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Performative Perspectives on Short Story Collections

Abstract

The first part of this paper offers a brief theoretical discussion of the short story collection and raises some concerns about the relevance of its historical roots. In a second part, the concepts of performance and performativity are introduced in order to investigate how these concepts can play a relevant role in the theoretical description of the peculiar functioning of the short story collection as a literary form.

Résumé

Après une brève description préliminaire du recueil de nouvelles, à laquelle sont jointes quelques remarques à propos de l'importance de ses racines historiques, cette étude se focalise sur quelques aspects dérivés du concept de performance et de performativité, afin d'analyser en quelle mesure ces théories peuvent jouer un rôle pertinent dans la description théorique du fonctionnement particulier du recueil de nouvelles en tant que forme littéraire.

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Performative Perspectives
on Short Story Collections

Contemporary theoretical approaches to short story collections have focused almost exclusively on modern and contemporary Anglo-American cases, taking for granted, if not explicitly theorizing, that the short story collection is a modern genre. There are few exceptions, the most significant being Timothy Alderman's unpublished dissertation on the integrated short story collection.[1] Indeed, where scholars refer to collections of short fiction prior to the 19th century, such as the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*, in most of the cases these texts are indicated as lacking the genre's defining characteristics. Moreover, in recent studies of the short story collection, there is a heavy focus on corpora tied to specific and recurrent geo-cultural contexts, to such an extent that the geo-historical or cultural characteristics have been assumed to be genre characteristics. In parallel, the short story collection is frequently identified as a literary expression of specific cultural communities.[2]

In my view, these trends have not yet produced a common theoretical framework about the short story collection. Moreover, the exclusive focus on certain geographically and historically uniform texts reduces the range of the short story collections considered and threatens to lead to an identification of the literary form with certain recent expressions. I would argue, on the contrary, that the short story collection as a literary form has evolved in different literary traditions through the centuries while maintaining some fundamental traits, related to its processes and functions.

In this paper, therefore, I will try to clarify how the short story collection as a literary form functions by offering a new theoretical framework for the short story collection as narrative form. The aim is to test a perspective through which one can both analyse the theoretical implications of collecting short narratives and describe the extent to which a collection of short stories represents a specific epistemological approach to reality different from those of other narrative forms (i.e. novels and short stories). Referring to both Frederic Jameson's definition of narrative as an epistemological category and Mikhail M. Bakhtin's and Pavel N. Medvedev's remarks on a genre's conceptualization of reality, Charles E. May refers to the specific epistemological approach of the short story, c.q. short

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1. Timothy Alderman, *The Integrated Short Story Collection as a Genre*, West Lafayette, Purdue University, 1982.
2. See for example Sandra A. Zagarell, "Narrative of Community. The Identification of a Genre", in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1988, 13, 3, 498-527; Maggie Dunn & Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel. The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, New York, Twayne, 1995; Rolf Lunden, *The United Stories of America. Studies in the Short Story Composite*, Amsterdam-Atlanta, Rodopi, 199; James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle. The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2001.

story collection, as follows: "If we approach genre from the point of view of its intrinsic thematic relationship to reality and the generation of reality, we may say that every genre has its methods and means of seeing and conceptualizing reality, which are accessible to it alone."[3]

What is needed first of all, however, is a preliminary description of the short story collection. This description will allow us, in a second step, to shed light on the subject by means of concepts related to the theory of performance and performativity.[4] This does not mean, however, that I will study the short story collection within speech-act-theory, even though, generally speaking, collections of short stories are literary acts, i.e. acts of language that change the world by bringing into being the things they name and tell.[5] My argumentation will instead test suggestions deriving from disciplines other than the philosophy of language, namely sociology, philosophy, and theatre studies in which concepts of performance and performativity will have different meanings, so to describe how the short story collection differs – in its processes, functions and effects - from other literary forms and narrative genres.[6]

In brief, I hope that the analysis of the performative dynamics of short story collections can contribute to a definition of the short story collection as an autonomous literary form whose functioning can never entirely be reduced to single national, regional, cultural or historical traditions. For, as I hope to argue, short story collections maintain their fundamental characteristics in Western literary traditions from late medieval framed tale collections to late 20th-century postmodern narratives, and from traditional authorial collections to non-authorial or posthumous collections.

