

How First Wave Short Story Poetics came into Being: E. A. Poe and Brander Matthews

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If the first peculiar truth of the American short story is that Edgar Allan Poe is its patron saint, then the second peculiar truth is that the genre is a purely American art form.

ANDREW LEVY, 1993: 27.

In the Western¹ literary tradition, the discourse of short story² poetics derives largely from two critical texts by Edgar Allan Poe: «The Philosophy of Composition» (1846) and the review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's «Twice Told Tales» (1842)³. These texts

¹ Western literary studies also frequently cite Chekhov and Maupassant as influential to the short story genre. Maupassant deals with the nature of short fiction in only a few writings, such as the preface to his novel *Pierre et Jean*, which addresses the aesthetics of realism. Chekhov's work deals with the short story more extensively, albeit via thoughts dispersed throughout letters to his brother Alexander and to various friends. He essentially discusses a literary «economy of means». Critics have not explicitly drawn from Chekhov's theoretical writing, however, as they have from Poe. While Poe was not widely accepted in the United States at first, he was translated into French by Baudelaire, and until now both Latin American writers and critics and Portuguese scholars of the short story are heavily indebted to Poe's legacy. Thus, Poe's reputation as a critic extends beyond the English-speaking world.

² The term «short story» will denote the genre of short fiction as generally understood today, while the hyphenated «Short-story» will refer specifically to the concept proposed by Brander Matthews.

³ The full significance of these two texts for the short story field may be appreciated by considering how Charles May excerpts them, along with other texts by Poe, in *The New Short Story Theories*. By compiling these fragments, May suggests indirectly that an underlying concept links them. May also includes an

were so influential that scholars have credited Poe as the «inventor» of modern short story theory. Despite the importance of his work to the genre, the oft-acknowledged founder of what was later regarded as America's national literary form⁴ made no significant use of the precise term «short story»⁵. Moreover, Poe's theoretical groundwork might not have persisted, were it not for «The Philosophy of the Short-story» by Columbia professor Brander Matthews⁶. In the five decades after Poe put forth his ideas about short fiction, they would not be taken up by any other critics, but due to Matthews' work beginning in 1901, notions originating with Poe have held considerable sway in short story theory to the present. Indeed, it might be most useful to conceive of Poe as the founder of American short story criticism,⁷ and of Matthews

1842 review of Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* entitled «Mystery» (May, 1994: 66-67), originally published in Graham's magazine, and another one from Eureka (ibid.: 69-71). Curiously, May does not include any excerpts from Poe's «The Poetic Principle,» first published posthumously in the August, 1850 edition of *Home Journal* and in *Sartain's Union Magazine* in October, 1850. This essay repeats many of the same ideas put forth in «The Philosophy of Composition» but is known in its own right for a statement about poetry: «Poetry is the rhythmical creation of Beauty» (ibid.: 61-72).

- ⁴ Andrew Levy cites the American professor Archibald Bouton, the handbook-writer Walter Pitkin and the Russian critic Boris Eichenbaum as attesting to the short story's American genesis (qtd. in Levy, 1993: 28), before proceeding to discuss it in greater detail as «The National Art Form» (ibid.: 30). This myth persists until the present. In the preface to the *Penguin Book of American Short Stories*, James Cochrane writes: «American Literature and the short story might be said to have come of age at about the same time, and this, along with something in the bustling and energetic American temperament, might go some way towards explaining why the two go together as well as they do» (Cochrane, 2000: 7-8).
- ⁵ Poe uses it once, for instance, in the preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque*, but not so much as a genre label as a loose term for fiction that is merely short: «The epithets "Grotesque" and "Arabesque" will be found to indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales here published. But from the fact that, during the period of some two or three years, I have written five-and-twenty short stories whose general character may be so briefly defined» (Poe, 2004: 483).
- ⁶ In *The Reality of Artifice*, Charles May writes that «Poe's theories about the uniqueness of the short story became firmly embedded within American literary criticism with the publication of Matthews' *The Philosophy of the Short-Story* in 1901, whose title indicates that he was influenced by Poe's «The Philosophy of Composition» as by his *Twice-Told Tales* reviews» (May, 1995: 109).
- ⁷ Poe's status as founder has been questioned, particularly and surprisingly in postwar German short story criticism. Kuipers argues not only that Poe never used the term «short story» but also that Poe actually never wrote any real short stories, and that he is instead the author of simplified novellas (Kuipers, 1970: 9). Alfred Weber, meanwhile, cites not Poe but Washington Irving as the first to write about the nature of short fiction in America, for instance, in his letter to Henry Brevoort from December 11th, 1824. Kuipers' argument fails, however, to distinguish properly between Poe as a critic and Poe as a writer of fictional tales. Poe is a founder on account of his critical notions; he was certainly not the first to write short fiction. As for Irving, meanwhile, his writing about short fiction was never accepted by a broad community of scholars in the field, and thus never attained the influence of Poe's criticism, nor did it garner him Poe's reputation as founder.

as helping not merely to canonise Poe's work, but also to transpose his critical findings into the realm of theory⁸.

For American literature, the first quarter of the twentieth century may be deemed an era of formalised poetics in two senses. Firstly, the growing market for magazines birthed a new generation of writers, not all of whose works have remained in high regard, and some of whom worked within the popular short story genre primarily in pursuit of easy fame and profit. In such a context of commercialised literary production, formulaic short fiction inevitably flourished, and with it a set of formal conventions. Secondly, and almost in counterpoint, short story poetics arose as an academic discourse. Scholarly publications of the period evince competitive efforts among the East Coast literati to produce a critical treatise on the short story, with major Ivy League academics attempting to define the nature of the genre by drawing on the two seminal works by Poe, with some additional debt owed to the work of Matthews. As American critical discourse on short fiction proliferated, so grew the notion of the short story as an American literary form. Relatively new as a defined genre, and thus a natural parallel for the relatively young American nation itself, the short story was readily viewed as an American product⁹. European criticism of «The Philosophy of the Short-story» would deal precisely with this notion that Matthews «invented» an American genre to rival the European novel.

What follows, then, is a comprehensive account of Poe's ideas and how Matthews borrowed them¹⁰: a project all the more necessary since the bulk of neither modern short story criticism nor theory, since Charles May's 1976 *Short Story Theories* (May, 1995: 124), has fully escaped the paradigms that Poe constructed and Matthews furthered. Indeed, most attempts at defining the genre¹¹ have further entrenched and validated the critical routes designated by Poe and Matthews. Therefore, before a detailed account of modern criticism can be given, it will be necessary to examine Poe's criticism on its own, prior to comparing it with Matthews' theory. An anonymous critique from the *London Academy* will also be considered, then lastly a succinct examination of how short story poetics progressed after Poe and Matthews in the early twentieth century.

