted to traditional modes as the gothic, or to allegory and adventure, even if seasoned by parody.

Postmodernity is a huge umbrella which excels in great diversity.¹ The anthologies that at the time collected postmodernist short fiction provide ample illustration of how this period, in its essentially parodic orientation, fostered innovative approaches to fiction and changed our more conventional views of the literary text.²

Sudden Fiction differs from the postmodernist anthologies on account of the “easy inclusiveness” by which John L'Heureux characterizes the “short-short stories” and to which George Garrett adds a twist when he dismisses postmodernist theory because of the “*No Trespassing signs*” it entails. (1986: resp. 228; 257) The existence of a canon — and the period saw to a considerable theorizing of the genre — inevitably leads into these alerting signs, trespassing always bringing about heretical deviation from canonical pieties. Minimalism and metafiction had disregarded the warning signs of the previous short-story practitioners and had banned their reliance on conventional strategies, namely on plot, character and action, but its shift from a more traditional perception of the genre had also produced new alerting signs. Obversely, inclusiveness, as an organizing concept, takes the American short story back to its origins, allowing it to “be voiced in almost any known mode: realism, naturalism, fantasy, allegory, parable, anecdote”.³ Co-opting a diversity of forms — scraps of dialogue, inventories and questionnaires,

¹ I have in mind the difference between “postmodernism/postmodernist” and “postmodernity/postmodern” in spite of possible overlapping. “Postmodernity” refers to the period that roughly starts after world war II and the changes brought about in terms of sensibility, which are still very much part of contemporary worldview. We are all postmodern, a term coined by the poet Charles Olson in the early 50s. “Postmodernism” I apply to the influential group of writers whose experimental work had great impact upon the literary scene of the 60s and 70s, causing a shift in the American literary canon.

² Among some of the most influential were *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction*, ed. Philip Stevick, (with its famous manifesto against mimesis, reality, event, subject, common experience, plot and character in traditional fiction; against consensus and a pre-existing scale); *the naked I: fictions for the seventies*, eds. Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian; *Innovative Fiction: Stories for the Seventies*, eds. Jerome Klinkovits & John Sommer; *Cutting Edges: Young American Fiction for the '70s*, ed. Jack Hicks; and *Super Fiction or the American Story Transformed: An Anthology*, ed., Joe David Bellamy.

³ Fred Chappell, “Afterwords”, *Sudden Fiction*, p.227. In this section, the contributors to the anthology also consider the traditions from which “short-short stories” emerge and comment upon the practical application of this type of fiction in creative writing classes. Stephen Minot argues that *Sudden Fiction* is rooted in at least five different traditions although not every story will fit neatly into a single category (236). In some stories, experience is everything (among others, “Twirler”, “The Merry Chase”, “The Artichoke” and “The Speed of Light”); in others idea dominates (“A Walled Garden” and “Rosary”, to mention just a few). Structure as in exemplary stories, fables or parables is a fundamental feature in some pieces (among them, “Pygmalion”, “Popular Mechanics” and “Sitting”); mood is stressed in others (namely, “The Visitation”, “How J. B. Hartley Saw His Father” and “Moving Pictures”). Finally there are those in which imagery is more highly valued than any other narrative element (as in “Even Greenland” or “The Coggios”). The use of conventional devices (theme, tone, character and setting) does not, in any case, weaken the experimental orientation of these stories.

dramatic monologue, sketch, parable, myth, exemplum – what in the 1980s came to be known as “sudden fiction” resorted to the oldest strategy of innovating by artful renegotiation of the heterogeneous American short story tradition.

Almost from the start, as Joe David Bellamy argues in "Afterwords", "compression and concision have been part of the aesthetics of the American short story form"(Ibid: 238). The reference to Edgar Allan Poe is, of course, inevitable (the designation of "poes" was even adopted by Russell Banks instead of "short-short story"), particularly when we recall his fondness for brevity as a means to achieve singleness of effect. Writing about Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* he praises them in often quoted passages as short prose narratives “requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal,” adding after a few considerations about the reader, that the wise author “has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect” (1984: 572).