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3. Charles E. MAY "Why Short Stories are Essential and Why They are Seldom Read", in: Per WINTHER, Jakob LOTHE & Hans H. SKEI (eds.), *The Art Of Brevity. Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, Columbia, University of South Carolina, 2004, 14-24, 14. May refers to Frederic JAMESON, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Itacha, Cornell University Press, 1981 and quotes Mikhail M. BAKHTIN & Pavel MEDVEDEV, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship. A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, translated by Albert J. Wehrle, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1978, 133.

4. I would like to thank Raffaele Donnarumma (University of Pisa), Massimiliano Tortora (University of Perugia), Katharina Pewny and Mathijs Duyck (University of Ghent), Elke D'hoker and Bart Van den Bossche (University of Leuven) for their input.

5. I refer to the main theoretical approaches developed after John L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962): John R. SEARLE, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969; Richard OHMANN, "Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature", in: *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1971, 4, 1-19; Wolfgang ISER, "The Reality of Fiction. A Functionalist Approach to Literature", in: *New Literary History*, 1975, 7, 1, 7-38; Jacques DERRIDA, *Limited Inc.*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977; Michael HANCHER, "Beyond a Speech-Act Theory of Literary Discourse", in: *MLN*, 1977, 92, 1081-1098; Mary Louise PRATT, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1977; Joseph MARGOLIS, "Literature as Speech Acts", in *Philosophy and Literature*, 1979, 3, 1, 39-52; Stanley FISH, "How to do Things with Austin and Searle. Speech-Act Theory and Literary Criticism", in: Stanley FISH, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980; Jonathan CULLER, "Literary Competence", in: Jane P. TOMPKINS (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980; John R. SEARLE, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse", in: John R. SEARLE, *Expression and Meaning. Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989; Sandy PETREY, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*, New York, Routledge, 1990; Jonathan CULLER, "Philosophy and Literature. The Fortunes of the Performative", in: *Poetics Today*, 2000, 21, 3, 503-519.

6. Nathan STUCKY, "Re/Locating the Text. Literature in Performance Studies Practice", in: *Communication Education*, 1996, 45, 112-117, 112.

1. The Collection of Short Stories: A Theoretical Description

1.1. The Collection of Short Stories as Macrotext

The short story collection as literary form belongs to the larger category of 'macrotexts', defined for the first time by Maria Corti as semiotic units generated by the assembling of autonomous texts and superior to each of the individual texts. According to Corti, a macrotext is a sign in its own right generated by independent texts, whose meaning does not correspond to the mere sum of the meanings of the individual texts.[7] On the basis of Corti's first definitions, subsequently taken over and elaborated by other scholars, one could say that the core element of a macrotext is its composite character, its being made up of autonomous texts, whether or not specifically composed for the macrotext and published or unpublished before the act of collecting.

Although the collected texts compose a new and broader semiotic entity, in turn autonomous and independent, they do not lose their original autonomy. In fact, the single components are interlinked but do not merge in the process of semanticization that generates a broader semiotic unit. Since the nature of the interaction between the collected texts is intertextual, this process can not affect the autonomy of the interacting texts nor their independence. Yet, at the end of the process of creation of the broader unit, the identity of the component texts turns out to be semantically more complex, because of the recontextualisation of the single texts in the macrotext.

Indeed, the process of "macrotextualisation" implies, on one hand, that the component texts, by virtue of their mutual semantic interaction, generate a new semantic unit and, on the other, that they receive additional semantic values from the newly generated superior entity, the macrotext. Consequently, in the macrotextual process the textual interaction is set up at two levels: the microtextual – between single texts or between sequences of texts – and the macrotextual – between the macrotext and single texts or sequences of texts.[8]

1.2. The Narrative Collection

Depending on the genre of the component texts, which belong mostly but not necessarily to a single genre, macrotexts refer to different literary modes that

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7. To define the macrotext Corti refers to the concept of "hyper-sign" (*ipersegno*) that can be related to Umberto Eco's concept of super-sign and of super-sign function. See Maria Corti, "Macrotesto", in: Maria Corti, *Principi della comunicazione letteraria*, Milano, Bompiani, 1976, 145-147 (English translation: *Introduction to Literary Semiotics*, translated by Margherita Bogat and Allen Mandelbaum, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978). See also: Cesare Segre, "Macrotesto", in: Cesare Segre, *Avviamento all'analisi del testo letterario*, Torino, Einaudi, 1985, 40-42 (English translation: *Introduction to the Analysis of the Literary Text*, translated by John Meddemmen; with the collaboration of Tomaso Kemeny, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988); Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Milano, Bompiani, 1975 (English translation: *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1975).