⁸ Levy refers to Charles May's skeptical assertion that « the development of the short story in this country was profoundly affected by the fact that Brander Matthews simply took seriously Poe's somewhat doubtful account of the writing of «The Raven». In «The Philosophy of Composition»- and was in turn taken seriously by generations of short story practitioners (Levy, 1993: 11).

⁹ Levy writes that «[t]he nationalist claim has proven so useful that it has withstood the most vitriolic objections, and even incorporated them» (Levy, 1993: 28).

¹⁰ As the present text aims not to trace the development of short story poetics through the first decades of the twentieth century, only brief mention is made of the «how-to» handbooks that instructed short story writing, and of the now superseded scholarship informed by Matthews.

¹¹ These efforts have proven exhaustive for short story critics outside as well as within America.

Edgar Allan Poe

Throughout both «The Philosophy of Composition» and his review of Hawthorne's «Twice-Told Tales», Poe insists that fiction-writing proceeds best from the choice of an overall «effect» that the author wishes to create. All other choices made in the composition of the text should contribute to this effect. The following citation is the *locus classicus* of short story theory:

A skilful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain *single effect* to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such tone as may best serve him in establishing the preconceived effect. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (Poe, 1984: 586)¹²

While Poe clearly operates from the presupposition that a single author actively constructs a narrative, he also allows (and perhaps demands) that a hypothetical reader should affect the author's choices. The assumed reading audience has needs and limitations that the author must consider:

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. (Poe, 1984: 15)

Andrew Levy outlines the implications for author and reader, citing Poe's «faith that the artist's intention can be communicated completely uncontaminated to a kind of tabula rasa reader» (Levy, 1993: 23). In «The Philosophy of Composition», while Poe begins by theorising the importance of «effect» to the construction of potentially any literary work (even a longer form like the novel), he moves toward a focus on poems: those sufficiently long to convey such an effect, yet still short enough to be read in one sitting, taking his own poem «The Raven» as his example (Poe, 1984: 14-25).¹³ In the review of «Twice-told Tales», Poe explicitly identifies the short «prose tale» or

¹² Poe elaborates on the author's technical process in «The Philosophy of Composition»:

«Having chosen... a vivid effect, I consider whether it can best be wrought by incident or tone . . . looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect» (Poe, 1984: 13-14).

¹³ Levy cites Charles E. May's doubts about the accuracy of Poe's account of writing «The Raven» (Levy, 1993: 10-11). A interesting essay on how capitalism had its grips on both the structure of the short story and the management of short story magazines in the last quarter of the nineteenth century is Joseph Urgo (see works cited list).

«narrative» as one that can be read in a single sitting, the better to convey unmitigated the intended effect:

We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality*. . . . In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. (Poe, 1984: 572)

He then proceeds to characterise the tale as a medium that often aims for «*Truth*» (Poe's emphasis) – whether the impression be of «terror, or passion, or horror» – in contrast to the poem, which best conveys «Beauty» (ibid.: 573).¹⁴

In addition to qualifying how the short prose tale should be created and received, Poe privileges the genre in the hierarchy of literary forms only after the poem (ibid.: 585). In his ranking, the novel places low on account of its length and inability to be read in one sitting (ibid.: 586). Indeed, in the first case, where the tale is compared to the poem, the more elusive, almost unfathomable qualities are underlined, whereas in the second – the contrast of the novel with the tale – the greater economy of the latter's prose is duly underscored, often resulting in quantitative descriptions. Poe begins his review of «*Twice Told Tales*» proclaiming Hawthorne a «privately-admired and publicly-unappreciated man of genius» giving the following reasons for Hawthorne's lack of acclaim: «first, that Mr. Hawthorne *is* a poor man, and, secondly, that he *is not* a ubiquitous quack» (ibid.: 578). Poe points toward a disregard for Hawthorne's frequent medium of the tale, in what is arguably the first acknowledgement in American literary criticism that shorter fiction is comparatively devalued. (Charles May will later lament this same failure of critics and authors to appreciate the genre¹⁵). Poe precisely decries that literary works are often merited on account of quantity or length rather than quality:

¹⁴ It should be noted that Poe's criticism was translated by Charles Baudelaire, and that Poe's ideas about poetry were well appreciated in France and throughout Europe – certainly more so than in America. Moreover, his work regarding the short story never had the impact in France that his treatises on poetry had. There is no comparable trail of treatises on the *Nouvelle* (Baudelaire translated «short story» as «*Nouvelle*»).

¹⁵ May's first collection of critical articles on the short story opens with Thomas Gullason's account of the genre's depreciation. Levy summarizes Gullason's argument that «the short story has often been treated as an apprentice prose form, a practice field for authors too inexperienced, unsophisticated, or otherwise incapable of composing a novel» (Levy, 1993: 46).

Fred Lewis Pattee sums up the devaluation of the short story as follows: «The tale, the short story, to most of the American writers, was an inferior thing, a fragment, a convenient, apprentice exercise, a stepping stone to better things—the dignified novel and the stately romance. Stories shortened to magazine lengths were good pot-boilers and useful exercises for those denied the gift of construction in the large, but not things to be lingered over and thought of in terms of artistry or finality» (Pattee, 1923: 292).

There has long existed in literature a fatal and unfounded prejudice, which it will be the office of this age to overthrow – the idea that the mere bulk of a work must enter largely into our estimate of its merit. (ibid.: 583-84)

As Poe counters, however, «perseverance is one thing, and genius quite another» (ibid.:584). Her refers to an instalment of the «North American Review» which «honestly avows that it has little opinion of the mere tale» (ibid.: 584).

Nevertheless, Poe persists in championing the genre: «The tale proper affords the fairest field which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose, for the exercise of the highest genius» (ibid.: 584). Slightly higher than the tale in Poe's hierarchy of prose and verse forms, however, ranks the rhyming poem that can be read in an hour. This medium, according to Poe, is the best outlet for a writer to exhibit his genius:

Were I bidden to say how this genius could be most advantageously employed for the best display of its powers, I should answer without hesitation, «in the composition of a rhymed poem not to exceed in length what might be perused in an hour». (ibid.: 584)

By specifying an amount of time in which to read the poem, Poe implies a specific reader with assumed limitations, interests and needs; this construction of a reading audience is one of the most important features of Poe's theory. That poetry should aim for the reader's excitement is germane to Poe's poetics: «A poem must intensely excite» he insists, «Excitement is its province, its essentiality» (ibid.: 584). The intended excitement, though, can be difficult to preserve according to Poe:

[A]ll excitement is, from a psychic necessity transient. It cannot be sustained through a poem of great length. In the course of an hour's reading, at most, it flags, fails; then the poem is, in effect no longer such.