Poe also praises invention, creation, imagination and originality, acknowledging them as distinctive traits of Hawthorne's tales. His own practice, as illustrated by "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839, 1845), "A Descent into the Maelström" (1841, 1845), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843, 1845) or "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), translates the above traits into the romantic obsession with nightmarish psychic levels of experience and the quest for redemptive aestheticism. A simulacrum of ordinary everyday life appears in his tales of deduction, which an ever-growing number of critics describe as diurnal speculations of the mind and exercises on textuality. It is effectively Hawthorne who engenders stories where character and circumstance interact in a realistic way that nevertheless does not shun the representation of nocturnal levels of the romantic psyche such as sketched by the phantasmagoria of "The Haunted Mind" (1835, 1842). But the tightly controlled narratives revolve around moral concerns in "My Kinsman Major Molineux" (1832), "Young Goodman Brown"(1835) or "The Birthmark" (1843, 1846), all of them displaying a masterful handling of older allegorical and gothic forms in a new realistic context, which even Poe admitted as the rendering of *Truth* that " is often and in very great degree the aim of the tale". (1984: 573) What the first theoretician of the American short prose narrative meant the

word he italicizes is, in any case, debatable and, as consensually admitted, the successful attempt to render the recesses of the human heart draws the line between the Hawthornian short story and Poe's endeavor to defer human condition into pure aestheticism.

From its very start, the American short story has existed in transgression with previous tradition, as in Washington Irving's tales and sketches, which earned him the paternity to the native genre. Both "Rip van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1819-20) foreground everyday ordinary protagonists that subvert the Germanic romantic models by American circumstance, the subversion often undermining picturesque description and favoring, for instance, the mock-pastoral in "The Angler"(1819-20). In a sense, this sketch metaphorically enacts the defeat of canonical rule by local expertise such as rendered by the successful catch of the "lubberly country urchin" (1983: 1051). American ingeniousness spooks off the Waltonian species to England where it remains to this day, a trustworthy instructor of British anglers. Herman Melville's *Bartleby* evokes a more somber reality, one that, as Charles E. May points out, oddly parallels Roderick Usher's alienation and psychic distress in Poe. The parallel between the two characters is, however, divergent and sums up the attitude of each of the authors towards art and life, Poe's realistic character being drawn into the aesthetic realm of imagination whereas Melville's aesthetic figure is obversely confronted with harsh reality (35). May's neat distinction also shows how experimental the short story has been from the very beginning and how very much governed it is by a diversity of concerns. Such concerns take different shapes in *The Piazza Tales* (1856) and bespeak of the author's wish to foreground the protean nature of the short story as well as his realization of the capacity of realism to absorb older romance forms.

But before proceeding with my argument, let me consider the scarcity of critical attention paid to the American short story, at least until the second half of the twentieth century, by comparing the fortune that *The Piazza Tales* enjoyed at the time of publication with Hawthorne's *Tales and Sketches*. Herman Melville was on the way to falling from grace with his public when the short fiction was collected in a volume and neither this volume nor *The Confidence Man* (1857) restored the reputation he lost after the publication of *Pierre; or The Ambiguities of Life* (1852). Between 1853 and 1856, his short fiction appeared in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* and even if "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby, The Scrivener" enjoyed due appreciation, they did not supplant the fame of Melville as *the* author of sea-faring adventures. Written after these popular novels, the short fiction was received as the "minor mode" in which he exercised the vein for more portentous work. Hawthorne's is a different story. He was first

known as a short-fiction writer (*Twice-Told Tales* and *Mosses from an Old Manse*, respectively published in 1837 and 1846) and, only in 1850, would he achieve recognition with the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*. And when I mention recognition in connection with fictions of longer extension, I have of course in mind the dream of the great American novel pursued by the so-called American canonical authors even if they were acknowledged practitioners in the minor key of short fiction. But not only the writers were involved in this phenomenon when we bear in mind the reading public who, as in the case of Melville, tended to judge by comparison with his previously published novels. In both instances, the dream of grandeur was without doubt that of the form better suited to represent a symbolic cartography that was associated with "America."

