SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND HISTORY

SOME ASPECTS OF THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY

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THE literary form we call the modern short story came into existence it seems spontaneously and almost simultaneously throughout Western literatures in the early years of the nineteenth century. One cannot give a precise date: my choice would be 1827. In that year Sir Walter Scott published *The Chronicles of the Canongate*, which contained his story 'The Two Drovers', in my view the first story in English that we read as a modern story. It seems fitting that the earliest attempt to define the modern short story should have been made by an American; fitting, because American literature is nothing if not a modern literature and because the short story is one of the glories of that literature. The attempt was made in 1842 by one short-story writer reviewing the work of another short-story writer; by Poe reviewing the *Twice-Told Tales* of Hawthorne. I propose to substitute for Poe's definition what is by implication a restatement of it made some sixty years later by another American short-story writer, Ambrose Bierce. It comes from his book *The Devil's Dictionary* and it appears under the heading 'Novel':

NOVEL. n. A short story padded. A species of composition bearing the same relation to literature as the panorama does to art. As it is too long to be read at a sitting the impressions made by its successive parts are successively effaced, as in the panorama. Unity, totality of effect, is impossible; for beside the few pages last read all that is carried in mind is the mere plot of what has gone before. . . . The art of writing novels, such as it was, is long dead everywhere except in Russia, where it is new. Peace to its ashes—some of which have a large sale.

That is a definition in negative terms, humorously ironical; but it makes Poe's point about the story, that it has a unity, a totality of effect, that cannot be secured by the novel.

At the same time, the definition is purely aesthetic. It does not deal with content; and it is here that I think the American story differs from the European. Men have been composing stories for more than two thousand five hundred years: the

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relation borne to them by the modern short story is very similar to that of the novel to the romance that preceded it. And just as the romance has never wholly been killed by the novel—indeed, the romance, in terms of science fiction or the prose narratives of Tolkien, has had a striking revival in the past thirty years—so the older story still remains with us and often as part of the modern story. People still tell jokes, for example; and if one wants an example from American writing of the joke as story what better than Mark Twain's 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County'? If one distinguishes between the modern story and the older tale, which is exemplified in the *Thousand and One Nights* and the *Decameron*, one does so in the same way as one does between the novel and the romance. The province of the modern story, as of the novel, is the probable; that of the older story, as of the romance, is the astonishing, the extraordinary.

This seems to me clear when we think, at any rate, of the great European masters of the short story—Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*, Flaubert's 'Un Cœur Simple', the stories of Chekhov—and his œuvre is so vast that I instance just two stories, 'The Kiss' and 'The Lady with the Little Dog', which everyone must know because it has been filmed so faithfully and so beautifully—the stories of Maupassant and those of Kipling from *Plain Tales from the Hills* onwards. The effect we take away from the stories of all these writers is surely that of truth; we have been given a microcosm of man's life in society. Maupassant's 'La Maison de Madame Tellier' is more than a story about a brothel; it implicates a whole provincial society. There is something else, of course. Thomas Hardy, who was in many ways an old-fashioned writer in his time and who had a hankering after the older, pre-modern story, of which he wrote some distinguished examples, said: 'A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling.' Of course; and the stories of the writers I have instanced are generally exceptional enough; but the exceptional is as it were overlaid, obscured by the ordinary, the everyday, the feeling we have that outside the story life is going on in its normal way and that the story does not contradict it. What I would emphasize is that we feel that what we are reading exists in the context of a recognizably normal society and that society as it conditions men's lives is part of the theme of the story.

When we turn to the American story, I am not at all certain that this is true. There are plenty of exceptions; all the same,

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what strikes me is that the American story is very often the story of the life of a man who is not involved in society at all, or at any rate not involved to anything like the degree that a character in a European story is. I am suggesting that very often the theme of the American story is man—a man—in himself, and sometimes against himself. Let me take what is admittedly an extreme example, possibly Poe's most famous story, 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. Everybody knows it. The narrator, whose name we do not know, rides up to the house, which is reflected in a tarn in front of it. The landscape is vaguely Scots: it was W. H. Auden who pointed out that Poe's poems are set in imaginary landscapes, and so, it seems to me, are most of his stories. In the first paragraph or so the house is vaguely anthropomorphized; the house stands both for the building itself and for the family that owns and inhabits it: the windows look like eyes. And also the façade is fissured. The narrator enters. It is not necessary for me to relate the story, which is one of ancestral doom and of incest; the incestuous lovers, as we can only suppose them, brother and sister, die in each other's arms. The story is suffused with Poe's preoccupation with tombs and the entombing of the living. It is all very romantic indeed, in the terms of Mario Praz's *Romantic Agony.*

The narrator flees, and:

> Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to whence a gleam so unusual could have issued: for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure, of which I have spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently on the fragments of the '*House of Usher*'.