Thus, for Poe, a long poem is problematic. He cites *Paradise Lost* as an example, deeming Milton's epic too unwieldy for a single sustained reading process; any excitement created is diffused by the poem's division into smaller parts:

Men admire, but are wearied with «Paradise Lost»¹⁶ for platitude follows platitude, *inevitably* at regular interspaces (the depressions between the waves of excitement,) until the poem, (which, properly considered, is but a succession of brief poems,) having been brought to its end, we discover that the seems of our pleasure and of displeasure have been very nearly equal. The absolute, ultimate or aggregate effect of any epic under the sun is, for these reasons a nullity. (ibid.: 585)

¹⁶ Note the casualness with which Poe dismisses such a revered work of the English literary canon!

Conversely, a poem cannot be too short, else it approach an epigram, which «may produce a sharp or vivid, but never a profound or enduring impression» (ibid.: 585). Poe explains, via analogy, the creation of excitement: «There must be a dropping of water on the rock; there must be the pressing steadily down of the stamp upon the wax» (ibid.: 585).

Having articulated his insights into poetry, Poe applies them to prose fiction. In his hierarchy of prose forms, the tale occupies the highest place – above the novel, as the novel has less capacity for unified impression, and as such, cannot create the desired effect of excitement¹⁷.

The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons analogous to those which render length objectionable in the poem. As the novel cannot be read at one sitting, it cannot avail itself from the immense benefit of totality. Worldly interests, intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, counteract and annul the impressions intended. (ibid.: 586)

The tale, being more feasible for uninterrupted reading, renders its reader less susceptible to such intrusions, thus better conveying the author's design as an unmitigated whole. In Poe's scheme, during the hour of perusal, the reader should be under the writer's control.

After making these suppositions on the length and quality of poetry and prose, Poe offers a *modus operandi* for the author of tales. The following passage from «The Philosophy of Composition» is perhaps the most important in short story criticism because it traces from its beginning the mechanistic principle that will dominate the first decades of the short story in the twentieth century. Here the principle of «excitement» recurs:

When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect – they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of the soul – not of intellect, or of heart . . . Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes – that objects should be attained through means best adapted for their attainment – no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation alluded to is most readily attained in the poem. Now the object, Truth, or the satisfaction of the intellect, and the object Passion, or the excitement of the heart, are, although attainable, to a certain extent, in poetry, far more readily attainable in prose. (ibid.: 16)

¹⁷ Charles May attributes the intense excitement to the compact form of the medium: «the shortness of the form seems inevitably to require some sense of intensity or intensification of structure» (May, 1995: 116).

Poe does not specifically compose a poetics of short fiction in «The Philosophy of Composition»; rather, his notions about short fiction fall into a more broadly encompassing poetics concerned primarily with poetry, prose and their effects on the reader. The text on Hawthorne, meanwhile, is mainly a detailed book review discussing the causes and reasons for the author's unpopularity, but again stressing the unique quality and unified effect of the short story. These ideas, however, Poe put into thorough and extensive practice; as Eugene Current-Garcia writes, «virtually all of Poe's short fiction was produced in accordance with a set of principles that were the outgrowth of a gradually developing but clearly defined theory of composition» (Current-Garcia, 1985: 59).

While contemporaneous literary criticism tends to favour longer works, Poe argues against the trend, equating quality not with length but impact – indeed, even suggesting that greater length detracts from an overall unified impact. In Poe's hierarchy of literary forms, the short rhyming poem and the prose tale rank above the epic poem and the novel respectively. As Lubbers shows, Poe accounts for literature's psychological impact¹⁸ on the reader (Lubbers, 1977: 2). An author must provoke excitement in the reader by following certain rules of composition; Poe discusses these rules, however, more in relation to his own poem «The Raven» than he does in reviewing Hawthorne's tales. That Poe's principles of poetic composition implicitly apply to the short story reaffirms the closeness (in Poe's critical perception) between poem and prose tale.

Brander Matthews

In the five decades after Poe's critical statements on short fiction, no vocal proponents of his ideas would emerge.¹⁹ As critics like Charles May observe, it was through the work of Brander Matthews that Poe's ideas would be ensconced (May, 1995: 109). In his 1901 *The Philosophy of the Short-story*,²⁰ Matthews builds on Poe's premises to give Western literary criticism arguably its first poetics on the genre that would

¹⁸ Specifically, Lubbers proposes that Poe's critical stance is best summarized as a production aesthetics with a view to the psychology of the reader (Lubbers, 1977: 2).

¹⁹ As Pattee notes, «There is no evidence in all the critical writings of the mid-century or in any of the literary correspondence of the time that a single reader in 1842 had seen [Poe's] review of Hawthorne or that anyone had profited at all from the brilliant technique of his «Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.» For a generation after his death his tales we mentioned only as terror compelling things, strange exotics standing gruesomely alone almost to be regretted among the conventional creations of American literature» (Pattee, 1923: 145).

²⁰ Matthews developed this text from previously published articles of his own.

commonly become known as the «short story». Matthews' theoretical project is perhaps the first to centre on short fiction as a category of literature, rather than to review short works by writers like Hawthorne, Chekhov, Irving, Perkins or Poe himself. Matthews defines his focus:

the Short-story – in spite of the fact that in our language it has no name of its own – is one of the few sharply defined literary forms. It is a *genre*, as M. Brunetière calls it, a species, as a naturalist might call it, as individual as the Lyric itself and as various. It is as distinct an entity as the Epic, as Tragedy, as Comedy. (Matthews, 1901: 73)

Matthews thus identifies a new genre.²¹ Short tales or novellas may long have flourished and spawned criticism, but here a separate form is discerned and described, and a theoretical framework established. As stated, Matthews constructs his framework on the basis of Poe's ideas, while revising an existing genre label²². Neither label nor concept were thus completely new, but the combination of the two was, and not only did it come at the right time, but it would also inform short story theory for a whole century. Poe himself, as mentioned, never uses the term «short story» In both his review of «Twice Told Tales» and in «The Philosophy of Composition», he instead refers variously to «the tale proper», the «prose tale», the «short prose narrative» and the «brief tale», as Pattee observes (1923: 291). The generic distinction initiated by Poe would grow more pronounced in Matthews' discourse.