The hierarchized relationship of the short story to the novel is exposed as a typically American phenomenon when a writer like Jorge Luís Borges, from a different culture and background, comes forward with the eulogy of Hawthorne's tales and sketches, which he holds in higher regard than the novels. It is true that Borges's own fiction favors the compressed form as more amenable to the word-games and the labyrinthine digressions in which he, himself, delights. He, however, praises the universal humanity and the transcription into a symbolic situation in the Hawthornian short fiction against the particularized, diffused effect achieved by the longer extension of the novel. This, he believes, sabotages the very nature of storytelling, thriving as it does on the kinship with communal legend and myth. Furthermore, Borges's essay on Hawthorne shows how instrumental the tales and sketches were in achieving a distinctive style and how they support Hawthorne's celebrated distinction between the novel and the romance, founded on the tight aesthetic control over realistic context and symbolic significance.

The role of the short story as a workshop for the art of fiction is of course at the heart of Herman Melville's *Piazza Tales*. I would venture to add that such awareness has determined the existence of a frame, the prefatory sketch, which, as it is well known, was the last piece he added to this collection of short narratives. Not only does "The Piazza" announce the forthcoming stories but it revises the conventional framing device by anticipating and dramatizing the themes and motives of the remaining pieces. As a mirror to the narrator of "the Piazza," a coherent Melvillian persona surfaces in *The Encantadas*, the collection of sketches that may also be read as authorial musings about the nature of the literary text and the process of creation. Melville's experience as a novelist cannot but have influenced his awareness of the contracted scale as a privileged form for the patterned dramatization of

the dialectics between life and art. The narrator's digression through the enchanted archipelago resonates as a quest for the metaphysical and aesthetic concerns that he genially intertwines and, before him, had set Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne in distinct directions, which are delicately balanced in *The Encantadas*. Articulated as a sequence of discrete sketches in which Poe's aestheticism and Hawthorne's rendering of the recesses of the human heart strike as perfect a balance as that of the juxtaposed 'isles' that, among themselves, defer stable significance, in favor of the overall effect of ambivalence and paradox.

The obsession with the nature of art and with the role of life in its definition may, perhaps, account for the extensive practice of the short story by canonical American novelists. The inevitable reference is, of course, Henry James who devoted his whole life and energy to solve the riddle of the artist's fate and of the peculiar nature of art in his fiction and critical theory. Again, it is in short stories like "The Real Thing" (1893) and "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896) that James's obsession with the issue is, for the singleness of effect, most forcefully rendered. Collected together with other variations about the aesthetic theme in F. O. Matthiessen's *Stories of Artists and Writers* by Henry James, this collection should nevertheless be read along with those short prose fictions in which the author's misgivings about the "ivory tower art" are dramatized by the interplay between life and art, and the winning of the former over the later. None more pointedly, I believe, than in "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903), a story about the deferral of living and the dreary consequences of postponing life in favor of aesthetic illusion. These stories moreover illustrate the thin boundary between autobiography and storytelling, with art and the artist's plight brought into the center of the narrative.

From Melville and James's time to this day, we find uncountable instances of the American artist's endeavor to induce by metaphor his own experience as a fiction-maker or to textualize it as self-awareness about the nature of such an endeavor as postmodernist authors would later obsessively do. This tradition bears however endless variation. Written before the novels that exerted such a powerful influence on European writing, Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" (1925) has often been described as a dark journey into the privacy of the self, a metaphoric ramble about psychic distress and suicidal impulses. The trout fishing two-part story has moreover been read as literary biography, although Nick Adams, Hemingway's surrogate persona, is barely linked to the art of writing. There is, however, good reason to endorse Michael Reynolds' assertion that in "Big Two-Hearted River" the youthful Hemingway moves beyond the literary tutors, on and off cropping up in the remaining stories