8. When one compares the theory of the macrotext with Ingram's definition of the short story cycle, which – precisely because it is broad and flexible – remains valid and acceptable in its basic and general intuition, one can observe the first convergence between different theoretical approaches in studies of the short story collection. Indeed, Ingram (unintentionally) applies from a semantic perspective (and only to the narrative collection) the broader concept developed by Corti in semiotic terms (Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*, Paris, Mouton, 1971). As Ingram states, a short story cycle consists of texts whose assembly produces a semantic increase, brought by a semiotic entity that does not correspond to the mere sum of its parts, like in a macrotextual structure. In both cases this *Gestalt* corresponds to an autonomous text structured by the repetition of a set of narratologically defined elements (Ingram's "recurrent development") that belong both to the text and the paratext.

respond to different epistemological approaches.[9] Macrotexts composed of short stories behave in the same way, for their component parts share a basic narrative stance. This narrative should not to be conceived as a traditional narrative, since the macrotext of short stories does not develop a coherent story line in the way a novel or a single short story do.

If, as was stated earlier, the macrotext does not coincide with its component texts, it is equally true that the narrative of the macrotext does not coincide with the narratives of the component texts. Indeed, it can even be argued that the macrotext does not have a narrative of its own. The short stories put together in a collection are autonomous narrative acts whereas the collection in itself does not develop 'one' narrative act. In other words, in the short story collection two different discourses coexist: a short story discourse and a short story collection discourse. The latter is not a narrative discourse in its own right, but has a narrative form because it is generated by narrative texts.

In fact, the message of a macrotext made up of narrative texts is rooted in the act of storytelling brought forth by the component texts to such an extent that the collection does not cease from being a narrative even when it includes texts that are, for instance, descriptions or philosophical thoughts rather than stories. The collection is a form of narrative, I would argue, as long as the single narratives determine the whole and as long as the non-narrative texts that can be included in the collection function like suspensions in the sequence of narrative acts, for instance as digressions or theoretical pauses.

1.3. Extension of the Literary Form

In my view, there can be no theoretical limitation in terms of narratological features (plots, themes, characters, settings) of the narrative macrotexts I have so far described. In other words, one cannot pinpoint a set of elements or features whose presence identifies the collection of short stories beyond the fact that the fundamental component parts are short stories. Similarly, one cannot postulate any conjectural limitation in terms of geo-historical framework of development, so that, in principle, historically and geographically determined collections cannot exhaust the taxonomy or the theory of the form, which begins, as far as Western literature is concerned, in the late Middle-Age with the *Lais* of Marie of France and with Boccaccio's *Decameron*.[10]

2. The Short Story Collection and Its Performance: An Overview

As has been argued in the first section of this article, a short story collection can be called a macrotextual narrative because of the narrative nature of

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9. René Audet, *Le Recueil. Enjeux poétiques et génériques*, PhD Thesis, Université Laval, Quebec, 2003. Irène Langlet (ed.), *Le Recueil littéraire. Pratiques et théorie d'une forme*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2003.

10. **Concerning the first historical collections of what so far have been called short stories, I** must note that, although the *Lais* is not really made up of short stories, I can discuss here neither their distinctive features nor their evolution. Hence, I will implicitly assume that they share a fundamental literary behaviour that qualifies them as short narrative texts, which in this study tends to coincide with the form/concept of the short story.

the short stories put together in a book – a book that is neither a novel nor a short story in its own right. This macrotextual narrative differs from other narrative forms because the creative process of *writing* the single short stories does not coincide with the creative process of *collecting* these stories in a structured series in which the component texts are no longer isolated. Moreover, one can say that the single stories have at least two meanings: one that stems from their contextualisation in the macrotext and one that is not in this way contextualised.

The gap between the writing of the short stories and the composition of the collection implies that the structuring of the latter is an act bound in time and space. Furthermore, the act of structuring is primarily visible in the paratext, which identifies the framework of the collection as a whole and the context in which the interaction between the short stories is set. Both within and outside of this framework, the short stories maintain their own identity. Yet, outside of the framework of the collection, they lose the contextual value which they had as its component parts. Within the framework, each short story activates a set of narrative features which interact with those of the other short stories and generate the composite identity of the narrative collection. Consequently, the narrative macrotext is a dynamic network bound in time and space between narrative acts contextualized in a framework and "performed", as we will see, text by text.

