



Micro fiction and short fiction: surrounded by scaffolding on all sides

Microficção e ficção curta rodeadas por andaimes

Erik Van Achter

CLP /Coimbra – KULeuven (Belgium)

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THE FRINGES OF GENRE

Short stories and micro fictions, relatively similar yet chronologically disparate, have both occupied the fringes of literary genre studies: the short story in its late 19th and 20th century heyday; micro-fiction in its on-going 21st century digital age popularisation. Unsurprisingly, since both forms are initial exponents of (at the time) newly emerging materialities in literature, namely the magazine in the short story's case and digitalisation/internet for micro fiction. This article will contrast the magazine/periodical origin of the modern short story with micro fiction's 21st century digitalised popular emergence. How distance, chronologically-engendered disinterestedness, from the short story's popularity enables its definition - or at least stimulates new levels of clarity regarding a (or even: the) definition – will be compared against the current absence of definition for micro fiction, a form (at) which is still under development, albeit rapid development, in the popular psyche. Whilst there may yet exist no standard academically accepted definition, high profile micro fiction competitions are steadily becoming commonplace news in many newspaper literary

columns such as Fiction in a flash, show that “the exercise of extreme verbal concentration is perfectly suited to the age of Twitter” (McCrum, 2014).

Frank O’Connor writes that for the short story writer there is no such thing as essential form. Because the writer’s frame of reference can never be the totality of a human life, he must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it, and each new selection he makes, contains the possibility of a new form as well as the possibility of catastrophic failure (O’Connor, 2003, p. 21). Without the expansiveness of the novel, both short stories and micro fictions adhere to this limited frame of reference O’Connor writes of. They both interrogate a single scenario, but exactly how each accesses their selected scenario is quite a different “story”, indicating already that the short story has once again retreated from the limelight, replaced by micro fiction’s digital superciliousness. All the while, that form which has never seen and may never see the limelight - the almost academically absent vignette - will be preliminarily investigated via comparison and contrast throughout.

The short story is permissibly perceived of as the awkward middle child in our current estimation of modern literary history. Russell Banks, in his introduction to O’Connor’s *The Lonely Voice*, astutely notes that whilst the novel form was born of 19th century industrialised normalcy, the short story is very much born into 20th century turmoil and its respective “disintegration of tribe, nation, family, church” (O’Connor, 2003, p. 9). The very essence of the short story form is thus problematic – the stories themselves emerging as chaotic by-products of increasingly fragmented societies. Societies moreover, whose edges indicate political scars of the past and the respective residual bitterness, racism and nationalism. It is hardly by chance then that some of the most instantly recognisable and canonical short story collections integrate and compact vast swathes of local colour into their tales, becoming deeply rooted in a particular scarred landscape – a fact very visible almost in all western literatures in the last decades of the nineteenth century. One remembers here, as far as Portugal is concerned, the rather vast output of such “scarred” tales published by Eça’s Epigones where the *conto rústico* trembles under contradictory aesthetic forces of Realism and Naturalism: *Mulheres da Beira* (Teixeira Queirós), *Photypias do Minho* (José Augusto Vieira), *Esboços do Natural* (Júlio Lourenço Pinto). As to Anglo-Saxon Modernism, consider the array of undeniably Dublin characters populating Joyce’s *Dubliners*, such as the drunken, domestic-abuser Farrington in *Counterparts* and the keen, almost cheeky swindlers, Lenehan and Corley in *Two Gallants* as a mere start. In such a fractured modern world, the short story writer must invent some locus to their collection, and in lieu of the narratological space a novelised plot engenders, the specific

territory and issues shared by a remote group are instead explored¹. Indeed, within *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice*, May writes:

Poe moves the first-person narrator away from the eighteenth-century discursive and distanced ironic voice familiar to readers of the *Spectator* and the stories of Washington Irving, and toward a teller so obsessed with the subject of his narration that the obsession creates the tightly controlled unity. (May, 1995, p. 8)