of the volume, and creates "a style and attitude for his time" (47). The Jamesian use of the short-story as dramatic metaphorization of the writer's concerns with his art veers in Ernest Hemingway towards the existential dilemmas that are masterfully handled by the author of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1939). Among the variety of American short stories, those authored by Hemingway are a clear instance of how experimental the genre becomes in native soil. "A Very Short Story" (1925), "Hills like White Elephants" (1927) and even "A Clean Well-lighted Place" (1933) illustrate his attempt at conciseness and dialogue, and his anticipation of later minimalist practices. Held in high esteem by the modernist Hemingway was the digression of the realist Mark Twain by the artifice of a garrulous voice belonging to a would-be oral narrator. His tales, namely "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1867) welded for good, life and literary parody, the speaking "voice" becoming an important strand in American fiction. Along with Ernest Hemingway, other modernists were rehearsing narrative experimentalism in short fiction. F. Scott Fitzgerald became famous with *The Great Gatsby* (1925), but the novel's themes and patterns were already present, in *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), namely in "May Day", a story which, in a necessarily less elaborate fashion, foreshadows Gatsby's drama. There is also a commonly held view that William Faulkner's stories are not as formally experimental as his novels. In the early 30s nonetheless, stories like "A Rose for Emily" and "Spotted Horses" (1931) show him engaged with strategies, namely with point of view and voice, upon which he structured his cutting-edge longer fictions. Furthermore, each of the stories is unified by tone, between them achieving the whole gamut of Faulknerian digressive style, from Gothic romance to farcical realism.

Along the 50s and through the postmodernist 60s and 70s, the situation of the short story as evidence of the singularities of a style did not change. Where may you find a better sample of Saul Bellow's brilliant rhetorical mode or of John Updike's masterful handling of characterization and setting than in their respective short stories? In the early 80s, Thomas Pynchon collected his previously published short fiction of the late 50s in a volume ominously entitled *The Slow Learner*, in which the dominant themes and some of the strategies anticipate his portentous novelistic work in the following decades. And John Barth's theoretical flings with the nature of writing and the role of the author in an age of dismissed individual identity are most interestingly rendered in *Lost in the Funhouse. Fictions for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (1968). The subtitle signals the engagement not only with the metafictional trend in his postmodernist novels but also with the interaction that abbreviates the gap between forms of oral and written expression. And to add a woman writer's name to the postmodernist gallery of authors, Joyce

Carol Oates's intermittent involvement with realism and fantasy or the artful combination of the two modes is nowhere more manifest than in her collected shorter fiction, the tight control on form serving her acknowledged versatility.

To consider the contribution of women authors to the genre brings me again into the realm of transgression. Such was the case of writers who broke off from more canonical pieties as, for instance, the sentimental novel in the nineteenth century. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), the celebrated story about psychic disintegration, claustrophobia and madness, stands out as inevitable reference. The recourse to gothic convention in the dramatization of the degraded psychic condition might eventually evoke the descent into the abyss of some of Poe's doomed protagonists. But as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story is not a flight into the fantastic mode but a confrontation with the very real and progressive destruction wrought upon the self by confinement and spiritual starvation (119-122). Tightly patterned as a short story, the author's autobiographic experience replicates the pattern by which ordinary nineteenth century woman was imprisoned in her own body and thereby driven to insanity. Other stories by women authors, namely Kate Chopin, Sara Orne Jewett, Edith Wharton or Willa Cather, similarly dramatize the risks involved in the defiance of societal roles and the dreary consequences of a woman's being shackled to them. These women writers, however, also depended on their novels for fame when they published in the early twentieth century, the "minor mode" of prose fiction rarely worthy of critical attention. And yet when, for example, we compare Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) with "The Story of an Hour" (1894), we cannot but stress the intensification of the stifling predicament of the female protagonist, this same predicament being ambiguously rendered in a narrative convoluted by the demands of an extended plot.

As women's voices became more audible, so did their stories claim the right to build their world anew, the genre more often than not providing the medium which accommodates the diversity of their experience and styles. By the stunning use of voice in "I Stand Here Ironing" (1956) or the heartbreaking lyricism of "Tell Me a Riddle" (1959), Tillie Olsen vividly renders the costs of the American dream to a first-generation immigrant family. Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1955) or "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1965) offer, on the other hand, excellent illustrations of how a woman writer's appropriation of the grotesque may swerve distortion and paradoxical excess into the unfathomable mystery and grace of the catholic devotion. Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl" (1980) and

"Rosa" (1982) take up as subject the haunting ghosts of World War II and translate the horror – not imagined but very real – into poignant domestic imagery, showing how the abyss of pain and suffering may be rendered in gestures of sheltering and tenderness.

