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EDITOR'S NOTE

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- 1 The short story is, of course, *sui generis*; it is not an unsatisfactory form of the long story. It is a form on its own, with its own laws and its own logic. A short story has its natural length. It isn't trying to do the same thing as a novel. It has ground staked out which is its own ground. Historically, it is not an ancient form. It's very much a modern form. It belongs to modern literature, the literature of about the last hundred years. It comes into being at about the same time as the specifically modern poem, just after Edgar Poe remarked that the long poem was a contradiction in terms. Whether the rise of the modern short story coinciding with the rise of the modern poem is simple coincidence I don't know. I can't formulate an explanation as to why it should have done this, but it is a noteworthy fact that it did. It also arose at about the same time as Impressionist painting with its obliquity of approach. You know that when an Impressionist paints people, he often puts them at the edge of the painting, or just walking off the painting, as if you catch them in the act of getting on with their ordinary lives, as if the painter were saying, "Yes, I'm not sitting this person down right in the middle of the painting and painting them. I'm painting a cafe, and there's a man and a girl sitting at a table, and they're over to one side, and about half the painting is made up of empty table, because that's in the picture too, and that is also what I'm painting." And the short story arises at about the same time as these other phenomena. I cannot explain why, but that it did so is obviously true.

The short story, *vis-à-vis* the novel, is almost exactly like a drawing as compared to the painting. When we see a perfectly successful drawing we never say "How good that would have been if only it could have been a painting." A painting is an entirely different thing. It has a depth, and it has a richness that the drawing can't have. The drawing catches a

moment - forever. It's completely satisfying on its own grounds. The short story very nearly always does, or most characteristically does, deals with a moment of perception, very much what Joyce called an epiphany. It deals with a moment of perception. It deals with a moment of realization. I'm not going to go over what the other speaker said and contradict individual statements, but I was surprised by the remark that "Nothing very much can happen in one day." I think that as we go through our lives, we often find that, as people say when they're telling you about an experience: "All of a sudden I realized that so-and-so." With regard to your perception of life, things can happen in one day; things can happen in one minute that change the way you look at things, and this is very much the material of the short story: The moment of recognition, the moment of eye-opening. But, of course, a short story is not completely wedded to dealing with such moments. It can also show you, from outside, the essence of a life, the essence of the man's frustration when he gets back home and his boy has let the fire out, and he beats him. It's a concrete representation of the kind of life, the kind of frustration, and the emptiness that his life has, and the unbearable resentment that wells up in him, and makes him behave unjustly. It says everything in a very economical way.

- 2 Now, I think that is the first thing that one really must say, and it is the basis of what I want to say: that the short story has its own logic and its own laws, and it is not trying to be something else and failing. It is very triumphantly doing one thing. The best short stories are completely unforgettable, and they're just as good as the other work by the same author. I do, to speak briefly of my own practice, write short stories occasionally, and I agree very wholeheartedly that there is something instinctive, almost a knack; it's quite irrational. Writing a short story, to me, is very much - as I said, it's like a drawing - but it's also, on a humbler level, like a cook turning out a blancmange. You know you get the mold, and you turn it upside down, and you lift it off, and either the blancmange is perfect or it just falls over, and nothing will remedy that. That's it: it's ruined, and with a short story, it turns out right, or it doesn't turn out right. I have never read a fairly good short story. I have never read a short story that succeeded up to a point. There are perfectly successful short stories, and there are totally unsuccessful ones, and there's nothing in between, which again is rather like a drawing: it hits the nail on the head; it gets it right, or else it's nothing. And the satisfaction that one gets when one manages to turn that blancmange out perfectly, and it couldn't be done better, is a very great satisfaction, and I feel very glad that I have that knack. But a knack it is. It is not related to one's deeper powers, which is the reason why many famous writers have not been able to write short stories. It is a knack that they lack. It is something almost physical, the movement of the wrists, and one can do it or one can't.
- 3 Now the literary form that the short story most resembles is poetry, though I think that even poetry is not so much a matter of knack, not so much a matter of turning out the blancmange as the short story is. Even poetry is not that. Nevertheless, poetry also is something that evidently is partly instinctive, something that many respect-worthy writers have not been able to do. I mean, I don't know whether Tolstoy wrote any poems, but they haven't become well-known if so, and yet Tolstoy was a very great writer, and, therefore, there is once again the element of the given, the element of the instinctive power which is somehow implanted in some people and not in others. There is at least one writer in England today, that is Victor Pritchett, who writes marvellous short stories and has done so for many years, and his few novels, I think, are much less interesting, and

he is a man who works very naturally in the short story and gives the impression of being short-winded; he doesn't like to keep it going for very long.