Indeed, signalling his identification of a short prose form separate from the «mere story which is short» (1901: 15), Matthews coins the capitalised and hyphenated compound term, «Short-story», then proceeds to define the term as much by what it is *not* as by what it *is*. Matthews differentiates the genre from others characterised solely by their short length. «I have written “Short-stories” with capital S and a hyphen» he writes, «because I wished to emphasise the distinction between the Short-story and story which is merely short. The Short-story is a high and difficult department of fiction» (ibid.: 24-25). Matthews thus asserts himself as the first critic to identify the genre in such specific terms. While working on conceptual grounds laid by Poe, Matthews adds several notions of his own. He goes further than Poe, for instance, to

²¹ Matthews is even so bold as to locate the new genre within a literary lineage alongside such Classical forms as the epic poem, and the tragedy and comedy of Greek drama (Matthews, 1901: 73).

²² Frederick Lewis Pattee notes that, while the term «short story» was already in use by the 1860s and 1870s, it would not, before Poe, have denoted a specific genre: «It connoted simply that for general magazine purposes fiction must be severely shortened. That the tale, or the short story, was a distinct genre, necessarily short as a lyric is necessarily short, following laws distinct from those ruling the novel and its abbreviated form the novelette, had been realized in its fullness by no one, save perhaps Poe» (Pattee, 1923: 291).

define the «Short-story» as a narrative genre distinct in «kind» (and not just length) from the novel (ibid.: 15). Its main distinguishing quality, meanwhile, Matthews takes directly from Poe: «[a] true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression» (Matthews, 1907: 15). He extrapolates from Poe to interpret this «unity» or «totality» as manifest in specific elements of the narrative: «[a] Short-story», he states, «deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation» (16). Matthews highlights links between Poe and the critical traditions developed from Aristotle,²³ by likening the Short-story to French classical drama with its «the three false unities» which Matthews argues that the Short-story observes²⁴. He relates this manifestation of unity to Poe's stipulations about a text's length:

Poe's paradox that a single poem cannot greatly exceed a hundred lines in length under penalty of ceasing to be one poem and breaking into a string of poems, may serve to suggest the precise difference between the Short-story and the Novel. The Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of episodes. Thus the Short-story has, what the Novel cannot have, the effect of «totality», as Poe called it, the unity of impression. (ibid.: 16-17)

Considered in light of Poe's commentary on how an author should proceed from a chosen effect, the Short-story's shorter length, therefore, may be seen as a *consequence* of its essential unity²⁵. For Matthews, as mentioned, whereas the Short-story differs from the novel in *essence*, other short fiction is distinct only for being short: «The difference between a Novel and a Novelet is one of length only: a Novelet is a brief novel» (ibid.:15), for example. Matthews insists that the Short-story is more than a mere excerpt from a longer story or a chapter from a novel, but a complete unified work in itself:

²³ Levy notes Poe's debt «to Aristotle's Poetics for its discussion of unity» (Levy, 1993: 23).

²⁴ According to Matthews, «the Short-story fulfils the three false unities of the French classic drama: it shows one action, in one place, on one day» (Matthews, 1901: 16).

²⁵ The practical applicability of these notions to how most short story writers work, however, is contestable. Levy cuts to the heart of the potential debate, noting how on one hand, American literature produced the short story as a "project" or product, «developed by commercial and academic forces, and infused by nationalist expectations» and on the other hand, also conceived of a less formalized aesthetic movement: «the natural and spontaneous short stories of freely acting individuals unconstrained by the definitional fervor of the project» (Levy, 1993: 55). The former scheme, which highlights the commercial aspects, would seem to negate the idea that short stories are short as a natural result of their unity. The latter model would more readily account for Matthews' argument that the Short-story is short because the author has chosen to write a more unified work that naturally entails concision, yet even Matthews exhibits the «definitional fervor».

Of a truth the Short-story is not only not a chapter out of a novel, or an incident or an episode extracted from a longer tale, but at its best it impresses the reader with the belief that it would be spoiled if it were made larger, or if it were incorporated. (ibid.: 17)

Again, Matthew echoes Poe's emphasis on a single impression easily contained by a more compact form.

Matthews highlights still another pertinent difference – one of content – between the Short-story and the novel: the latter «must be a love-tale while the short story need not deal with love at all» (ibid.: 18).²⁶ He relates this lack of dependence on the love-plot to the form's compactness²⁷, observing that, in contrast to the novel, «the Short-story, being brief, does not need a love-interest to hold its parts together» (ibid.: 21), but must rather exhibit concision and originality and can benefit from «a touch of fantasy» (ibid.: 22-23)²⁸.

When Matthews *does* consider the more ostensible difference in length between the novel and the Short-story, he analyses the options afforded a writer by the narrative's length. Within the last quarter of the twentieth century and especially after Charles May's reinvigoration of short story theory, the contrast with the novel would gain precedence over the analogy with poetry in defining the short story's features. Matthews articulates the difference thus: «The novelist may take his time; he has abundant room to turn about. The writer of Short-stories must be concise, and compression, a vigorous compression, is essential. For him, more than for any one else, the half is more than the whole» (ibid.: 22-23). Matthews also attributes to the short story an originality comparatively absent from the novel. His argument and tone here confirm that his project is not of mere objective description but rather a subjective defence or promotion of a new American genre:

the novelist may be commonplace, he may bend his best energies to the photographic reproduction of the actual; if he show us a cross-section of real life we are content; but the writer of Short-stories must have originality and ingenuity. (ibid.: 23)

Notably, Matthews follows Poe's privileging of the tale over longer forms like the novel, albeit via his own three-part strategy. Firstly, he differentiates the «Short-story»

²⁶ The notion of love as a necessary subject or theme even to the novel, however, is a polemical caveat, which Matthews is quick to modify; he cites *Robinson Crusoe* as one major novel unconcerned with romance, but also (in keeping with Poe's requirement that all elements contribute to a consistent effect) mentions that a Short-story writer may address love if it «enters into his tale naturally and to its enriching» (Matthews, 1901: 19).

²⁷ Observe how, in this instance, the Short-story's shortness is a *cause* rather than an *effect*, in contrast to Matthews' earlier reasoning that the Short-story is short due to its main characteristic of unity.

²⁸ Henry Seidel Canby studies at length the supernatural and specifically terror-inducing qualities of Poe's short prose, tracing them in part to Poe's influence by German literature (Canby, 1909: 228-231).

from the novel in order to highlight the superior essential qualities of the former genre, foremost among them its aforementioned totality: «a Short-story has unity as a Novel cannot have it» (ibid.: 15). Secondly, Matthews contrasts the genre against other contemporaneous types of short fiction, then reviews the genre's development, beginning with predecessors in French literature. In a way distinct from Poe's approach, Matthews' defence of the «Short-story» takes on some distinctly nationalistic overtones in the third part of his comparative analysis. Whereas Poe views the genre hierarchy from an effect-focused perspective comparable to reader-response methods²⁹, Matthews defends the new genre by setting it, despite its European roots, against the Victorian English «three-decker» novel³⁰. Following Matthews' lead, other short story theorists exhibit this defensively nationalistic strain³¹. This school of criticism maintains that the still-young American nation readily contributed a new literary genre, and one superior to the European novel.