Nearer to our time, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981) not only re-enacts the creative process in which boundaries between the short story and the autobiography, the oral narrative and the written text are erased, but, in this process, she also re-visits archetypal Laguna stories, which are metonymically linked by juxtaposition in the narrative to those of her own family. In *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a narrative that, similarly, associates identity with storytelling, Gloria Anzaldúa's approach to the question of cultural *métissage* grants a literary and also a theoretical framing to creative writers whose negotiation of discrete cultural traditions is at the core of the stories collected in *Woman Hollering Creek: And Other Stories* (1991) and *Loverboy's: Stories* (1996), respectively authored by Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo.

These women writers, like their male counterparts, were as much aware of cultural diversification as, for instance, had been the modernist Zora Neale Hurston who, along with the portrayal of a distinctive ethos, brought into her short stories the soul of the Blues and a discourse governed by rhythm, improvisation, call and response. They reverberate in Ntozake Shange's "Oh she gotta head fulla hair" (1978), or in Rita Dove's "Second-Hand Man" (1985) or, finally, in Edwidge Danticat's "New York Day Women" (1995). A different orchestration of themes, motives and rhythms weave together *Fado and Other Stories* (1997), a collection of short stories by the Portuguese American Katherine Vaz. She shares with other contemporary authors a taste for the delicate balance between ordinary life and the surreal, to which, however, she adds a distinctive legacy. In "Still Life", one of the stories, such legacy involves an immigrant Azorean grandmother and her Portuguese American granddaughter. hanging almost exclusively on barely spoken words and the undercurrent of repressed emotion. A sense of the inexorable emanates from the word "*Fado*" which on the cover of the volume challenges the reader to decode a word imported from another culture and which the negotiating agent, an author brought up as an English-speaking citizen, did not see fit to translate for lack of the appropriate connotations in the language of her native world.

The extreme variety of the short story genre cannot be subsumed by the handful of authors I chose to illustrate what, in my opinion, is specifically American about the short story as a literary genre. I do not claim to come forward with a definite conclusion on this matter, but by recalling some of the features

we, devoted readers, associate to it, I hope to arrive at a springboard from where new directions and turns might be envisaged. My choice of authors aims at establishing diversity as a trait that, although applying to the genre in general, finds in American soil a particularly favorable situation. The co-existence of discrete cultures and races that, in their own specific ways, respond to the aesthetical trends of the age, has from the very start been foreshadowed by the cultural difference in two founding opposite attitudes, the southern aestheticism of Edgar Allan Poe and the New England puritanical concern of Nathaniel Hawthorne with the representation of the recesses of the soul. If you add to diversity, the compulsion to respond to the genre by transgression of the apparently accepted European Romantic models, a third founding figure is invited into the pantheon. Actually, Washington Irving came to the scene before Poe and Hawthorne, having, on such an account, earned the paternity of the genre. Protean variety and transgression has from the start challenged single narrative patterns and obsessive thematic subjects.

A derivative inquiry into the genre inevitably led me to a nagging question, probably, spurred by the notion that there was no intrinsic difference between short and long narratives and that a good number of short story writers, among them, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald, had entered the canon as laureate novelists, their stories doomed to be a 'minor mode' inhabiting the margins of canonical respectability. The marginal status of the short prose narrative did not recede until the Postmodernist breakthrough, the choice of *Sudden Fiction* as a point of departure for my argument owing much to the nature of the book and the time of its publication.