2.1. The Act of Storytelling

First of all, I will connect the concept of performance as the oral and public production of a narrative speech act to the historical tradition of the literary form. Indeed, the early examples of short stories linked in a collection (cfr. Marie of France's *Lais*, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* or Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*) self-consciously addressed the performance of telling a story, both within the texts, as they stage the act of storytelling, and outside of it, as they explicitly refer to an oral tradition.[11] The performance of storytelling is thus a constitutive element of early models and historically identifies the short story collection as a series of narrative acts. In this I find a first fundamental characteristic of the collection, which is subsequently reinforced by other cohesive elements, such as the setting, the focus on one or on a group of characters, the themes and so on. Later on, those additional sets achieve more and more relevance and progressively prevail on the former set, so that the staging of the performance of storytelling moves to the background.

Thus, across the evolutionary stages of the form, up to modern and postmodern examples, the formal emphasis on the act of storytelling gradually loses

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11. For a short introduction to the subject see: André Boronad, "Genèse et esthétique de la nouvelle", in: *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1976, 4, 402-420; Madeleine Jeay, "Esthétique de la nouvelle et principe de la mise en recueil au Moyen Âge et au xvIᵉ siècle", in: Vincent Engel & Michel Guissard (eds.), *La nouvelle de langue française aux frontières des autres genres, du Moyen Âge à nos jours. Actes du colloque de Metz. Juin 1996*, Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve, Quorum, 1997, vol. I, 63-76; Marie-Louise Ollier, "Le recueil comme forme. A propos des 'lais' de Marie de France", in: Michelangelo Picone, Giuseppe Di Stefano & Pamela D. Stewart (eds.), *La Nouvelle. Formation, codification et rayonnement d'un genre médiéval. Actes du colloque international de Montréal. McGill University, 14-16 octobre 1982*, Montréal, Plato Academic Press, 1983, 64-79; Michelangelo Picone, *Boccaccio e la codificazione della novella. Letture del* Decameron, Ravenna, Longo, 2008; Giuseppina Baldissone, *Le Voci della novella. Storia di una scrittura da ascolto*, Firenze, Olschki, 1992.

importance, at least in its original configuration which is considered out-dated in the context of a literature that is more and more elliptical and implicit. This does not mean that the unifying elements connected to the performance of storytelling disappear entirely, but they are more frequently limited to paratextual elements than expressed within the texts. In other words, they have been absorbed as constitutive elements both by the author and the reader.

In brief: the performative component of the short story collection is explicit from late medieval collections onwards, where a character, or the text itself, meta-narratively declares the single narrative act and its macrotextual contextualization. The presence of macrotextual narrative performance is no longer made explicit in contemporary literature, given the decline of the orality which traditionally characterised the short story collection, and almost disappears from the late 19th-century onwards. In other words, performance is historically involved in the definition of the identity of the short story collection in its single components as well as in its overall structure, in spite of the fact that it is no longer explicitly marked in the texts.

2.2. The Identity of the Text

Although the specific meaning the single short story acquires within the framework of a collection depends on the collection itself, the existence of the short story in itself does not depend on the collection. On the contrary, the existence of the collection depends on the texts and the occurrence or the absence of each text changes the appearance and meaning of the whole. Moreover, since the collection derives from the network, rather than the sum, of the narrative features of the single stories, its identity is dynamic rather than static.

What the texts develop through their interaction becomes the new context in which they achieve an integrated meaning, which diverges from their initial meaning. The single text could go back to its initial meaning only by denying the existence of the collection. This does not necessarily imply a contradiction between the different states (inside/outside) but a differentiation or an evolution. Moreover, it shows that the meaning of the single text can change, for, from a deconstructionist perspective, the single texts are contextualized identities within the context of the collection.

As the texts are contextualized identities, one can observe that when a short story is put into a collection it fulfills the two fundamental requirements of performativity stated by Derrida: iterability and difference.[12] A short story is iterable, both within and outside of the collection. And while the story can still be identified, its meaning is changed by virtue of the context. Possible formal changes the author makes to make the original story more suitable to the macrotextual environment underscore this process. This performative character is not limited to a change of place from within to outside of the collection, since the text can also be given different positions even within the collection.

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12. Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différance*, Paris, Seuil, 1967 and Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Évenement, Contexte", in: Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Minuit, 1972, 365-369.

While the performative character of short stories included in a collection is thus made clear, it is important to point out that also the interaction between a single text and its context can be described in terms of performativity. Indeed, when a group of short stories becomes a collection it generates a kind of social context, namely an interlinked network of dynamic identities mutually determining each other as they determine the common context. In this sense text collections are social entities and therefore have a social identity.