- 4 Now, following on from the fact that the short story is like a drawing, we have the concomitant fact that you can write a short story about people that you don't know, whose lives you don't know, in very great detail. You see, if you write the realistic novel as I do, I mean, there are all kinds of novels, but if, as I do, you write the middle-of-the-road realistic novel as it's been understood in Europe for the last two hundred years (ordinary, credible characters in ordinary settings)... When I write a novel about people, I always have to write about the kind of people whose lives I know in detail, because the novel presents people making choices, and then what follows from that choice, and what they do next, and you've got to know what kind of work they do, and what they do when they get home, and what their homes are like, and what their relationships are like. You've got to know people very well to write a realistic novel about them, which means that all the novels that I have written have dealt with the kind of person that I am and the kind of person that I mix with; not necessarily the kind of person I am temperamentally, but the kind of milieu. I am a very middle of the middle-class person. My father was a dentist, and so when I was growing up, the people who came to our house were either medical people or clergymen (because my father was interested in church matters). I now know people who are scholars, or lawyers, or medical people again, or people who are in communications, radio, journalists and, of course, other writers. Now, those are the kind of people I know, and, therefore, if I'm going to write a novel, I'm stuck with those people. They're all right; they're human beings too. I mean, the emotional and moral problems that people have are real emotional and moral problems; therefore, I don't mind writing about them.

But if you write a short story, you can – because you don't need so much detail and because a short story takes one instance of that person's life, takes one specimen moment – you can, in fact, go and spend a day visiting a factory, you can look at someone working at a factory bench, and you can get a flash of what it must be like to be him or her, and then you can write a short story which just gives one flash of that person. You might get it wrong; it might be a flash that's quite misleading, but assuming that you are going to get it right, you don't need a lot of detail. You could observe that person from the outside, and, therefore, whereas when I have written novels, I have always written about the same milieu that I actually live in, when I've written short stories, I've written about agricultural workers, industrial workers, very old people, children, a boy who was a lifeguard on a bathing beach: things that are not within my ordinary experience but about people I've observed, and obviously observed to some extent from outside; though ideally one tries, of course to interiorize, one tries to sympathize with every human being, of every kind, in the world, if one possibly could.

But writing a novel about them is not just a matter of sympathizing with them; it is a matter of moving around enormous amounts of information. Now a short story does not need enormous amounts of information. It is, therefore, extremely liberating. It has the power to liberate you from the social milieu that you know best.

- 5 Now then, let's get a little closer to the question: how does it do this? The form that it most resembles is poetry and, like poetry, the short story is irreducible. You cannot tell it in other words. The novel is the form of literary art that is the most possible to translate into another language, for example, because you still have the story; you still have the characterization; you still have the order of the incidents, the structure of the narrative:

you have a great deal when you translate a novel. When you translate a poem into another language you have nothing, because that element in it which is poetry belongs to the language and is untranslatable. So you can only produce another poem in your own language which bears some relationship to it; you can carry over some of the subject matter, but you can't translate the poem, *per se*.

6 Now in exactly the same way, while you can translate a short story more or less, if you're meticulous enough, because you haven't got the problem of the verse and so on, it still comes very close to that inseparability from its original expression. Even a short story that actually has a story - and many of them don't - that has a narrative, an event, *un événement*, even such a short story always uses some very telling detail, and if you took that detail away, it's quite impossible to say exactly what would have gone from what the story is saying, but one knows, of course, that something important has obviously gone.

7 There is a story by Maupassant about an ordinary Parisian citizen called Monsieur Depuis in a railway compartment. (Maupassant loved railway compartments.) The world is going by outside, and you see the world through the window, but the world does not intrude on this closed situation. Now, Monsieur Depuis is going out of Paris after the siege of 1870. He's going to see his wife and children whom he sent to Switzerland to be safe during the fighting. And he's been a member of the guard in Paris, and done his patriotic duty, and he's terribly tired. He's a middleaged, peaceful sort of man. One pictures him as a grocer or something of that kind. And he's slumped in the railway compartment, watching, idly looking through the window, and as he sees groups of Prussian soldiers everywhere, standing about, and France seeming to be, as it were, haunted and desecrated by these soldiers in their alien uniforms. And there are two Englishmen in the compartment who are reading to one another out of a guidebook and treating the whole thing as an interesting sightseeing expedition that couldn't really concern them. And he falls asleep, and as the train rolls through the countryside, Monsieur Depuis goes to sleep.