Moreover, Poe's privileging of the tale, as may be recalled, relates to his esteem for poetic forms. Reflecting this connection, Matthews parallels the opposition of poetry versus prose to that of the Short-story versus the novel:

The difference in spirit and in form between the Lyric and the Epic is scarcely greater than the difference between the Short-story and the Novel, and the «Raven» and «How we brought the good news from Ghent to Aix» are not more unlike the «Lady of the Lake» and «Paradise Lost» in form and in spirit, than the «Luck of the Roaring Camp» and the «Man without a Country» two typical Short-stories, are unlike «Vanity Fair» and the «Heart of Midlothian» two typical novels. (ibid.: 17-18)

Thus, Matthews faithfully preserves Poe's suggestion that the tale (or «Short-story» in Matthews' discourse) is closer to poetry than to prose, and thus intimates that it is a superior prose form for being so³².

In Matthews' appendix to *The Short Story* (1907), an anthology of writings that illustrate in practice what he developed in theory, his theoretical writing is at once

²⁹ Poe's ideas differ from reader-response theory, however, in his ascription of total control to the author. The effect on the reader may be the important goal, but, for Poe, it is a result of authorial intention. As Andrew Levy hypothesizes, «Poe offers the possibility that the author's intent is all that matters in *the entire literary transaction*: Critics, audience, and publishers all disappear from the loop of creation, publication, dissemination, and canonization» (Levy, 1993: 23).

³⁰ Matthews attributes the greater proliferation of Short-stories in America to the commercial demand for the form engendered by the magazine industry, whereas «in the British magazine the serial Novel is the one thing of consequence» (Matthews, 1901: 56).

³¹ Levy observes that this movement was concomitant with the generic development of the short story form: «The nationalist claim developed during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, at about the same time that critics began to insist that short story was a genre of literature» (Levy, 1993: 30).

³² As Charles May notes, Poe «placed the short story next to the lyric as offering the opportunity for the highest practice of literary art» (May, 1995: 114).

more modern and dynamic than in *The Philosophy of the Short-story*, with more adept analysis touching on character as well as plot and setting to varying degrees of respective prominence, and in various modes of interplay and integration, all depending upon the specific kind of «Short-story» and the style of its author. In these three components of form, forever in interaction, Matthews observes once again an essential difference of short from longer fiction:

These three elements are the plot, the characters, and the setting. The novelist may pay equal attention to what happens, to the persons to whom these things happen. But the limitations of space forbid this variety to the short-story writer; he has to make his choice among the three. If he centres his efforts on his plot, he has no time to elaborate either character or background... If he focuses the interest on a character, his plotting must be summary, and his setting can only be sketched in... If he concentrates the reader's attention on the environment, on the place where the event happens, on the atmosphere so to speak, he must use character and incident only to intensify the impression of the place and time... (ibid.: 391)

As discussed, critics generally recognise Poe rather than Matthews as the creator of modern short fiction criticism³³, although in regards to the literary form, some might confer greater credit on de Maupassant and Chekhov³⁴. In terms of critical influence, however, Poe still takes precedence³⁵, his two main critical texts on the subject remain frequently cited in studies of the short story and its origins. Matthews has served primarily to cement Poe's place in the canon of short story theory³⁶.

³³ Canby even goes so far as to rank fiction-writing as the least of Poe's talents, reckoning that he was «[poet] and critic before he was a story-teller» (Canby, 1909: 238).

³⁴ The greater extent to which the short story flourished on the American literary scene may account for Poe's more widespread recognition as founder of the genre and its criticism.

³⁵ Moreover, Charles E. May, posits that by initiating critical discourse on the form, Poe actually helped to construct the genre itself: «Because a genre only truly comes into being when the conventions that constitute it are articulated within the larger conceptual context of literature as a whole, Poe's critical comments on the form in the 1830s are largely responsible for the birth of the short story as a unique genre» (May, 1995: 108)

³⁶ Mary Rohrberger contributed the first full-length study of the short story in the 1960s, after a period during which interest in the genre had declined. Rohrberger writes the following about Matthews: «In the study of the short story Matthews' work was of great historical importance. Following the publication of his study, commentators who approached the short story as a distinct genre took their critical approach from him. Although they acknowledged Poe as the first theorizer upon the form, they discussed the short story in the terms that Matthews set forth. Matthews had not altogether minimized Poe's importance. He had admitted that Poe was aware that the tale of which he wrote was a distinct kind, but Matthews believed that Poe did not formulate the distinction. Nevertheless, it is clear that Poe's review had profound effect on Matthews as well as on those students of the form who came after him» (Rohrberger, 1966: 12)

The Short-story in comparison and contrast to other sub-genres.

Besides discussing the Short-story in opposition to the novel, Matthews attempts to define the genre as it relates to other types of short fiction prevalent in his time, such as the French *vers de société*:

It is to be noted as a curious coincidence that there is no exact word in English to designate either *vers de société* or the Short-story, and yet in no language are there better *vers de société* or Short-stories than in English. It may be remarked also that there is a certain likeness between *vers de société* and Short-stories: for one thing, both seem easy to write and are hard. (Matthews, 1901: 29)³⁷

In determining the features of the Short-story and *vers de société*, Matthews finds that the similarities outnumber the differences and deems the two forms almost the same. «[T]he typical qualifications of each», he writes, «may apply with almost equal force to the other: *vers de société* should reveal compression, ingenuity, and originality, and Short-stories should have brevity and brilliancy» (ibid.: 29). Save for brevity and compression, Matthews identifies qualifications of a mostly subjective kind, anticipating trends in short fiction studies after the work of Charles May revived interest in the field.

Matthews encounters some difficulty in trying to contrast the Short-story with the literary form that he identifies as the «Sketch». He succeeds, nevertheless, in underlining one crucial difference, namely that the Sketch is a static form, and the Short-story a dynamic piece of writing.

Perhaps the difference between a Short-story and a sketch can best be indicated by saying that, while a Sketch may be still-life, in a Short-story something always happens. A Sketch may be an outline of character, or even a picture of a mood of mind, but in a Short-story there must be something done, there must be an action. (ibid.: 35)

In March of the same year in which Matthews published «The Philosophy of the Short-story», the European periodical *The London Academy* sardonically critiqued Matthews' text in an anonymously authored piece: «Review of Matthews' "Philosophy of the Short-story"». The author refutes Matthews' basic claim that the Short-story is a distinct genre:

³⁷ This last observation bears significantly on short story writers and novelists later on the century. In a literary climate predisposed toward longer fiction, critics would continue to devalue shorter forms, despite a consensus among many writers of both genres that short stories are more the difficult to create – certainly more than the finished work, in its trademark compactness, would indicate.