The 80s were, indeed, the crucial decade in which the 'minor mode' was upgraded by the attention it received from a generation of critics that brought the pioneering work of writers and critics from the previous decades to an unprecedented level of speculation and knowledge. *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989), edited by Suzan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, and extensively commented by the former, was one such a work among others that prepared the literary field to accept the short story not only as a mode that always enjoyed great popularity with the reading public, but also about which, as a literary achievement, it is claimed, a decade and a half later, that "the short story in America has for almost two centuries held a prominent, even pre-eminent place in the American literary tradition". (Scofield, 2006: 1)

On a concluding note I would point out that such tradition is built on inclusiveness and transgression, two distinctive features that account for the experimental bend of the genre. Inclusiveness becomes

emphatically experimental when delimited by shortness and brevity as in the case of the collection of stories gathered in *Sudden Fiction*. Precluding a prevailing mode — romantic tale, realist story, sketch, tall tale, parable, metafiction, minimalism or dirty realism — taking, instead, account of them all, this collection thrives on the experience of protean form, of stylistic border-crossing and multicultural diversity. Edging away from settled patterns and conventional pieties, without, however, shunning its ties to the world of life, the different stories take the reader by the hand into the experimental vein that is distinctive of the American short story as a genre rooted in the convergence as well as the divergence of a variety of cultural traditions and intercultural translations.*

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*I first tackled this subject in "O conto americano como oficina da arte de narrar" published in *A Palavra e o Canto. Miscelânea de Homenagem a Rita Iriarte* (Lisboa: 2000). This is an expanded English version of the same subject, however, with considerable changes.

SHAPARD, Robert and James Tomas, eds. 1986. *Sudden Fiction. American Short-Short Stories*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith.

ABSTRACT

Interweaving formalist concerns with the retrieval of conventional literary categories, *Sudden Fiction*, the anthology of “short short-stories” that hit the American literary scene in the late eighties, provides a good focus for the analysis of the genre’s sway between experimentalism and more conventional realistic strategies. These short pieces stand in heretical relationship to postmodernist metafiction and minimalism, engaged as both were in purging fiction from the so-called realistic attachments of character and plot; but the deviation from the postmodernist canon, it is argued, also returns the genre to the basic heretical condition to which it has been doomed by “the dream of the Great American Novel”. Women and other eccentric authors, for instances, often fictionalized exclusion by favoring the short story over the novel, co-opting a literary form that from the beginning had been peripheral to the celebrated longer fiction. In our own time, it is further argued, short story has, more than any other form, been able to encode the disparate fictional worlds of authors who, given their ethnic or racial circumstances and sexual orientation, have made use of the potential of this literary form to express their difference in face of dominant trends. The essay concludes by stressing the talent of the American short story to bring about change to more canonical forms, thereby asserting its genuine nature as a workshop for the art of fiction.

Key words: short- story; sudden fiction; canonical/eccentric; realistic/experimental.

RESUMO

Entretecendo preocupações formalistas com a recuperação de categorias literárias convencionais, *Sudden Fiction*, a antologia que em finais dos anos 80 tomou de assalto a cena literária americana, oferece um bom ponto de partida para a análise da oscilação do conto entre o experimentalismo e estratégias realistas mais convencionais. Estas peças curtas são heréticas em relação ao minimalismo e à meta-ficção pós-modernistas, ambos comprometidos com a expurgação de resíduos realistas, como a personagem ou a acção, do universo ficcional; mas o desvio do cânone pós-modernista, como se argumenta, reforça a condição herética básica a que o género fora votado pelo “sonho do Grande

Romance Americano”. As mulheres e outros autores marginais, por exemplo, repetidamente ficcionalizaram a exclusão ao preferirem o conto ao romance, assumindo-se numa forma literária que desde o início foi considerada periférica em relação à ficção mais célebre, de maior extensão. Nos nossos dias, prossegue o argumento, o conto, melhor do que qualquer outra forma, é susceptível de codificar os universos ficcionais divergentes de autores que tiram partido das suas potencialidades para exprimirem as suas diferenças étnicas, raciais, ou de orientação sexual. O ensaio termina sublinhando o pendor do conto americano para influenciar formas literárias mais canónicas, afirmando a sua natureza genuína como oficina da arte da ficção.

Palavras-chave: conto, “sudden fiction”; canónico/excêntrico; realista/experimental.