And then a Prussian officer gets in and behaves insufferably to him, and sits pointing out of the window, saying, "Yes, that's where I killed half a dozen of these damned Frenchmen," and so on and so forth. You remember the story. Anyway, in the end, the Prussian behaves so abominably that Monsieur Depuis can't contain himself, and he gives him a punch on the nose, whereupon the Prussian says, "You will fight a duel with me. I shall get one of my fellow officers to be my second at the next stop, and you will get off and fight a duel." So he says, "All right, all right, so I am going to be killed. I'm going to be killed." He doesn't know how to get out of it; there's no way to get out of it. And, obviously, fighting with a professional soldier, he's not going to be able to win the duel. One of the Englishmen agrees to be his second, and the whole thing is grinding on.

The train gets to a station. They get out. They go behind some sheds. The Prussian has another officer. The Englishman is seconding Monsieur Depuis. They raise their pistols, and the order comes to fire, and to his absolute stupefaction, Monsieur Depuis kills the officer; by some fantastic feat of chance, his gun goes off just a little bit before or something, and the man falls dead. He's killed.

So he goes back to the platform, and the train's still there, and he gets on, and the two Englishmen get on. And the train starts its journey again. And he sinks back, utterly exhausted by the whole horrible experience, and he goes to sleep again, and the two Englishmen look at him with amazement: he's asleep again. The story begins with him asleep and it ends with him asleep. Now, what that story is about is the man going to sleep and going to sleep again. And if I were to try to tell you in other words what that is

saying about the nature of Life and the nature of experience, I couldn't. I couldn't unpack it, any more than you can unpack what is said in a poem. It's very close to what we used to call pure poetry. You know, there was a vogue for *la poésie pure*; it isn't necessarily the only kind of poetry, but all poetry approaches it to some extent. And that detail of the train with the man asleep, and then the dreadful, ghastly situation of the duel and the death of the officer, and then the train going on with the man asleep again - that is how the short story works.

Incidentally, I must be honest and confess to you that I have known that story all my life, and Maupassant has always been very important to me, but when I was making my preparations to come here, I got the *Pléiade* edition of Maupassant in order to read the story again. I thought I'd better re-read it, and I found that in the version that's there, he doesn't go to sleep - either at the beginning or the end. But I'm perfectly sure I didn't dream it. Maupassant very often revised his stories. The textual notes in the *Pléiade* edition, in the case of Maupassant, are extremely brief, and the editor simply says, "This appeared in a certain publication in 1883, and that is the text I used." That's admitting that there are other texts; he doesn't tell you anything about them.

Maupassant has that wonderful gift of the detail that says it all. There's another siege of Paris story you'll remember about two middle-aged Parisians who get out through the German lines, and they go fishing. And they catch some fish. And on the way back, they're caught; they're captured by the Prussians who take them to their commandant. And he's trying to get some information from them about the defenses of the city. And they won't tell him anything, so he gets each one off on his own, and says that the other one has talked, and they still won't tell him anything. So he has them shot. And as they're led away to be shot, he sees the bag with the fish that they've caught, lying there. And he says to his orderly, "Oh, we'll have that tonight. It will be delicious;" and then he lights a cigarette.

- 8 Now, that story would really not be anything without that detail of eating the fish that the men have caught. And if I were to try and say what it is that that detail says, I probably could do it if I talked for an hour, but Maupassant can do it in those few words.
- 9 Now, this is why the short story has no need to defer to any other form because such a detail would be lost in the large canvas of the novel. Such details do occur in novels, but you don't notice them so much because the extent of the novel is so much greater. So that is one point I wanted to make.