All this is wrong, a negligent utterance of a negligent thought. How can a Short-story be «Something other than a Short Story?» The answer is that it cannot. . . There is no difference whatever of kind between a novel and a Short Story. (Apud Walton, 1961: 43-44)

The critic charges Matthews with inventing a category and then manipulating examples to fit his theory. Even Matthews' differentiation of the Short-story from a fragment of a novel the anonymous critic contests, positing that both short story and novel-excerpt belong to the realm of narrative and that «the methods of narrative are the same for one episode as for a chain of episodes» (ibid.: 44). Complexity of prose, moreover, need not detract from Matthews' «unity of impression»; in the reviewer's words, «complexity does not exclude unity, nor need simplicity include it» (ibid.: 44). The reviewer also faults Matthews for building on ideas appropriated from Poe, whom he holds in no high regard either:

The truth is that the professor has excogitated this part from a well-known paradoxical essay in which Poe tries to demonstrate that there can be no such thing as a long poem, and that every so-called long poem, is a series of short ones. (ibid.: 44)

Toward the end of the review, the writer consolidates his conviction that the writing of short fiction is a lesser craft than writing novels:

For years it has been a fashion among prattlers to prattle about «the art of the short story», as though it were something apart, high, and of unique difficulty. The short story is a smaller, simpler, easier and less important form of the novel. Other things being equal, a short story can never have the force of a novel. As to the comparative difficulty of the two ask any author who has written both fine novels and fine short stories. (ibid.: 44)

Henry Seidel Canby attempts to reconcile the two perspectives on short fiction. After summarising both Matthews' standpoint and the critique from the *London Academy*, Canby postulates an alternate way of conceptualising the matter, and suggests that the great difference between a poem, a historical essay and a novel, even when dealing with the same subject or theme, has to do with a difference in point of view. Appropriately enough to his emphasis on differing viewpoints, Canby's stance is a unique one, and the distinctions that he makes are comprehensible in the context of their own time. While there is something to be said for both sides of the debate, the *London Academy* is inaccurate in one respect, by present standards of literary criticism. The final paragraph states: «No one will follow the professor [Matthews] in his attempt to lay down a rule that Short Stories are not Short Stories unless they happen to be Short Stories of a particular kind» (ibid.: 44). In the current literary climate, no one

contests the existence of the short story, although diverse labels (such as «short fiction») and definitions co-exist. More persuasive than any voices of dissent, however, is that Matthews and Poe still exert an overriding influence in short story studies, so much so that their work has constructed a paradigm that has proven difficult to escape, and at times cumbersome³⁸. Within this paradigm, one primary and aforementioned critical project is to quantify fiction (to consider the length of a work and the amount of reading time required). Two major trends in the quantification of fiction are to compare short fiction with poetry and to contrast it with the novel. Before these are addressed, however, yet another trend started by Matthews, the formalised poetics of American short fiction, will be examined in order to give further idea of how Poe and Matthews have informed short fiction theory.

Formalised Short Story Poetics and the Response in Early 20th Century America

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the preponderance of writing manuals or handbooks would firmly embed Poe's precepts, as filtered through Matthews' work, within American short story theory. L. A. G. Strong derides this phenomenon in an article from the *Bookman* entitled «Concerning Short Stories»:

Upon examination, most of the short story handbooks reveal that they are largely expansions and extensions of what the late Brander Matthews wrote some years ago in his *Philosophy of the Short-story*. And it must be added that he wrote next to nothing of real literary worth, insight or suggestiveness. (May, 1994: 90)

In fairness, however, Matthews cannot bear sole responsibility for the handbooks that Strong denigrates; the commercial world of magazine distribution and the bustling literary scene populated by influential figures like O. Henry must also be considered. As Charles May states, «[w]riters rushed to imitate O. Henry and critics rushed to imitate Matthews. Everyone could write short stories if they only knew the rules» (May, 1995: 109). Among these texts that purported to teach «the rules», it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between manual and treatise. In Matthews' wake, writing about short fiction proliferated, until most publishing houses had their own best-selling

³⁸ Indeed, so great is their sway that even the critics who position their work outside of Poe and Matthews' model must still address it, if in order to articulate their position against it. In «A Theory of the Short Story», James Cooper Lawrence directly and meticulously refutes Poe and Matthews' main points, arguing that «any attempt to limit the definition of a short story beyond the statement that it is 'a brief tale which can be told or read at one sitting,' is for our purposes inadvisable, if not impossible» (Lawrence, 1976: 63).

manual³⁹. Most handbooks are similar in their emphasis on narrative construction elements, drawn primarily from Poe's and Matthews' terminology. Proponents of such «formalised» poetics distinguish the short story from a full novel or a shorter version of one – even if it should be as long as the latter. Again, the distinction stems from the singleness of effect that, according to Matthews, the novel lacks but the Short-story's scope and structure allow. Among the typical features of the form, as identified by Pattee, (who draws from Poe, Matthews and Aristotle) are its relative shortness, its compression (that is, its economy of prose, without unnecessary deviations), unity, directness, momentum, representation of character, and its verisimilitude, or evocation of true life (Pattee, 1923: 365-67). As Pattee observes, the short story, as an early twentieth century literary form, bears all the features of a teachable genre; it could be conceptualised as «an exact science, with laws as arbitrary and as multitudinous as those governing bridge whist», as Pattee puts it (ibid.: 365).

As most short stories produced in the first decades of the twentieth century reflect the purposes and needs of magazine publishing, plot plays an important role in their construction⁴⁰. Numerous episodes and sub-plots often complicate the narrative of novels, whereas the short story explores – or perhaps exploits – the single incident, and (should it feature any) only a few additional plot lines relegated to subordinate status. Plot directly affects a narrative's length. Most handbook writers appear to have in mind the romantic novel with its incidents unfolding at an accelerated speed, or the realistic novel in which the novelist takes time to philosophise, and to describe settings and characters. A few handbooks also contrast the short story with other kinds of shorter fiction. Matthews' contrast of the short story and the Sketch seems to have been an especially useful one, as the Sketch was seen as a static form that did not tell a story, whereas the short story obviously *did*. The contrast pre-figured a debate that would arise in the 1980s over whether the plot-less short story (*a la* Chekhov) was the *real* modern short story, and the plot-centred story actually a «tale»⁴¹. One instance

³⁹ In 1902, Bliss Perry included a chapter on the short story in his *A Study of Prose Fiction*. H. S. Canby wrote an academic text entitled *The Short Story*. C. S. Baldwin's 1904 *American Short Stories* made mention of Matthews. In 1907, Matthews himself re-addressed the genre in his introduction and preface to an anthology that he edited called *The Short-Story: Specimens Illustrating Its Development*. J. Berg Esenwein's *Writing the Short Story* (1909) followed, and Carl H. Grabo's *The Art of the Short Story* (1913) would influence Brazilian theory and thus find its way to Portugal, especially through the seminal work on the *Portuguese short story* by Massaud Moisés. Blanche Colton Williams's *A Handbook on Story Writing* appeared in 1917.