Obviously, this is a symbolist story, and what is being dramatized in symbols is the disintegration of the psyche. As Poe himself said: 'If in any of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany'—that is, the Gothic—'but of the soul.'

'The Fall of the House of Usher' dramatizes the events, as it were, within one man's skull. It is entirely solipsistic. In terms of the story itself, society, the external world, other people, have

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no existence. This cannot be said of Hawthorne's story 'Young Goodman Brown'. Society, other people, are very much there; and yet, in a sense, there are affinities with Poe; we are faced at least with questions of, doubts about, objective reality.

The story takes place on the eve of All Saint's Day, Hallowe'en, that most sinister of days, and the time is the late seventeenth century in New England. Young Goodman Brown, Hawthorne tells us, 'came forth at sunset into the street at Salem village'. He has a journey to make. His young wife, Faith—the name is significant—implores him not to go. 'Pray tarry with me this night, dear husband,' she begs, 'of all nights in the year.' But go he must. We are not, in fact, told why he must go or what the purpose of his journey is: he is obeying an atavistic impulse, behaving, one might say, like a lemming. His journey takes him into the forest, the moral wilderness. In the forest he falls in with a middle-aged man carrying a staff that bears the likeness of a great black snake. Walking together, Hawthorne tells us, they 'might have been taken for father and son'. Brown has his scruples and is for turning back, but his companion tells him:

I have been as well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans; and that's no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's War. They were my good friends, both; and many a pleasant walk have we had along this path, and returned merrily after midnight.

Here we realize that Hawthorne is attributing to young Goodman Brown's ancestors the sins of his own.

There are others walking through the forest, pious, God-fearing, venerable people: there is Goody Cloyse, 'who had taught him his catechism in youth'; there are the minister and Deacon Gookin. Goody Cloyse greets Brown's companion familiarly as the Devil, 'in the very image of my old gossip Goodman Brown, the grandfather of the silly fellow that now is'. Brown is unwilling to go on, but the presence of the minister and of Deacon Gookin overbears him, and he follows them to their rendezvous. And though when he reaches it, he cries out, 'With heaven above and Faith below I will yet stand firm against the devil!' he seems to see gathered there the whole community of the Saints, 'a grave and dark-clad company'. He calls out for his wife. There is no answer. ' "My Faith is

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gone!" cried he, after one stupefied moment. "There is no good on earth, and sin is but a name. Come, devil, for to thee the world is given." ' So he joins the congregation at the devil's altar in the forest and hears the devil's sermon:

. . . By the sympathy of your human hearts for sin ye shall scent out all the places—whether in church, bedchamber, street, field, or forest—where crime has been committed, and shall exult to behold the whole earth one stain of guilt, one mighty blood spot. Far more than this. It shall be yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin, the fountain of all wicked arts, and which inexhaustibly supplies more evil impulses than human power—than my power at its utmost—can make manifest in deeds. . . . Lo, there ye stand, my children. Depending upon one another's hearts, ye had still hoped that virtue was not all a dream. Now are ye undeceived. Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness. Welcome again, my children, to the communion of your race.

As he waits to be confirmed into the group, Brown finds a young woman standing beside him. It is Faith. He cries: 'Faith! Faith! look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one.' And then, Hawthorne continues:

Whether Faith obeyed he knew not. Hardly had he spoken when he found himself amid calm night and solitude, listening to a roar of the wind that died heavily away through the forest. He staggered against the rock, and felt it chill and damp; while a hanging twig, that had been all on fire, besprinkled his cheek with the coldest dew.

Brown returns at dawn to Salem, 'staring around him like a bewildered man'. In the village street are all the pious he has seen at the devil's altar, old Deacon Gookin, the minister, from whom he shrinks 'as if to avoid an anathema', Goody Cloyse, 'catechising a little girl who had brought her a pint of morning milk'. Brown 'snatched away the child as from the grasp of the fiend himself'. At the end of the street Faith is waiting for him. 'She skipped along the street', Hawthorne tells us, 'and almost kissed her husband before the whole village. But Goodman Brown looked sternly and sadly into her face, and passed on without a greeting.'