There has always been short fiction. There have always been short stories since mankind began. Of course. And short narrative occurs all through world literature from the very beginning. But I think it's quite easy to demonstrate that even the greatest examples of short narrative from the ancient world, and, for that matter, the medieval world, are quite different. The conditions of modern literature are different, modern literature of the last hundred years, are quite different. And if you take even the most memorable short tales, and think of a typical one... Now, here I find myself in a slight difficulty because I want to refer to a story from the Apocrypha. Even in this secular age, it might offend some people if one used a story actually from Holy Writ for the purposes of literary criticism, but the Apocrypha, presumably, is a different matter. And I want to use the story of "Tobit" from the Apocrypha. Now I don't want to insult anybody's intelligence, but I might just help one or two people if I briefly remind you of what happens in the story of "Tobit," because, of course, there are very well-known stories, but perhaps you will be patient while I just very briefly say what happens in the book of

“Tobit.” I’ll cut it down so remorselessly that it won’t seem a very interesting story, but... Tobit is a good, God-fearing, religious Israelite, who obeys all the religious commandments and keeps all the observances, and he’s the diagram of a good, upright, God-fearing man. And, in particular, the Israelites, at the time of the story, were in captivity, as they were in so many of the Bible stories. Tobit, who has managed to avoid being persecuted and has some kind of responsible position, is always on the lookout for religious duties that he can perform; and, particularly, he buries the dead. When he finds somebody lying dead, he buries him with the full procedure; he gives him a proper religious burial. And he gets into trouble for this, and he has to flee and go into hiding, and then there’s another change in the political system, and he’s allowed back, and he lives with his wife, Anna, and his son, Tobias.

And one day it is a feast day where the Jews are commanded to feast, a religious feast day. So Tobit does all the things: he says all the right prayers, and he does the ritual washing, and then he sits down to eat this meal. But before eating the meal, he says to Tobias, his son, “Go out and find me a member of our tribe who fears God, who keeps the law and bring him in to share our food.” Tobias goes out, Tobit is waiting - and the son, Tobias comes in and says, “There’s a man lying dead out there. He was strangled, just a few minutes ago, and he’s lying dead.” So Tobit immediately gets up from his meal, goes out, picks up the body, and takes it into a shed or somewhere where he can hide it until nightfall and then dig the grave, and not be seen, and give him a proper burial.

The neighbors see this and mock him. They say, “Look at him: burying a dead body again. The number of times he’s got into trouble for that - you’d think he could have learned his lesson.” And they pour mockery on him. But he just goes ahead and he takes the body in.

10 Now, that night, in sorrow, he buries the man. And it’s a hot night, and he’s lying out of doors. And he lies with his face turned towards the wall, and there are some sparrows in the wall whose droppings fall on his eyes. And white patches appear on his eyes - opaque white patches. He’s now struck with blindness. And he’s in despair, and he prays God to let him die.

11 Now at just the same time in the same country, there is a young woman named Sarah who is also praying for death, and her problem is that she has seven times been betrothed; seven times they’ve had a wedding feast; and seven times the bridegroom’s been destroyed, between the wedding feast and consummating the marriage. The bridegroom’s been killed by a fiend, an evil spirit called Asmodeus who has particularly marked out this girl’s bridegrooms as victims, and he always appears on the wedding night. So she is being mocked at by other people of her generation saying, “You must be a bad-luck bringer; you must be bad news. I hope you never have children.” And she’s in complete despair, and she prays God that she may die.

So you have Tobit and Sarah both praying for death. And the two prayers arrive at the throne of God at the same time, and God says to his archangel, Raphael, “Go down, and put the troubles of these two people right.” So Raphael departs.

The story now takes a turn here. Tobit has to send Tobias on a journey. It doesn’t matter what the journey’s for. It’s to claim some money that he left or something, but never mind. He says to Tobias, “Go on this journey and take someone with you who knows the way and knows the country. Go out and find a guide for your journey.”

So Tobias goes out, and the first person he meets is Raphael, who has assumed ordinary human shape for this errand. And he says, “I’m looking for somebody who knows the way to so and so.” “Oh, I know it. I know the country, and I’m of that region.” “Oh, well, that is

good," says Tobias. "You must come see my father, and he will hire you."

So he takes the archangel in, and the old blind man is sitting there, and he says to the archangel, "What is your family? Who is your father? What is his tribe?" And Raphael gives him a set of invented answers. And he says that he's called Azarias, the son of the older Aranius, who is a kinsman. And Tobit, who is very obsessed with relationships and tribal matters, is very pleased that he's found somebody of the right family. And he says to him, "Ah, you come of a good family, and you have a good father."