⁴⁰ In «Prolegomenon to a Generic Study of the Short Story», Charles May quotes John W. Aldridge's assessment (itself an echo of Edward O'Brien) of formulaic short stories as «"assembly line fiction" – all empty technique and no significance» (May, 1996: 462).

⁴¹ In *New Short Story Theories*, Charles May includes an article deeming Chekhov the founding father of the plotless short story, while himself dubbing Chekhov founder of the modern short story. Chekhov leaves

prescient of this debate is worth citing: Cooper, writing in 1909, not only contrasts the sketch with the short story, but also contrasts the short story with the tale. The shifting of terminology over time, however, has complicated this latter distinction. Poe's category of the tale would now fall under the term «short story», while the term «tale» has come to denote a sub-genre different from the form that it previously described. The handbooks tend to accord great importance to plot, and to stress this element in their advice to aspiring writers of magazine fiction. Despite objecting to the use of diagrams to analyse plots, E. A. Cross diagrams various types of plot possible (qtd. in Levy, 1993: 93-94). One of Cross' diagrams, derived from O. Henry's short fiction, proved a successfully applicable model for plot-construction that Cross called the «rocket-design». In contrast, James T. Farrell's preface to his own collected works of short fiction evinces a tangible shift away from plot-centred writing strategies. A lecturer on the short story at the University of New York, Farrell devised the «X-ray method», suggesting that although plot was important, an exceptionally good short story had something else to give the reader. The X-ray method is «an ingeniously simple scheme» that benefits from the author's «borrowing one leaf from the book of the theatre and another from the clinical notes of the doctor» (Farrell: xiii-xxv). As Farrell elaborates, «the author places one character under the X-ray and allows his readers to his thoughts as well as actions» (xiii-xxv)⁴². Farrell suggests not only a growing preoccupation with character-psychology, but by privileging authorial insight into character over any quantifiable rules of plot-construction, he also destabilises the short story's status as a teachable genre⁴³.

Reactions against formalised poetics

Indeed, some critics began to bemoan the formalised, formulaic theories of short story composition, along with the works that resulted from their promulgation. In the *Atlantic Monthly*, Henry Seidel Canby writes the following:

behind a short story poetics dispersed throughout his various letters, though he never became as influential as Poe. Some of his letters, however, similarly refer to an economy of means. Chekhov favours brief descriptions, for instance, when trying to capture nature (Chekhov, 1924: 69).

⁴² Here is a more complete quotation from Farrell about his X-ray method: «An ingeniously simple scheme which depends for its success upon the author's borrowing one leaf from the book of the theatre and another from the clinical notes of the doctor. Instead of telling a story about a group of characters or about something which happened to someone, the author places one character under the X-ray and allows his readers to his thoughts as well as to his actions» (Farrell, 1945: xii-xxv) (preface, dated 10.08.1937)

⁴³ Levy notes the rise of «counterhandbooks», which «offered writing advice while claiming that writing could not be taught» (Levy, 1993: 89), but these are outside the scope of the present text.

What impresses me most in the contemporary short story as I find it in American magazines, is its curious sophistication. Its bloom is gone. I can take my texts from any magazine, from the most literary to the least. In the stories selected by all of them I find the resemblances greater than the differences, and the latter seldom amount to more than a greater or less excellence of workmanship and style. (Canby, 1909: 60)

Seidel points toward a staleness in many examples of the form, and a homogeneity about them. Herbert Ellsworth Cory, writing in *Dial*, meanwhile, relates the trends in short fiction to the need for instant gratification: «The very technique of the short story is pathological and titillates our nerves in our pathological moments. The short story is the blood kinsman of the quick-lunch, the vaudeville, and the joyride. It is the supreme art-form of those who believe in the philosophy of quick results». Criticism of the state of short fiction has also taken on subtler yet more scathing forms. Perhaps the most interesting of the handbooks is short story writer Ring Lardner's satirical treatise, in which his sardonic tone and sarcastic observations caricature the task and techniques of the short fiction writer. Lardner toys with the notion of short story writing as a fashionable craft, as is apparent in his appropriation of French words and phrases to reflect the idea of «couleur locale»⁴⁴: a popular trend in early twentieth century writing. Lardner humorously explains that a fledgling short story writer must first consider a «catchy» title for his story, at which point the real work can start. «Then I sit down to a desk or flat table of any kind», he writes, «and lay three or four sheets of paper with as many different colored pencils and look at them, cockeyed a few minutes before making a selection» (Lardner, 1961: 84).⁴⁵ Lardner parodies the sort of meticulously ordered writing process that other handbook authors tout seriously⁴⁶. Lardner offers the following tongue-in-cheek survey of the many ways to start a short story:

⁴⁴ Brander Matthews also relates this concept to short fiction, albeit without using the French term. In the «Prefatory Note» to *The Short-Story: Specimens Illustrating Its Development*, Matthews explains that the stories chosen for the collection «present many contrasting shades of local color» (Matthews, 1907: 3).

⁴⁵ In an extreme example of Lardner's facetious tone, he gives his readers a final piece of advice by commenting on the kind of writing surface to use:

In conclusion let me warn my pupils never to write their stories – or, as we professionals call them «yarns» – on used paper. And never to write them on a postcard. And never to send them by telegraph (Morse code...) (Lardner, 1961: 85)

⁴⁶ Whether facetiously or earnestly presented, this notion of a proper procedure likely derives from Poe – not only his account of writing «The Raven» in «The Philosophy of Composition», but also his statement emphasizing a story's opening sentence: «If [the author's] very first sentence tend not to the outbringing of [the preconceived] effect, then in his very first step he committed a blunder» (Poe, 1984: 586). Some of the handbooks stress a short story's opening as vital in itself, however, whereas Poe emphasized it only inasmuch as it established the author's chosen effect.