The story can be taken as, and indeed it is, an exposure of the dark underside of Puritanism. But it is more. It is a very ambiguous story in which Hawthorne uses to the full what Yvor Winters called his 'formula of alternative possibilities'. For instance, Hawthorne himself asks the question which, even without it, we would be bound to ask ourselves. 'Had Goodman

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Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch meeting?' We may decide as we choose; Hawthorne is concerned with psychological reality, and this is unaffected by simple questions of waking and dreaming. However we interpret the question, the fact remains that young Goodman Brown is initiated into consciousness of sin, sin as a universal experience, inescapable, transmitted from generation to generation. Two things interest me here. The first is the consequence of Brown's experience, whether dream or reality. It is alienation—from his family and from his society. He becomes, Hawthorne tells us, 'a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man. . . . Often, awakening suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith. . . . When the family knelt down at prayer, he scowled and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away.'

> And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren, a goodly procession, besides neighbours not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom.

And yet, it seems to me, the consequence of the realization of sin as a universal fact is not necessarily alienation. In a different society or in a different body of religious belief, the realization could be comforting and a source of sympathy with one's fellows. Hawthorne plumps for alienation, and this, I think, is connected with my second point; which is that in a very real sense the story takes place as it were within the skull of young Goodman Brown. This is underscored by Hawthorne himself, when he raises the question whether Brown's experience was contained in a dream. This, you will already have realized, is the element that seems to me to differentiate the American short story, or at any rate a great many of the finest American short stories, from the European: the emphasis on the experience of the individual seen primarily and essentially as an individual and only in a very minor sense as a member of a community.

I'd like to offer some more examples and I begin by turning to Melville and in particular to 'Bartleby the Scrivener', a story I find very mysterious indeed. The setting is familiar enough, a lawyer's office in Wall Street in, I guess, the eighteen-forties. It is similar to the lawyers' offices we meet in Dickens. Indeed, I suspect it owes a lot to Dickens. Of the lawyer's four employees three are Dickensian types, and the lawyer himself,

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who tells the story, is a Dickensian figure, a prosy, good-natured, unimaginative, not over-busy man. He sums himself up when he says, introducing himself, 'All who know me, consider me an eminently *safe* man.' His practice flourishes and he engages another scrivener, Bartleby, 'pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!' As a scrivener, Bartleby gives satisfaction; but he refuses to do anything but his scrivening. He refuses, for example, to help with the checking of briefs or to go to the Post Office. His answer to any request, almost to any question, is: 'I would prefer not to.' Then the lawyer discovers that Bartleby is living in his office. When ordered to quit, he answers: 'I would prefer *not* to quit you.' In the end, it is the lawyer who is forced to quit. He takes other offices, but Bartleby, that hermit-like man about whom nothing is known, refuses to budge from his accommodation, though it is now tenanted by another lawyer. For reasons that he cannot explain to himself, his ex-employer feels himself responsible for Bartleby. All the same, Bartleby is arrested and taken to the Tombs, the New York City jail. The lawyer pays for his meals: Bartleby's response is, 'I prefer not to dine today.' He dies in the Tombs. In the last paragraph the narrator, the lawyer, vouchsafes some further information he has gleaned about Bartleby after his death. He had been a 'subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington' and lost his job because of a change in administration. Melville's narrator comments:

> Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and asserting them for the flames? For by the cartload they are annually burned. . . . On errands of life, these letters speed to death.

A most mysterious story. I've suggested that it shows signs of the influence of Dickens, but in the end it resembles the stories of a writer who cannot possibly have influenced Melville—for the simple reason that he was not yet born. I refer to Kafka. The story has been seen as a parable of Melville's own fate as a writer of works that no one wanted to read and who, rather than compromise or concede, said to society the equivalent of 'I would prefer not to'. The explanation is attractive; it makes good sense; but I confess it does not wholly satisfy me. For there is another character in the story: the narrator, the lawyer, who is in every respect the polar opposite of Bartleby and yet is

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disturbed by a strange sympathy with Bartleby. The lawyer is, I think, something more than merely a symbol of an uncomprehending society.

What one can say is this. However one interprets the story, it remains a most powerful rendering of a man who, for whatever reasons, has opted out of society, will take nothing from it and recognizes no obligations to it; a story, in other words, of man alone.