So the two of them go off, and they go off on their journey, and then it becomes pure folk tale.

One night they camp by the river Tigris. Tobias goes to the river to wash his feet. An enormous fish in the water grabs one of his feet. And he calls to Azarius to help him, and he says, "Get hold of the fish and pull him out of the water." So he pulls the fish out of the water. And then Azarius says, "Cut the fish open, take out the heart, the liver, and the gall." So he does it and he wraps them up, and they go on their journey. And as they go, Azarius says, "Now, we're going to stay with so-and-so, and he has a daughter called Sarah, who wants a husband, and it would be a very good thing if you married her. The old man has got wealth. You would inherit all that, and what's more, she's a very nice girl, and you ought to do it."

But he says, "Look, I've heard about these seven men who were killed by Asmodius. I'm afraid." "That's all right. Do it." And something in the angel's authority convinces Tobias. And when they get there, and he meets the girl and he meets the father, and he asks the girl's father if he may have the girl in marriage. It's arranged there and then. According to the law of that time, the old man writes a marriage contract immediately. They have a meal. Then the young couple go to bed, and the father doesn't ever expect to see Tobias again, so much so that when morning comes, he tells the servants to go out and dig the grave, so that they can get him buried before anybody sees him.

But what has in fact happened is that they go to the bedchamber. Asmodius does appear, but Tobias has been told by the mysterious friend, the angel, that he must take the heart and liver of the fish and burn it, and the fumes will drive away any evil spirits; it will drive away any fiend or devil of any description. So when Asmodius appears, Tobias puts these two organs of the fish onto the hot incense that they're burning. The smell immediately banishes the fiend, who is then pursued into Upper Egypt, which is a rather nice touch, by Raphael, who binds him hand and foot, presumably for eternity. He never reappears in the story.

So, Tobias has married the girl and lived, and when they discover that, there's a tremendous feast. Everybody is full of joy, full of contentment of every kind, and the archangel, still in his human identity, says, "Now the gall of the fish has another use: it cures blindness. In particular, it removes white patches from the eyes. You powder it, and you blow it on the eyes."

- 12 So they journey home. The old, blind Tobit comes out to greet his son, and Tobias blows the gall of the fish on his eyes, and forthwith the patches peel away, and his eyes are normal. He can see.

So they're all completely overjoyed. Tobias has come back. He's got a wife. He's rich. Tobit can see. Their troubles are over. The happy ending of the story is now with us, and the story ends with a tremendous burst of joy and gladness.

And then, in the middle of the feast, Tobit says to his son, Tobias, "What about the fellow who went with you to show you the way? We mustn't forget to pay him." And Tobias says, "Pay him? We'll give him half of everything we brought. He deserves it: he cured your

eyes, he enabled me to survive Asmodius," and so on. And the old man says, "Yes. We will give him half."

So they call him in, and they say, "You must take half of everything we brought - the slaves, the gold, the camels, and this and that. Go in peace." And the angel, then, reveals himself and says who he is.

Now part of why that *dénouement* is moving is, of course, because of the stately way it's told, the stateliness of the language. I'm quite sure that in the original Hebrew, the language is very beautiful. In seventeenth-century English, it's this:

Surely I will keep close nothing from you, for I said, "it was good to keep close the secret of a king but that it was honourable to reveal the works of God. » Now, therefore, when thou didst pray and Sarah, thy daughter-in-law, I did bring the remembrance of your prayers before the Holy One. And when thou didst bury the dead, I was with thee likewise. And when thou didst not delay to rise up and leave thy dinner to go and cover the dead, thy good deed was not hid from me, but I was with thee.

And now God hath sent me to heal thee and Sarah, thy daughter-in-law. I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels which present the prayers of the saints, and which go in and out before the glory of the Holy One.

Then they were both troubled and fell upon their faces, for they feared. But he said unto them, "Fear not, for it shall go well with thee."

13 That, of course, is magnificent. It's one of the great stories, but we will now stand away from it and consider that narrative and why it is different from a modern short story.