Without the space to become as generic and all-encompassing as a lengthy novel, the short story becomes not so much obsessed with the story, but the telling of this story – the means of creating something structurally solid without the space for, arguably, adequate foundations. The short story becomes a balancing act between information and plot, where the base information present (which gives the story its “tightly controlled unity”) hints towards how one may fill in the plot holes present. The short story, whilst structurally solid, is surrounded by scaffolding on all sides which renders the completed work blurred by interpretation. By means of example, consider Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart*. This classic short story presents a coherent story, to summarise, namely that of an individual suffering from an “over-acuteness of the senses” who, distressed by the vulture eye of the elderly man plans and murders him only to hear what he considers the beating of his heart beneath the floorboards when questioned by police (inevitably revealing himself as a murderer). However, being a short story specific details and plot holes are deliberately present which leave readers plenty of room to navigate and manipulate the structural scaffolding present. What exactly is the relationship between the elderly man and the unnamed narrator? What is the beating the narrator hears? His conscience, and ruse by the police visiting him maybe to withdraw a confession? Indeed, even more fundamentally the very gender of the narrator is never specified and whilst generally presumed male, it has been observed that no pronouns are deployed to clarify for definite (Sova, 2001, p. 234). Moving to Micro fiction, it, in its turn, may thus be seen as all detail and no plot, purely this malleable scaffolding material, so much scaffolding that the story itself is impossible to see clearly – the

¹ This sense of geographic, stylistic and thematic cohesiveness is very much concomitant with the emergence of the short story cycle. In no other genre has place and unified theme of integration and degradation played such a primordial role. For more background information on the composite genre I may refer to Ingram Forrest (1971), Mann (1989), Kennedy (1995), Fagundes (1997) and more recently two PhD publication very worth due consideration, Pacht (2009) and Smith (2010).

bare bones of interpretation. The structure, or story, is absent, rendering its overall shape indiscernible, but the scaffolding on all sides presumes the story's 'constructability'.

PARTITIONING EVENTS

It has been written that "Comment on the short story has tended to be either rueful or patronizing, even among writers who have proved themselves experts in the form" (Shaw, 1983, p. 1). The incompleteness of these stories, sacrificing plot for information presumptive of plot, goes some way to explain this scornful outlook on the form. Short stories are not designed to be incomplete novels, but that is how they are often perceived – even by many short story writers themselves. Increasingly, micro fiction is looked down upon by the literary elite, replacing the short story as the dominant misrepresented (and academically unrepresented) form. Short stories, and micro fiction by extension, become almost intrinsically fantastical by nature (fantasy, being itself an academically unrepresented genre by the literary elite). May writes in *The Art of Brevity* that

The very shortness of the short story, as well as the necessary artistic devices demanded by this shortness, force it to focus not on the whole of experience ... in all its perceptual and conceptual categorization, but rather on a single experience that is lifted out precisely because it is not a slice of that reality, but rather a moment in which "reality" itself is challenged. (May, 2004, p. 24)

Short stories thus attempt to partition out a specific event, showcasing the mundane as the extraordinary. Micro fiction can be seen not so much as a partitioning of an event from others, but the distillation of the already extraordinary event. Consider the almost impossibly short, *The Return*, by Joe R Lansdale – "They buried him deep. Again" (Swartwood, 2014). The circumstances, the "informatics" verbosity, surrounding this extraordinary event are omitted. The reader is left only with the absurdity of a single event in isolation. One can imagine this rewritten as a short story, a tale containing the original burial and the details as to why this unspecified being had to be buried again. In micro fiction however, only the ineluctable extraordinariness of the event itself remains on the page.