I want now to turn to a much lesser writer than Melville, Ambrose Bierce, whose stories seem to me unduly neglected and under-rated, no doubt because they are, one has to admit, disfigured by gimmickry. Still, as a delineator in fiction of the American Civil War, he is second only to Stephen Crane. But here let me make a comparison between him and one of his American contemporaries, Hamlin Garland. Garland has a very moving story called 'The Return of a Private'. It describes very simply the last stages of a journey from the South to rural Wisconsin of a handful of demobilized soldiers of the Union army. It focuses on one man in particular, Edward Smith. His wife and family do not know when he is returning, and his coming takes them by surprise. The last words of the story are: 'The common soldier of the American volunteer army had returned. His war with the South was over, and his fight, his daily running fight with Nature and against the injustice of his fellow-men, was begun again.'

The point I wish to make is simple. It is a story of family life, of community life, of the willing, loving return to society, to the duties and responsibilities of citizen, husband, father. Its theme is universal; it could just as well have been written by a European after any war of modern times or earlier. It is, one might say, in the broad European tradition of the modern story. Bierce's Civil War stories, by contrast, are very different. Though the surfaces of his stories are much more realistic than Poe's, his affinities are with Poe. He is obsessed with death, or rather, to borrow Poe's phrase, the terror of the soul which leads to death. The very real world the stories describe should not prevent us from seeing how solipsistic the stories are. It is significant that Bierce's favourite figure is the loner, in the form of the scout. Let me consider one story in particular, 'One of the Missing'. It begins:

> Jerome Searing, a private soldier in General Sherman's army, then confronting the enemy at and about Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia,

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turned his back upon a small group of officers with whom he had been talking in low tones, stepped across a light line of earthworks, and disappeared in a forest. None of the men in line behind the works had said a word to him, nor had he so much as nodded to them in passing, but all who saw understood that this brave man had been entrusted with some perilous duty.

Searing is a scout; his instructions are to 'get as near the enemy's lines as possible and learn all that he could'. He makes his way through the forest, crawls across the terrain beyond and hides himself in a ruined shed in a derelict plantation. He sees that the enemy is withdrawing; his mission is over.

Searing had now learned all that he could hope to know. It was his duty to return to his own command with all possible speed and report his discovery. But the gray column of infantry toiling up the mountain road was singularly tempting. His rifle—an ordinary 'Springfield', but fitted with a globe sight and hair trigger—would easily send its ounce and a quarter of lead hissing into their midst. That would probably not affect the duration and result of the war, but it is the business of a soldier to kill. It is also his habit if he is a good soldier. Searing cocked his rifle and 'set' the trigger.

There follows a disquisition on determinism which in spirit is remarkably like that of Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Converging of the Twain'. It begins: 'But it was decreed from the beginning of time that Private Searing was not to murder anybody that bright summer morning, nor was the Confederate retreat to be announced by him.' As he is about to fire, 'a Confederate captain of artillery, having nothing better to do while awaiting his turn to pull out and be off, amused himself by sighting a field piece obliquely to his right at what he took to be some Federal officers on the crest of a hill, and discharged it. The shot flew high of its mark.' It hits the shed in which Searing is concealed. He is knocked unconscious by the blast. When he comes to consciousness, he realizes he is pinioned by the debris above him; he cannot move, but he is unhurt. Only his right arm is partly free, and cautiously he attempts to wriggle beneath the weight upon him; with little success. And then:

In surveying the mass with a view to determining that point, his attention was arrested by what seemed to be a ring of shining metal immediately in front of his eyes. It appeared to him at first to surround some perfectly black substance, and it was somewhat more than a half inch in diameter. It suddenly occurred to his mind that the blackness was simply shadow and that the ring was in fact the muzzle of his

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rifle protuding from the pile of debris. He was not long in satisfying himself that this was so—if it was a satisfaction.... He was unable to see the upper surface of the barrel, but could see the under surface of the stock at a slight angle. The piece was, in fact, aimed at the exact centre of his forehead.

The rifle is cocked, the trigger set; even if he is successful in disentangling himself from the debris that pins him down, his struggles will mean that the rifle goes off. There follows a very careful and detailed account of the soldier's state of mind—for a time he is in near-delirium—and of his efforts to render the gun harmless. Then:

Perceiving his defeat, all his terror returned, augmented tenfold. The black aperture of the rifle appeared to threaten a sharper and more imminent death in punishment of his rebellion. The track of the bullet through his head ached with an intenser anguish. He began to tremble again.