We could describe it, I think, by saying it is a blend of two very well-defined genres. First of all, it is an instructional religious story. It is the story of how a good man was rewarded, because it goes into great detail about how scrupulous Tobit was; Tobit always - in misfortune, in sickness, in everything else - observed the law and kept the commandments of God, and he was rewarded, because you note that the reward is purely a personal reward for him. It doesn't flow from anything in the situation. When Tobias marries Sarah, her father was very glad that he's a kinsman, but actually, all the other seven were kinsmen too. In the eyes of the world, by the standards of ordinary morality, Tobias has no more claim to the girl and the fortune than the other men. But his claim is that the archangel is looking after him, that God has sent Raphael for that purpose. Therefore, it is a direct story of intervention on the behalf of a good man, and, thus a story that naturally arises in the literature of a much-suffering people, the Jews, whose traditional literature is full of those stories.

That is one of its two main elements, and the other, of course I needn't say - you know already - is folklore. It is pure folktale: the magic properties of the organs of the fish, for instance. It's very much an Eastern folktale, like the kind of story that we find in "The Arabian Nights", and indeed, it is, as you will, of course, know, cognate with a very widely distributed folk story which scholars call "The Grateful Dead," and which occurs across Europe and Asia.

In the "Grateful Dead" cluster of folk-tales, there is always a rich merchant who goes travelling, and sees a dead man whose corpse is being maltreated. He goes over and says, "Stop that." And they say, "He died owing us money, and now he's dead, and we can't get our money." So he says, "Leave him alone. I'll pay the money." So he pays the money, and he buries the man. Later on in the tale, when he's fallen into poverty and misfortune, he wants to marry a rich girl, but the trouble with this girl is that she's had seven husbands, and all the husbands have been killed by a snake which has come out of the mouth of the bride. A mysterious slave advises him and says, "Do it. It will be all right." Something

impresses him about this, and he goes and marries the girl, and that night they go to the bed chamber, and this snake does come out, whereupon the mysterious slave appears and kills the snake, and they all live happily ever after. It turns out that the slave is the spirit of the dead man that he has helped.

14 Now, that story appears intact, you see, in the book of "Tobit," which explains the tremendous emphasis on Tobit burying the dead and getting into trouble for it, and getting up from the table to go and bury the dead. The story of the grateful dead is embedded in an instructional religious story. Now it's superb narrative; but it is nothing like a modern short story. I hope I've made my point, that the great stories of antiquity, though they're short and they're stories, are not what we call "short stories." They have different roots and different modes of procedure.

And I want to end by considering one more story, one modern short story, this time from the earlier years of our century, in 1907. Penguin Books have just put back into print and made available again *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns* by Arnold Bennett, so it's a very easy book to get. It can be bought at any wayside paper shop, practically, news agency in England now, certainly any book shop. It contains one of Bennett's finest works.

Bennett is a writer who is not in fashion at this moment. He's a minor classic of English literature; I suppose people would more or less agree with that assessment. Some of his books, like *The Old Wives' Tale*, continue to go on and on, and they always have readers. And he represents the attempt to plant in English the kind of novel that was so strong in France in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries: the realistic novel, the novel which was, above all, truthful.

Bennett is a great writer about provincial life, and he has a story called "The Death of Simon Fuge," which is in this book, *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*. The "five towns" are what Bennett called what is now the city of Stoke-on-Trent, which is actually six towns, a place where you worked, and you didn't really do anything but work, because it was organized for work, and outside work, you could drink beer and watch football that's really about all you could do. Not a place where there was fine appreciation of the arts, you would have thought, or very much in the way of high civilization, though of course, it was the town of Wedgewood. It is the only town in England known by the name of a trade - the Potteries.

Now, Bennett came from there, and when I say came from there, he left at the same age that Joyce left Dublin - twenty-one. And he had a very ambiguous relationship with it. He was an artist of memory, like Joyce. He wrote about the Five Towns all his life; all his best work, or nearly all his best work, is about it. But he died in 1931 when I was six years old - and I remember that the older people didn't like him. They disapproved of him. To them, he was a man who'd made a lot of money writing about them, but he didn't go and live among them, you know, and they disliked him. When he died, he left instructions that he was to be taken back home and buried. And he is buried, under the shadow of a great slag heap, in the middle of this very working town, a man who could easily have gotten into some fashionable graveyard in London if he'd wanted to.

But he had a relationship with the five towns that was very deep and very complex, and "The Death of Simon Fuge" is a wonderful story, which I'm sure you'll read because it's very easy to get hold of and very cheap, and I'm not going to spoil it by talking very much about it. I just want to lay it before you, for your attention, because, once again, it is the art of the short story in suggesting, in using very telling detail; it says as much as a novel, it says easily as much as a novel of a hundred thousand words could say on this theme.