Following Judith Butler's theory on identity, each social identity follows the internal codes of a social context, which performatively constrains the single individuality it includes. In the same way each short story follows the internal codes of the collection it belongs to, which performatively constrain the individuality of the single story.[13] Furthermore, since the identity of the text differs according to its context, the identity of the single text in itself is a potential network of various identities, comparable to the "I roles" defined by Goffman.[14] The different places where a short story can be published or the different positions it can assume within a sequence define the kind of roles the text can play and its behaviour as a short story. Therefore, where a short story is placed determines the role it is expected to perform and the constraints of those roles.

In this sense, one can consider the short story as a performative utterance that, because it is iterable, in a Derridean sense, cannot be tied to a single context. This implies that there cannot be only one context or no context for a short story that becomes part of a collection, and that each text in a collection is always contextualized and can be continually re-contextualized. But, as stated above, the collection represents a specific and peculiarly formalized context, a form of interactional networking, in which one must distinguish between what the text does – how it performs its identity – and what is done to the text – how the text is performed by the context.

2.3. The Non-Narrative Pathway of the Short Story Collection

When comparing the short story collection with the novel, it can be noted how the single short stories within a collection are asked to do something different than the chapters of a novel. Indeed, the chapters are part of one narrative, and the author leads the reader towards the end of the book as through a *continuum*. In a short story collection, to the contrary, the pathway the reader follows is based on independent fragments whose interconnections, while linked to textual elements, are activated within the context of the collection but outside of the individual texts. Due to the macrotextual nature of the collection, this mechanism has specific implications for the collection of narrative texts.

According to the description of the short story as narrative act that does not give the whole to the reader but focuses on fragments and details, as opposed to the novel's traditional claim to full representation, the short narrative text differs from the novel in what it does not say. The act of storytelling is thus developed against

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13. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limit of 'Sex'*, New York, Routledge, 1993.

14. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1959 and *Frame Analysis*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1974.

the background of elliptical information the reader is asked to fill in.[15] For example, if short story (b) of collection (Y) fills in what remains untold in short story (a) of the same collection, they can be considered chapters of a new story (a+b) and no longer as totally independent items. It is possible for a short story collection to contain such sequences, but only when a single sequence does not cover the whole collection; in that case the collection becomes a novel.

Since it is not in itself a narrative text but a composite narrative form constituted by narrative texts, the short story collection does not explicitly put forward its message, but it discloses a pathway. While this pathway is not itself a proper narrative, in the sense of a single short story or a novel, it unfolds through the interaction between the short stories, thus bringing to the surface what remains untold in the individual stories.

At the same time the short story collection is a potentially metamorphic form because in different editions of a collection authors can change not only the components of the macrotext but also their sequence. In this respect, it is noteworthy that while in a novel or in a single short story a redefinition of the narrative sequence changes the plot but not the story, in the macrotext each alteration of the sequence modifies the structure of the book, and the structure affects the function and meaning of each text within the whole, or, in other words affects the performative features of the texts described earlier.

Hence, if the short story collection enacts stories and reaches its goal through the act of storytelling – without actually telling a story – and if the untold emerges through processes of floating interaction between stories, i.e. processes of performed identities, the short story collection reveals its performative dimension in another way as well. In fact, the collection of short stories stages the process of being of the short stories and of the collection and it reveals the gap between what is present (the short stories) and the activity that makes visible what is present (the collection). To use the words of Aldo Tassi: "To be, whether on stage or in nature, is to be constituted by a process which is bringing something forth. Onstage the process is called performance."[16]

According to Tassi, a narration does not enact what it describes because the reader is "required to constitute this presence out of the words". Drama, on the contrary, performs or enacts what it represents and "The words in theatre reach us from the ground of what we see. They issue from a presence that has already been constituted as being present to consciousness." These remarks cannot completely be applied to the form of the short story collection.[17] Indeed, as theatre does not refer to the performance of being but enacts it, the collection does not refer to the performance of being of the collected short stories but stages and performs it.

In fact, the pathway of the short story collection emerges from narrative acts already present to the reader (the single stories). The reader is not required to,

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15. See Charles E. MAY, "Why Short Stories are Essential and Why They are Seldom Read", 14-24 [incomplete].