Suddenly he became composed. His tremor subsided. He clenched his teeth and drew down his eyebrows. He had not exhausted his means of defence: a new design had shaped itself in his mind—another plan of battle. Raising the front end of the strip of board, he carefully pushed it forward through the wreckage at the side of the rifle until it pressed against the trigger guard. Then he moved it slowly outward until he could feel that it had cleared it, then, closing his eyes, thrust it against the trigger with all his strength! There was no explosion; the rifle had been discharged as it dropped from his hand when the building fell. But Jerome Searing was dead.

'One of the Missing' is obviously a sensational story, an exercise indeed in sensationalism. It is based, you might say, on a gimmick; a splendid example of the magazine story in the derogatory sense. One of the things I find interesting in it is that very fact, the way in which the feeling of isolation, of man existing alone without reference to the community of his fellows, had invaded even popular fiction.

I turn to a later writer, Sherwood Anderson, whose best stories, *Winesburg, Ohio,* was published in 1919. They focus on crucial moments in the lives of men and women living in the small town of Winesburg. They have been seen as examples of what has been called the revolt against the village, and here the date of publication is significant. One remembers a popular American song of that early post-war period: 'How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm now that they've seen Paree?' In fact, the time of the events described in *Winesburg, Ohio* is some ten years or so before the First World War; one of the things that

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strikes one reading the volume today is that one is in the United States in the pre-automobile era. Society is very much present in these stories; having read them, we know a great deal about Winesburg, its industries, its topography, the diversions of its citizens. The collection of stories becomes, one might say, almost a novel, because there is one character common to them all. This is George Willard, the son of the town's hotel-proprietor and a reporter on the local paper, the *Winesburg Eagle*. It is difficult not to think of Willard as the young Anderson: he too wishes to be a writer; one knows that he will soon leave Winesburg; and one suspects that *Winesburg, Ohio*, is the book he is destined to write.

Anderson prefaces the volume with a story that, on the face of it, has nothing to do with Winesburg. It is called the 'Book of the Grotesque' and describes an unpublished book. When we turn to the stories themselves we find that Anderson is dealing with men and women who are in some sense grotesques. They are frozen, as it were, in postures of estrangement and alienation, from which they attempt in vain to break away, generally through some effort to communicate with George Willard, who appears to them as a sort of priest, at any rate as a free spirit as they are not. I assume that in Willard Anderson is seeking to describe as it seems to him the function of the writer in American life. The people who 'confess' to him are represented as intolerably trapped, isolated, trapped in themselves and in their grotesqueness, cut off from communion with their fellows. They appear as drunks, homosexuals, voyeurs, frigid women, religious maniacs. They are distorted by their alienation from the society they live in and by the consciousness that they are different from others and thereby condemned to inexorable loneliness. At the same time, Anderson seems to suggest that they are superior to their fellow-citizens who acquiesce and accept, who are 'normal'.

I want to look briefly at three of the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio*. First, 'Hands', the story of an elderly man named Wing Biddlebaum, who, Anderson tells us, has been the 'town mystery' ever since he arrived in Winesburg twenty years earlier. He lives alone; his only friend is young George Willard. He is the best and quickest strawberry-picker in the town; the growing of soft fruits is Winesburg's chief industry. He seems to live in terror of his hands; he keeps them in his pockets or hides them behind his back. He has in fact—and this is the core of the story—been a school teacher in a small town in Pennsylvania, a dedicated teacher, and in his fervour as a teacher he would

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caress and fondle the boys, until one day he is beaten up by angry parents and driven out of town as a homosexual. So he comes to Winesburg.

Some characters in these stories do achieve a sublimation of a kind. I should point out that Anderson was writing very much under the influence of his reading of Freud. There is the Revd. Curtis Hartman in the story 'The Strength of God'. He struggles against his carnal desire for Kate Swift, the school teacher into whose bedroom he can peep from the bell-tower of his church. 'Up and down through the silent streets', Anderson writes, 'walked the minister and for days and weeks his soul was troubled. He could not understand the temptation that had come to him nor could he fathom the reason for its coming. In a way he began to blame God, saying to himself that he had tried to keep his feet in the true path and had not run about seeking sin. "Through my days as a young man and all through my life here I have gone quietly about my work," he declared. "Why now should I be tempted? What have I done that this burden should be laid on me?" ' The better to see Kate Swift, he breaks a hole in the stained glass window of the belfry; and one night he sees her naked on her bed, weeping, and kneeling in prayer. He rushes away to seek out George Willard in the newspaper office.