It begins with a train, like Maupassant. In the train compartment is an esthete from the British Museum, an expert on ceramics, very much a Londoner, very much a metropolitan type who knows all the fashionable things, who keeps up with everything that happens in London, and who reads the right papers, and who is very much in the swing - which was the other half of Arnold Bennett. Bennett lived in London most of his life - that's to say when he didn't live in Paris, because he was passionately fond of Paris and lived there for about seven years. But Bennett was always very keen on going to the latest music, and going to the theatre, and keeping in touch with everything. And this man represents that side of him. And he's going down to the five towns where he's never been, in his life. And he's going down to see this bunch of strange provincial people who - he really almost expects them to have tails, I think.

And on the way down, it gives a beautiful, concise picture of this man, the kind of thoughts he's having, what he's reading, and then he gets there. And he looks out of the train window at the blackened houses and the smoke and the dirty canal, and he thinks, "Is this where Simon Fuge came from?", because in the paper on the way down, he's read "Death of Mr. Simon Fuge, Painter," and there's a little appreciation of this exquisite painter - not one of the very famous ones but somebody with an exquisite gift who is very well-known like himself. And he's been reading that Simon Fuge is dead on the way down. And he gets there; he looks around, and he says, "Is this where Simon Fuge came from?" And the evening is just - he meets the man who runs the local museum he's going to work with tomorrow, and they give him dinner, and they take him out and get him drunk, and one thing or another. He meets the local people. And on one side of it, the story follows a very well-worn pattern: it's the taking down of the courtier by the peasant. You know, that's almost a folktale: the man from London who knows it all and arrives and finds that they know it all, too, and they actually know more about contemporary music and things than he does. And he gradually realizes that behind their rough exterior, they actually are people with a great deal of information, and he comes to respect them. But when he brings up Simon Fuge, they won't have it. They won't even talk about him, because they rather have the attitude of, "Oh, yes, Simon Fuge, yes, well, we knew him well," you know, like the people from back home, always, you know. It's no good talking. Right up to recent times, the people in Dublin would never have any respect for "Willy Yeats" because "We knew him, when." And so whenever he brings up Simon Fuge, all they're concerned to talk about is that Simon Fuge had a rather mysterious, amorous entanglement with two sisters. And it's not quite known whether he got anywhere with these sisters or whether he did with one and not the other or maybe both of them or what. And one of these sisters is married to one of the men whose houses he goes to, and she receives him in this nice, comfortable house, and the other is working as a bar maid. And in the course of the evening, they meet the other one.

His host, Mr. Brindley, has said he'll find out; he'll bring the subject up.

"By the way," said Mr. Brindley, "you used to know Simon Fuge, didn't you?"

"Oh, Simon Fuge," said Miss Brett. "Yes, after the Brewery Company took the Blue Bell at Calder over there I used to be there. He would come in sometimes. Such a nice, queer old man."

"I mean, the son," said Mr. Brindley.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I knew young Simon, too." A slight hesitation and then, "Of course." Another hesitation. "Why?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Brindley, "only he's dead."

"You don't mean to say he's dead?" she exclaimed.

"Day before yesterday, in Italy," said Mr. Brindley.

Miss Brett's manner certainly changed. It seemed almost to become natural and unecstatic. "I suppose it'll be in the papers," she ventured.

"It's in the London paper."

"Well, I never," she muttered.

"A long time, I should think, since he was in this part of the world," said Mr. Brindley. "When did you last see him?" He was exceeding skillful, I considered.

- 15 Nothing actually happens. It's like Chekhov. They go from house to house to talk, and you never even find out what happened between Simon Fuge and this girl. It's very much a Chekhovian story. (Bennett was so passionately fond of Chekhov that he had two complete sets of Chekhov's stories - one in his London house and one in his country house - so that if at any given moment he suddenly wanted to read a story by Chekhov, he was only seconds away from the bookshelf.) And this is a Chekhovian story, I think one of the first in English - 1907.

But as they go from house to house and talk, and they bring up Simon Fuge, and they bring up this and that aspect of Fuge's life and finally the Londoner goes into the art gallery. And he sees a little painting.

