

Theses on the Short Story

I

IN ONE OF HIS notebooks, Chekhov recorded the following anecdote: 'A man in Monte Carlo goes to the casino, wins a million, returns home, commits suicide.' The classic form of the short story is condensed within the nucleus of that future, unwritten story. Contrary to the predictable and conventional (gamble–lose–commit suicide), the intrigue is presented as a paradox. The anecdote disconnects the story of the gambling and the story of the suicide. That rupture is the key to defining the double character of the story's form. First thesis: a short story always tells two stories.

II

The classic short story—Poe, Quiroga¹—narrates Story One (the tale of the gambling) in the foreground, and constructs Story Two (the tale of the suicide) in secret. The art of the short story writer consists in knowing how to encode Story Two in the interstices of Story One. A visible story hides a secret tale, narrated in an elliptical and fragmentary manner. The effect of surprise is produced when the end of the secret story appears on the surface.

III

Each of the two stories is told in a different manner. Working with two stories means working with two different systems of causality. The same events enter simultaneously into two antagonistic narrative logics. The essential elements of the story have a dual function, and are employed in different ways in each of the two stories. The points where they intersect are the foundations of the story's construction.

IV

Near the beginning of Borges's 'Death and the Compass', a shopkeeper decides to publish a book. This book is there because it is indispensable to the framework of the secret story. How to arrange things so that a gangster

like Red Scharlach is well informed about complex Jewish traditions, and capable of laying a mystical and philosophical trap for Lönnrot? The author, Borges, gets hold of this book for him so that he can educate himself. At the same time he uses Story One in order to dissimulate that function: the book seems to be there in connection with the assassination of Yarmolinsky, the reflection of an ironic coincidence. 'One of those shopkeepers who have found out that there are buyers for every book came out with a popular edition of the *History of the Sect of the Hasidim*.'² What is superfluous in one story is fundamental in the other. The shopkeeper's book is an example (like the volume of *The 1001 Nights* in 'The South', or the scar in 'The Form of the Sword') of the ambiguous substance that makes the microscopic narrative machinery of the story work.

V

The short story is a tale that encloses a secret tale. This is not a matter of a hidden meaning which depends on interpretation: the enigma is nothing other than a story which is told in an enigmatic way. The strategy of the tale is placed at the service of that coded narration. How to tell a story while another is being told? This question synthesizes the technical problems of the short story. Second thesis: the secret story is the key to the form of the short story.

VI

The modern version of the short story that descends from Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Sherwood Anderson, the Joyce of *Dubliners*, abandons the surprise ending and the closed structure; it works the tension between the two stories without ever resolving it. The secret story is told in ever more elusive fashion. The classic short story à la Poe told a story while announcing that there was another; the modern short story tells two stories as if they were one. Hemingway's 'iceberg theory' is the first synthesis of that process

¹ Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937): Uruguayan short story writer, poet and playwright.

² 'Death and the Compass' (1942) opens with the murder of a Talmudic scholar, Marcelo Yarmolinsky, in a hotel room. An enigmatic note left at the crime scene prompts detective Erik Lönnrot to suspect a connection with Jewish mysticism. A second murder and a third take place, with similar notes left at the scene. Lönnrot deduces there will be a fourth—thus completing the four letters of the tetragrammaton, the name of Jehovah—and, connecting the previous crime scenes on a map, projects its location. But once there he discovers that he has been entrapped by the gangster Red Scharlach, who committed the murders and planted esoteric clues precisely to lure Lönnrot to his doom.

of transformation: the most important thing is never recounted. The secret story is constructed out of what is not said, out of implication and allusion.

VII

'Big Two-Hearted River', one of Hemingway's foundational tales, encodes Story Two (the effects of the war on Nick Adams) to such an extent that the short story seems to be a trivial description of a fishing trip. Hemingway puts all his skill into the hermetic narration of the secret story. He employs the art of ellipsis with such mastery that he succeeds in making us notice the absence of the other story. What would Hemingway have done with Chekhov's anecdote? Recount with precise details the game and the atmosphere in which the gambling takes place, and the technique the gambler uses to place his bets, and the kind of drink he has. Never saying that the man is going to commit suicide, but writing the story as if the reader already knew this.

VIII

Kafka tells the secret story clearly and simply, and narrates the visible story stealthily, to the point of turning it into something enigmatic and dark. This inversion is the basis of the 'Kafkaesque'. Kafka would place the story of the suicide from Chekhov's anecdote in the foreground, recounting it as if it were entirely natural. The terrible part of the story would be centred around the gambling, which would be narrated in an elliptical, menacing way.

IX

For Borges, Story One is a genre and Story Two is always the same. In order to attenuate or conceal the monotony of this secret story, Borges resorts to the narrative variants that genres offer him. All of Borges's short stories are constructed through this procedure. Borges would tell the visible story, the short story, in Chekhov's anecdote in accordance with the stereotypes (lightly parodied) of a tradition or a genre. A game of knucklebones between some gauchos on the run (say) at the back of a storeroom, in the prairies of Entre Ríos, told by an old cavalryman who served under Urquiza, a friend of Hilario Ascasubi.³ The tale of the suicide would be a story constructed out of duplicity and the condensation of a man's life into a single scene or act that would define his destiny.

³ Justo José de Urquiza (1801–70): Argentine soldier and politician, leading figure in the opposition to the *caudillo* Juan Manuel de Rosas during the long Argentine Civil War; president of the country from 1854–60. Hilario Ascasubi (1807–75): Argentine poet, early exponent of 'gaucho literature'.

X

The basic variation that Borges introduced into the history of the short story consisted in making the coded construction of Story Two the theme of the tale. Borges recounts the manoeuvres of someone who is perversely building a secret plot with the materials of a visible story. In 'Death and the Compass', Story Two is a deliberate construction of Scharlach's. The same is true of Azevedo Bandeira in 'The Dead Man' and Nolan in 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero'. Borges (like Poe, like Kafka) knew how to transform into an anecdote the problems of the form of narration.

XI

The short story is constructed so as to make appear artificially something that had been hidden. It reproduces the constantly renewed search for a unique experience that would allow us to see, beneath the opaque surface of life, a secret truth. 'The instantaneous vision which makes us discover the unknown, not in a faraway terra incognita, but rather in the very heart of the immediate', said Rimbaud. This profane illumination has become the form of the short story.