'I have found the light,' he cried. 'After ten years in this town, God has manifested himself to me in the body of a woman.' His voice dropped and he began to whisper. 'I did not understand', he said, 'What I took to be a trial of my soul was only a preparation for a new and more beautiful fervour of the spirit. God had appeared to me in the person of Kate Swift, the school teacher, kneeling naked on a bed. Do you know Kate Swift? Although she may not be aware of it, she is an instrument of God, bearing the message of God.'

My last example from Anderson is the story 'Queer'. The title does not, I think, have sexual implications. Young Elmer Cowley is the son of an unsuccessful shopkeeper who differs from his son only in not realizing he is queer, whereas Elmer has vowed: 'I will not be queer—one to be looked at and listened to. I'll be like other people. I'll show that George Willard. He'll find out, I'll show him!' He has a passionate longing to conform, to be like every one else, indistinguishable from every one else. An idea strikes him: he can lose his queerness simply by running away, by catching the midnight freight train to Cleveland, the local big city, and losing himself in the crowds there. He steals

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twenty dollars from his father's savings and sends a message to George Willard to meet him at the railway station. But he finds he has no words with which to talk to Willard; he is tongue-tied. Anderson writes:

> Elmer Cowley danced with fury beside the groaning train in the darkness on the station platform. Lights leaped into the air and bobbed up and down before his eyes. Taking the two ten-dollar bills from his pocket, he thrust them into George Willard's hand. 'Take them,' he cried. 'I don't want them. Give them to father. I stole them.' With a snarl of rage he turned and his long arms began to flay the air. Like one struggling for release from hands that held him he struck out, hitting George Willard blow after blow on the breast, the neck, the mouth. The young reporter rolled over on the platform half-unconscious, stunned by the terrific force of the blows. Springing aboard the passing train and running over the tops of cars, Elmer sprang down to a flat car and lying on his face looked back. Pride surged up in him. 'I showed him,' he cried. 'I guess I showed him. I ain't so queer. I guess I showed him I ain't so queer.'

Impossible, I think, not to remember Melville's Billy Budd who, at moments of intense emotion, was dumb and could express himself only through blows.

Though the stories in *Winesburg, Ohio* plainly spring from a criticism of American small-town life at the time when Anderson was writing, its narrowness, its conformity, its preoccupation with commercial values, it is equally plain that they go beyond this and become a criticism of life as Anderson saw it. As criticisms of the quality of American life, they have much in common with the novels of Anderson's contemporaries Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. But despite their realistic surface, they seem to me not to be primarily realistic. Anderson is dramatizing in his stories what seems to him to be the essential human condition, which is that of the individual's alienation from the society in which he is born. These are the characters with whom Anderson sympathizes: the individual is at odds with his society, which is another way of saying that society is the enemy of the individual. And now, when one reads Anderson, I think one sees how much he is at the centre of one American tradition of writing. One reads him in the light of later writers like Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor, writers who explore Anderson's themes of alienation and incommunicableness not through grotesques but through freaks.

The last writer I shall refer to is Hemingway, who early in his literary career wrote a damaging parody of Anderson, *The*

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Torrents of Spring. Hemingway wrote a mass of short stories, and I wish to concentrate on his first volume, *In Our Time*, and on one story in particular. I believe that *In Our Time* contains the whole of Hemingway. Like *Winesburg, Ohio*, *In Our Time* has a unity beyond that normal to volumes of short stories. The stories depict the growth to manhood of a boy named Nick Adams. The surname is suggestive: Nick is the first man, or everyman, or everyman's experience of life. The stories are set in Michigan, a state of rivers, lakes, and forests, where the primitive and indeed the primeval are still close at hand. In the first story, 'Indian Camp', the boy Nick, accompanying his father, a doctor, to an Indian village across the lake, learns the facts of childbirth. In the succeeding stories we read of his growing-up to manhood and his experience of war. The stories themselves are counterpointed with very much briefer stories, often not more than a paragraph in length and printed in italics; vignettes of scenes of battle, in Italy, and Greece, and of the bull-fight, often scenes of violent death.