The little picture showed all this: it was a painting, unfinished, of a girl standing at a door and evidently hesitating whether to open the door or not; a very young girl, very thin, with long legs in black stockings, and short, white, untidy frock; thin, bare arms, the head thrown on one side, and the hands raised and one foot raised, in a wonderful, childish gesture - the gesture of an undecided fox terrier. The face was an infant's face, utterly innocent, and yet Simon Fuge had somehow caught in that face a glimpse of all the future of the woman that the girl was to be. He had displayed with exquisite insolence the essential naughtiness of his vision of things.

The thing was not much more than a sketch. It was a happy accident, perhaps, in some day's work of Simon Fuge's, but it was genius. When once you had yielded to it, there was no other picture in the room. It killed everything else, but wherever it had found itself, nothing could have killed it. Its success was undeniable, indestructible, and it glowed sombrely there on the wall - a few splashes of colour on a morcel of canvas. And it was Simon Fuge's unconscious power of challenge to the five towns. It was Simon Fuge - at any rate, all of Simon Fuge that was worth having - masterful, imperishable, and not merely it has challenged. It was his scorn, his aristocratic disdain, his positive assurance that in the battle between them, he had annihilated the five towns. It hung there in the very midst thereof, calmly and contemptuously waiting for the acknowledgement of his victory.

"Which?" said Mr. Brindley.

"That one."

"Yes, I fancy it is." He seemed to agree. "Yes. It is."

"It's not signed," I remarked.

"It ought to be," said Mr. Brindley. They laughed. "Too late now."

"How did it get here?"

"Don't know. Oh, I think Mr. Perkins won at a raffle in a bazaar and then hung it here. He did as he liked here, you know."

- 16 He then changes the subject to show the man something else, but you get, you see, this little masterpiece, which the man says, "Oh, well, the fellow who used to run the gallery, he did as he liked," the implication being that it was an eccentric act to hang that painting, and the whole feeling of putting up a wall against Simon Fuge - that is how Bennett felt. It's very, very engagé, that story, because Bennett was just coming into his strength. In another year or two, he was to write *Old Wives' Tale*, and then he really became a world-famous author. But at the time he wrote this story, he was just conscious of being a very good writer, conscious that nobody back home had very much heard of him, conscious of strength, also feeling that double pull, feeling very drawn back home

and, at the same time, not wanting to go back because of the kind of attitude they would have - all these things. I'm putting them so crudely and quickly.

- 17 And there is Simon Fuge's painting, and as the man gets back into the train to go back to London, he thinks

"A strange place," I reflected, as I ate my dinner in the dining car, with the pressure of Mr. Brindley's steely clasp still affecting my right hand and the rich, honest cordiality of his *au revoir* in my heart; a place that is passing strange. And I thought further, "he may have been a boaster, and a chatterer, and had rather cold feet at the wrong moments, and the five towns may have got the better of him now, but that portrait of the little girl in the Wedgewood Institution is waiting there, right in the middle of the five towns, and one day, the five towns will have to give it best. They can say what they like. What eyes the fellow had, when he was in the right company!

- 18 That's how it ends. Now that is one of those last sentences, rather like, "I'll tell you," said Rosie, "he was such a perfect gentleman," at the end of *Cakes and Ale*, which, incidentally, I think is a book, a satire on English class consciousness, and, therefore, that last sentence is absolutely masterly, because it irradiates the entire book. "What eyes the fellow had, When he was in the right company," but what was the right company, for Simon Fuge? Was it the people that he came from? Or was it the Italians among whom he died? Was it London where his painting became known? What was the right company? It's just such a perfect touch; it's that kind of detail. And, as I say, that is an example of a short story which has, I think, been neglected. I think it is the best thing that Arnold Bennett ever did. It's very easy to get hold of. Now that must be my excuse for putting it very firmly in front of you, except, of course, that anything that underlines the power that Chekhov has had must be illuminating.

And we mustn't forget that even Chekhov, great, as supremely great as he was, Chekhov had the way made straight for him by Turgenev. Turgenev is the genius behind Chekhov, of course. And the short story begins - one of the first volumes of the modern short story is *A Sportsman's Sketches* by Turgenev. And you start reading them and you think they're just beautiful little sketches of Russian rural life, with the gentlemen going hunting and staying in the huts of the peasants. And then gradually as you read one fragile story after another, you realize it's a social document against serfdom. And that is another quick footnote: that the cumulative effect of a number of short stories can be exactly the same as a novel.