CONTEMPORARY DOMINANCE

Whilst the short story as a form has always suffered a lack of adequate definition via inadequate comparison to other genres or forms (Van Achter, 2010, p. 3), micro fiction deliberately attempts to avoid definition. For example, its stories tend to cloud even their

genre of definition, consider R Datwood's *Dandelions Actually*: "He showered her with roses but never asked her favourite flower" (Monkeybicycle). Is this a romance or a tragedy? Is it historicist, belonging to the feminist canon, or is a modern example of the breakdown in communication? The story is deliberately done away with in micro fiction, replaced by a void through which the reader pieces together a presumed story. In *Dandelions Actually* this story is of perhaps an over-zealous lover refusing to see reality or perhaps a sweet tale of a love so strong it transcends facts and the experience of sharing each other's presence overcomes any material, or floral, concerns. Micro fiction becomes not a literary genre in the classical sense, self-questioning and examining its own meaning, but rather it "post-modernly" forces the reader to spontaneously and constantly invent its variable meaning through potential alternate readings.

Whilst the similarities between short stories and micro fictions are generally presumed, those properties shared and those mutually exclusive have never been distinctly and rigorously academically identified. Attempts have been made however on the very platform micro fiction thrives, the internet, but are largely guesswork and presumption rather than sustained intellectual efforts (Casto, 2014) or Luis Venezuela's sweeping metaphorical generalisation "I usually compare the novel to a mammal, be it wild as a tiger or tame as a cow; the short story to a bird or a fish; the micro story to an insect (iridescent in the best cases)" (Shapard, 2014, p. 20). Shaw notes that it was "Only towards the end of the nineteenth century, when in fact all branches of literature and the arts were becoming acutely self-conscious, did people begin to acknowledge that short fiction might be shaped according to its own principles" (Shaw, 1983, p. 3). Indeed, perhaps the cause of all such associative presumptions between the short story and micro fiction is the very absence of an appropriate perception of the former. Presuming similarity somewhat bypasses the need for definition. But, there does exist one blatant similarity, and whilst painfully obvious, neither short stories nor micro fictions are long pieces of work. Crucially, however, the impetus for this shortness differs. O'Connor specifies that there's no criterion of a short story's length of than what the material itself demands (O'Connor, 2003, p. 26), an opinion shared by the canon itself (where lengths of short stories greatly vary). For example, there is much room for debate as to whether Joyce's closing story in *Dubliners* – "The Dead" – is a novella or a short story. By contrast, one may perceive micro fictions as deliberately short. Micro fiction was, after all, originally termed the short short story – emphasising its shortness over every other attribute (Van Achter, 2010). Short stories are then naturally short, whereas micro fictions are manufactured short (being deliberately crafted to sub one hundred words, or even to a single sentence as previously seen).

O'Connor suggests that "the short story, like the novel, is a modern art form; that is to say, it represents, better than poetry or drama, our own attitude to life" (O'Connor, 2003, p. 13). I propose that it is this proximity to form, the monumental appropriateness of the short story to the 20th century condition which lends itself to the 21st century birth of micro fiction. The proximity of 20th century man to the 20th century short story was so great that they metaphorically stumbled over each other. How can one accurately define the present historical context for example, we require the aftermath in order to accurately gauge the impact of events here and now. Thus, definition demands an adequate distance from the entity being scrutinised, and for the short story, so fitting to the 20th century, this distance simply did not exist. Micro fiction has emerged as this proximate form for the 21st century, its content perusable in roughly the same amount of time as a Google search, or a scroll through Facebook – the new chronological metrics for modern man. Its very emergence compounded by that essential entity in the establishment of any new form – the anthology (Shapard, 2014). Micro fiction is a deliberately short form for a deliberately, that is technologically, quicker world. Furthermore, as if an evolutionary step onwards from the short story - by labelling itself in quantitative terms (a certain number of words, or more generally as being as short as possible) – micro fiction becomes self-definitive. Micro fiction imbibes the rationalism of the modern western world, no longer is there some vague religious power at work granting the fiction a deeper quiddity which inherently binds it to all other micro fictions, it is instead the blatant shortness which makes it micro fiction. General guideline, vague, principles which govern other forms such as the novel or poetry, are done away with. Suddenly, stories must be either one sentence (Monkeybicycle, 2014) or exactly one hundred words (100wordstory, 2014). It is what it clearly is, and this lucid clarity has the side effect of perhaps illuminating more clearly the nature of the short story. Now with a new dominant form (which is not to say popular, merely it most fittingly ties to our *Zeitgeist*) there finally exists a formal distance between our 21st century generation and the 19th/20th century dominant short story. The shortness of short stories and micro fictions, natural in the short story and synthetic in micro fiction, unifies these works beyond the cohesiveness of other prose forms. Unlike, say, a lengthy novel which must be read in totality throughout several reading sessions, short fictions are generally consumed in a single reading. Edgar Allen Poe, one of the first short story theoreticians, wrote:

the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting. (May, 1995, p. 60)

CONTRASTING SHORT FICTIONS

Short fictions, then, consolidate not simply themselves, but also the very acts of reading taken upon them by the viewer of the work. The key contrasting feature between short stories and micro fictions being that short stories are perused via deliberate effort in much the same way one reads the next chapter of a nightly novel. There is a sustained, albeit terse, concentrated conscious effort. Micro fictions, however, are naturally unwilling to demand the total concentration of a reader. They are read in a single sitting, even glance, but if, during the reading, one's entire consciousness falls into a micro fiction, the fiction has, in some sense, failed. The work is no longer self-governed by its curtness and loses its source of self-definition. Take J Matthew Zoss's *Houston, We Have A Problem*: "I'm sorry, but there's no enough air in here for everyone. I'll tell them you were a hero" (Swartwood, 2014). Search too much for the story here, who exactly is talking to who and you will end fruitless, there is simply not enough plot references to gauge this level of information. The reader must stop reading the text and begin exploring their mind to witness the array of interpretations. Indeed, if micro fictions are, as previously imagined, all scaffolding and no building, all detail and no story, then they are not wholly dissimilar to a cooking recipe, and if you lose yourself too fully to the prose of the recipe, the meal itself will never manifest. The recipe ultimately fails because the reader fails to apply it. Whilst then the short story is built to enthrall the reader in its world for its duration, micro fiction exists as a semiotic signpost pointing outside of itself, to the reader's own mind, as the locus point for its definition. Here then, the post-modernist thrust behind micro fiction's contemporary dominance becomes apparent. In *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* Charles May indicates an evolution in the modern short story, out of which, I contend, the very impetus for micro fiction has emerged:

Fictional self-consciousness in the short story does not allow the reader to maintain the comfortable assumption that what is depicted is real; instead, the reader is made uncomfortably aware that the only reality is the depiction itself - the language act of the fiction-making process. (May, 1995, p. 84)

The short story reached its zenith in the 20th century, where the monumental ability of so few words to create such a vivid landscape for the reader shattered the simulacrum of the reading experience. The reader could no longer be absorbed into such a vivid world, a world perhaps more real than reality itself. Micro fiction thus emerged counterpoint to the short story. Where the short story created a vivid plot out of finely tuned words (orchestrating its own perfected demise), micro fiction's words are so finely tuned that they do not even appear on the page. The fiction-making process is itself commissioned to the reader.

Thus there exists a post-modernistic centrality to micro fictions, with them existing only in a state of reader-orientated potentiality. The short story's authorial harmoniousness has been usurped and upstaged by Roland Barthes's death of the author – the reader, not author, is kingmaker in micro fiction.