But I want to concentrate on the last story of the sequence, a story in two parts called 'Big Two-Hearted River'. It is heralded by a vignette of a bull-fighter's death in the bull ring: it has an envoi, again in italics, recounting a visit to the King of Greece. The last paragraph runs: 'It was very jolly. We talked for a long time. Like all Greeks he wanted to go to America.' After his service in Italy in the First World War, Hemingway was a war correspondent in the war between Greece and Turkey of 1922. Well, 'Big Two-Hearted River'. It presents something of a problem. Having read it in its place in the volume *In Our Time*, it is not entirely easy to know how we should interpret it if we read it on its own, as a story by itself; though I think we should still reach the same conclusion. The story opens with Nick Adams getting off a train at a wayside station in Michigan. We know from the volume itself that Nick has returned from the wars. I think we would know this if we read the story out of context, because the scene at which he alights is other than how he has seen it before. The town has been burnt down in his absence: the symbolism, I suggest, is obvious. And what happens? We have an account of two days in a man's life. It is very simple. A man is going fishing for trout. At the end of the first day he makes camp in a deserted countryside dominated by a trout river; on the second day he wades into the river and fishes. The detail is exact; having read the story, one feels that one has read a do-it-yourself

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manual on the art of trout-fishing. If you took the story with you, you could go and do it yourself. The story ends:

> Nick stood up on the log, holding his rod, the landing net hanging heavy, then stepped into the water and splashed ashore. He climbed the bank and cut up into the woods, towards the high ground. He was going back to camp. He looked back. The river just showed through the trees. There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp.

As a story, 'Big Two-Hearted River', for all that it exists in a context, is self-contained. There is no reference in it at all to the war just ended or to Nick Adams's previous history, except that he has fished in the same spot before. If we read it out of context we would still recognize it as a story of re-birth. It is, it seems to me, an extraordinarily successful attempt at what Eliot called an objective correlative to Nick's state of mind. It is, in other words, a work of symbolism, indeed you might say a symbolist poem. It describes, to borrow a phrase from another American writer, Nick's—and perhaps Hemingway's—idea of the Great Good Place. It is the nature of Nick's Great Good Place that interests me at this moment. It is a place where a man can be alone, because there are no other human beings in evidence; the story is empty of all but Nick. And it is a place where a man can subsist alone, where he is self-sufficient and, what is more, revels in his self-sufficiency. It is the story, in other words, of a man who has consciously, deliberately, opted out of society; and the only impression of society we get from the stories that lead up to it is of a violence that seems to make an opting-out entirely sensible. It is a story, if you like, of peace, of a man at peace with himself, but the condition of peace seems to be dependent on the man's withdrawing from society. One remembers the words of the hero of *A Farewell to Arms*, 'I have made a separate peace.'

I see this story of Hemingway's as in some sense the apotheosis of a tendency, a tradition even, in the American short story since its beginnings. It is a tendency implicit perhaps in the evolution of the short story everywhere. When that magnificent short-story writer, Frank O'Connor, wrote his book on the short story—it is by far the best we have—he called it *The Lonely Voice*. He saw the characteristic of the short story as being its 'intense awareness of human loneliness'. I do not think he proved it and indeed I do not think he tried to do so. But it remains an immensely suggestive intuition to which I am obviously much indebted. When I read the European masters of

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the form I am impressed by the crucial part played in so many of their stories by society, by the recognition that we are members of one another. It seems to me that Maupassant and Chekhov and Kipling could have talked, with Robert Browning, of 'the need of a world of men for me'. And this might have been said by many American writers of short stories, by Bret Harte, by James, by John O'Hara, at present an unfairly disregarded writer, by Fitzgerald, above all by Faulkner, who as fully as Scott sees man as the product of his social and historic environment. But along with their stories goes a counter-tradition of stories of isolation, of man-alone, stories of men and women condemned to loneliness or seeking loneliness, repudiating society as alien to them or simply not acknowledging its existence.

It is difficult to resist the temptation to surmise on the possible reasons for this. One thinks of the physical loneliness of the pioneer's life on the frontier—and one must remember that everywhere in the United States has been at some time the frontier. One thinks of the different kind of loneliness endured by many immigrants in the crowded cities of the nineteenth century. One thinks of the tremendous pressures upon the individual to conform that have been so strong in American life from frontier days onwards and of the secret and silent rebellion against it on the part of some. One thinks of the imprisoned conscience of the Puritans in their special relation to God, a relation that magnified, as it were, the value and importance of the individual. These are speculations. What is certain is that stories written in this tradition constitute a formidable contribution to American writing.

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