How to begin – or, as we professionals would say, «how to commence» – is the next question. It must be admitted that the method of approach (L'approchement) differs even among first class fictionists. For example, Blasco Ibanez usually starts his stories with Spanish words, Jack Dempsy with an «I» and Charly Peterson with a couple of simple declarative sentences about his leading character. (ibid.: 85)

This last observation is a possible pun on the *captatio benevolentiae*, or capturing of attention at the beginning of a text, stressed in many of the handbooks. Even the German scholar Bonheim adopts this emphasis by advising the comparison of short story openings to those of novels (Bonheim, 1982: 1982). Lardner, anticipating Ernest Hemingway's methods, favours opening a story with dialogue, one of the best ways of beginning *in medias res*⁴⁷. Lardner also satirises the sort of advice given to aspiring short story writers:

Personally, I have found it a good scheme to not even sign my name to the story, and when I get it sealed up in its envelope and stamped and addressed, I take it to some town where I don't live and mail it from there. The editor has no idea who wrote the story, so how can he send it back? He is in a quandary. (Lardner, 1961: 85)

Lardner's underlying flippancy ridicules not only the agenda behind the handbooks, but also the sort of criticism exemplified by Poe's *The Philosophy of Composition* that endeavors to define any proper methodology for fiction writing.

Another reaction against formalised short story poetics – not sarcastic like Lardner's but voiced again as advice for beginning writers – comes from Eudora Welty in a two-part essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly*: «The Reading and Writing of Short Stories». From the outset of her article, Welty expresses her disdain for the idea that short story writing can be taught, or any instructive rules of composition derived:

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 of writing. (Welty, 1949: 55)

Note that Welty does not negate literary criticism or analysis – a stance that would be «smug»and «ignorant», to use her own terms (ibid.: 55). Instead, Welty rightly draws a distinction between analysing a story for the sake of critical interpretation, and doing

⁴⁷ The technique of starting a text *in medias res* is of particular importance in post-World War Two German short story poetics. In «*Die Deutsche Kurzgeschichte der Jahrhundertmitte*», Ruth Lorbe states that both the beginning and the ending have disappeared from the modern short story, especially when compared with the nineteenth century Novella. This lack of a conventional beginning is mentioned by Walter Höllerer in «*Die Kurze Form der Prosa*» (Höllerer, 1962: 233), and Hans Bender in «*Ortsbestimmung der Kurzgeschichte*» (Bender, 1962: 206). These texts are considered by German *Kurzgeschichte* criticism to be the culminating diptych of the decade of high-quality German short story theory.

so for instructive purposes that would regulate the creative process. Indeed, Welty identifies the analytical impulse as opposite to the imaginative faculty of writing:

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 energies 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 way in peace? (ibid.: 55)

Composition and criticism thus constitute wholly separate and potentially irreconcilable projects for Welty. In their 1943 *Understanding Fiction*, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren similarly deny the practical applicability of rules to the writing process: «if one learns anything about fiction... it is that there is no single or special technique or formula for writing good fiction» (qtd. in Levy, 1993: 77)⁴⁸.

In spite of such opposition to formalised and prescriptive theories of composition, writing courses continue to be offered to students, as are creative writing courses on the short story. One particular creative writing textbook gained popularity in the 1970s: *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular* by former *Esquire* editor Rust Hills. In a fascinating introduction, Hills contemplates whether one can justifiably write a book on *how* to write – and particularly how to write short stories:

there's all those writing courses out there, at the colleges and universities; and the young poet English teachers and the writers-in-residence they aren't trying to teach «boy meets girl» and «know your market». They are trying to write short story masterpieces. (Hills, 1979: ix)

Hills observes among the creative writing instructors of his time an active focus on actual writing, rather than the promulgation of guidelines for story composition – a perception coherent with Welty's argument. Levy would later reflect on what the early short story handbooks signify for the present literary and academic climate:

During our own era, in which the creative writing graduate program is enjoying unprecedented growth and «short story publication appears to have become one of the missions of American higher education», the story handbooks provide a vital link in understanding how the symbiotic relationship between academia and the short story evolved, and how the pedagogy of the short story became intertwined with the practice. (Levy, 1993: 78)

⁴⁸ The forcefulness with which these critics contest the formalized poetics of short story composition, however, hints at the extent to which the poetics had become entrenched in the American literary consciousness. As Levy conjectures, «Perhaps the best indicator of the success of the ideology of [the short story's] accessibility is the depth and nature of the counter response that it has generated» (Levy, 1993: 48).

Levy not only contextualises earlier short story theory historically, but also in enlightening relation to current concepts of the genre. As shown throughout this chapter, a primarily critical project of genre identification and development (initiated by Poe and furthered by Matthews) gave way, via the increasing American commercialisation of literary craft in early twentieth century, to a trend of prescriptive writing theories, before the formal construct of short story poetics itself would seriously come to be questioned.

When the study of short story theory was revived in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, especially through the work of Charles May and Susan Lohafer, it became clear that Poe's statements, filtered through Matthews, had generated a paradigm that critical scholarship would only seldom escape. When critics define the short story, they often do so via analogy with poetry or in contrast to the novel. Thus, even though the handbooks have been largely forgotten, their lingering impact still infuses the critical genre hierarchy and methods of analysis. One facet of the formalist approach, however, has gradually disappeared: namely, the comparison of the short story with other forms of shorter fiction – precisely the strategy that Matthews contributed when he adopted Poe's premises. This method has subsided because, as the label «short story» has come to be used, it interchangeably applies either to a specific genre, or as a general term for short works of fiction. The disappearance of the comparative strategy may also have to do with the charges that Matthews paved the way for the oft-derided handbooks. Over time, criticism recalling the early twentieth century has decreased, while Poe's reputation as short story theorist and founding father has concomitantly been foregrounded to the detriment of Matthews. Thus, in a twist of irony, the one scholar who is arguably most responsible for elevating Poe to canonical status in the realm of short story theory – who may even be credited with resurrecting Poe's ideas – has been effectively eclipsed by Poe himself.

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Resumo: A teoria acerca da short story tem vindo a ser, na literatura ocidental, influenciada por dois textos críticos de E.A.Poe, embora o fundador da poética do conto nunca tenha utilizado a designação genológica *short story*. O presente artigo pretende ser uma análise aprofundada das teorias de E.A.Poe, tal como foram remodeladas por Brander Mathews.

Abstract: In the western tradition, Short story poetics has been thoroughly influenced by two critical articles written by E.A. Poe even though the universally acclaimed founding father of the genre never used the term short story. This article brings an in depth analysis of Poe's theories and of how they have been re- shaped by subsequent theoreticians, especially Matthews, in the first decades of twentieth century.