Summarisation is the final, perhaps unlikely, avenue which illuminates the short story against its protégé – micro fiction. Gerlach writes, "Plot could best be regarded as an activity, from the perspective of the writer or the reader, rather than a summary of events" (Gerlach, 2004, p. 45) and whilst the impetus behind this comment may sprout from the perspective of plot, it is its apparent differentiation to summarisation which is most intriguing. Indeed, as already discussed, plot is the activity of the author impinged upon the mind of the reader in short stories, whereas plot itself manifests in the reader's mind for micro fiction. Plot aside, consider summary. In the short story one may consider the summary to be shorter than the tale itself. In micro fictions, however, the synopsis of events (or non-events, or imagined events) greatly exceeds the content of the work. Consider, for example, that staple of the micro fiction canon, the six word story most often attributed to Hemingway "For sale: baby shoes, never worn". Here, three pieces of almost arbitrary information assemble themselves into plot in the reader's mind (most commonly that the writer of the advert is the mother who has had a miscarriage), and any possible explanation will be longer than the six word story itself. Whilst no plot exists on paper, its plot and synopsis are obtainable. However, the vignette, I argue, is impossible to summarise. This emerges as its key defining characteristic in relation to short stories of micro fictions. The vignette is the poetic equivalent of prose.

O'Connor writes that "it is only too easy for a short-story writer to become a little too much of an artist. Hemingway, for instance, has so studied the artful approach to the significant moment that we sometimes end up with too much significance and too little information" (O'Connor, 2003, p. 25). The vignette is, in some sense, the most primitive and primal of all the short fiction forms – it is this pure significance. It is pure artistry for art's sake. A modernist sensibility which has survived both modernism and postmodernism. Consider first and foremost its very definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a short descriptive literary sketch" or "a brief incident or scene (as in a play or a movie)" (Merriam-Webster). It is short - this binds it to the other short fiction explored in this essay. But, crucially, it is descriptive. It emphasises not plot, nor information (with which to construct plot), but the art of description and illustration. Sylvia Ney comments on the vignette as follows:

A vignette is a short, well written scene. It does **not** have a plot, but it does reveal something about the elements in it. It may reveal character, mood or tone. It may have a theme or idea of its own the author wants to convey. It is the description of the scene or character that is important. (Ney, 2011)

Communicating this “importance” is successful if it makes the reader emotionally respond. *Vine Leaves*, an online literary journal, specifies that “A successful vignette must evoke emotion. If you can make us feel, you’re on the right track” (Vine Leaves, 2014). Consider a short vignette published that very journal called flashback by Patricia Ranzoni: “The softness from dialing the phone is like lifting the lid to my music box (*Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, 2014, p. 17).

There is no plot here, no information which could potentially distribute a plot as such – just a pure poetic release. It exists as a modernist rupture in the banal every day, illuminating the instant often bypassed as trenchantly powerful. The short story is artistry via plot, micro fictions are artistry via information (how apt for the currently reigning information age), but the vignette is artistry in and of itself. It floats above, and diffuses between all other forms, unconcerned with plot or information and instead deeply, meditatively focused upon the significance of its own linguistically reflective existence. Is the vignette the same as flash fiction, defined differently? In conclusion then, there still exists turmoil within the definitive spaces and boundaries between short fiction forms (the short story, micro fiction and the vignette). A cursory search online reveals the shared lack of understanding between these interrelated genres (Yahoo Questions). However, through sustained study of the respective dominance and obscurity of the short story and micro fictions, key categorising features emerge: short stories emphasise plot, micro fiction emphasise detail (as a potential gateway to plot), and the vignette emphasises emotive response to description.

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RESUMO

Tanto o conto literário moderno quanto a microficcão têm a brevidade em comum como característica definidora; são, no entanto, produtos duma época diferente e consequentemente de circunstâncias diferentes. Contrariamente ao que acontece com a short story, a micro-fiction não tem encontrado grandes opositores, nem críticas severas. Entre estas duas categorias de micronarrativas existe ainda a vignette, e pergunta-se qual o lugar deste género no concerto dos subgéneros da narrativa breve.

ABSTRACT

Both short story and micro/ flash fiction have brevity as their common core feature. However, they are both products of a different epoch and surged in different circumstances. Contrary to the short story, micro fiction and flash fiction have not met with opposition from within (the novel) or from without (severe and condemning criticism). Finally one may ask: what is the place and the nature of the only occasionally mentioned vignette.