16. Aldo TASSI, "Philosophy and Theatre: An Essay on Catharsis and Contemplation", in: *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 1995, 35, 4, 140, 469-481; and later "Philosophy and Theatre", in: *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 1998, 38, 1, 149, 43-54.

17. *Ibid.*, 47.

as Tassi would put it, constitute an additional 'presence' on the level of the collection, since this constitutes no separate narrative act but only the constitution of a conceptual system. Moreover, if historically the short story collection staged the performance of the storyteller until the 19th century, in modern short story collections, the reader does not need to be told how to contribute to the performance of the collection, because he has already internalized this perspective. Indeed, what is acquired, on the level of the consciousness of the reader, is that the short stories of a collection bring to the surface something hidden behind them, something one can describe in terms of absence, as stated above. The performance of the short stories in the collection makes visible something invisible, "namely the *movement behind* the signification which is the *condition* for signification (*différance*). Seen in this way, it becomes clear that performance [...] in making perceptible the very force that enables signification, does not *re-present* but *presents*, that it reveals a process constantly coming into being", as Féral suggests.[18] In other words, what emerges is not a representation, but something that unfolds progressively. The short story collection, as performed both by the single texts and by the collection as a the whole, constitutes a performance revealing something that lies beyond the act of telling a story and of representing the world in a narrative form.

Moreover, this performative act is specific for the short story collection and does not hold in a similar way for the novel or short story, even though they all involve acts of storytelling. For, as I have argued before, the collection does not tell a story and is thus not a narrative act proper, but derives from the interaction of several, independent narrative acts. Hence, the collection is distinct from other kinds of narrative and is defined by its performative dimension (and not by the characterization of the narrative of its single components), which identifies a unique kind of narrativity.

2.4. The Role of the Reader

Even though the responsibility for both the assembling of the texts in a larger whole of the collection and the constitution of the collection's meaning falls under the intellectual responsibility of the author – or in some cases, of an editor –, the reader is given a responsibility which is specific for this literary form: the reader is asked to, as it were, 'perform' the short story collection, to identify in the narrative macrotext the non-narrative pathway the author has determined.

In order to identify the specific role of the reader with regard to the short story collection, I will compare, following Peter Kivy, the reception of narratives from different media. Kivy states, for instance, that the listener of a radio drama is asked to do more than the spectator of a film because he has to construct the visual part absent in the radio drama. In a similar way, a reader is required to be an even more active participant in the artistic experience, since he or she is expected to provide, by a mental effort, what cannot be seen or heard. For this reason, Kivy suggests the "hypothesis of silent fiction-reading as a performing art".[19] If the

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18. Alice Lagaay, *Metaphysics of Performance. Performance, Performativity and the Relation Between Theatre and Philosophy*, Berlin, Logos Verlag, 2001, 42; Lagaay refers to Josette Féral, "Performance and Theatricality. The Subject Demystified", in: *Modern Drama*, 1982, 25, 170-181.

19. Peter Kivy, *The Performance of reading. An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature*, Malden-Oxford-Carlton, Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

silent reading of literary fiction in general requires this effort, in the case of a short story collection, the creation of the artistic object requires not only a completion of the stories but also a construction of the meaning of the collection. This means that the reader must first go through the narrative representation of several subjects and then connect them in a non–narrative presentation of a concept. Therefore it requests an additional effort from the reader, not required by other narrative forms, which implies a greater conceptual involvement.[20]

Since the reader is always asked to play an active role in the interpretation of a collection, the reader has learned to find or to construct an overall meaning for each macrotext he or she is faced with. In this perspective, it becomes impossible to talk about 'merely' miscellaneous collections or about collections with no meaning. Even if this meaning is not necessarily an authorial one, it is inevitably construed in the process of reception. This means that each collection works as a text with a specific identity, even if only a minimal or limited one: for instance in the form of a chronological evolution within the short story production of a given author. In principle, this identity does not have to exist for the author but is given by the reader, who is by nature compelled to find wholeness or coherence in fragmentary discourse. It is highly likely, therefore, that no one can read consecutive stories in a book without even a superficial effort to connect them.

Hence author and reader consider the book of short stories from two opposite and irreconcilable sides, and *per absurdum*, one can say that there can be a short story collection if and where the reader identifies it, but that this can imply a complete or almost complete substitution of the role of the author as writer and assembler by the role of the reader as performer.

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20. For a reader-oriented study of the collection of short stories see René AUDET, *Des Textes à l'œuvre. La lecture du recueil de nouvelles*, Québec, Nota bene, 2000.