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11. Distance and Emotion

In Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, a text is monologic and diametrically opposed to the polyphonic novel when it lets us hear one truth only, privileging one voice over all others.¹ In the classic short story this voice is that of the reader through his representatives — the narrator and reflector. The polyphonic text can claim an ethical superiority, but this does not mean that monologic texts are without power, charm or value.² The classic short story is perfectly adapted to satire — the ethical value of which is evident. It can help readers to see vividly all the shortcomings of a character or a situation (social or moral) by putting it at a distance. It can even — although it does not avail itself of the possibility very often in the period we are considering — put the readers themselves at a distance. But the short story does all this without ever renouncing its monologism.

The short story with a dilemma

In order to create polyphony, as defined by Bakhtin, the different voices involved must be “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights”

1 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 5-6.

2 For more on the potential superiority of polyphonic over monologic texts (in relation to epic, see Florence Goyet, *Penser sans concepts. Fonction de l'épopée guerrière* (Paris: Champion, 2006).

— each of them must have their own validity.³ Not one of the characters in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* or *The Idiot* is discredited; faced with contradictory truths, the reader recognises the impossibility of choosing between them. There are very few classic short stories that expose us to several "voices". Even in the exceptional examples where we find two voices in a short story, both characters are equally discredited. Instead of polyphony, the result is the narrative image of aporia.

A good example of a short story with two voices is Anton Chekhov's *Vragi (Enemies)*.⁴ Kirilov, a doctor whose son has recently died of a drawn-out illness, is called upon by a local landowner, Abogin, who asks him to attend to his sick wife. At first the doctor refuses — he is exhausted from his son's illness and death — but in the end agrees. When they get to the landowner's house, they discover that his wife was feigning illness so that she could run off with her lover while her husband was fetching the doctor. Desperate, Abogin unloads his conjugal problems on the doctor who resents him for having brought him there. A terrible scene in which they insult each other is followed by some abstract remarks from Chekhov about how misfortune separates the unfortunate instead of bringing them together.

There is an important difference here from the stories we have seen so far: the two characters face off without either one getting the better of the other, without truth being on one side. Chekhov is careful to prevent us from being able to make a choice. We are no longer in the more common situation, as in Guy de Maupassant's *My Uncle Jules*, which we saw in the last chapter, where the character is discredited in favour of the narrator's values. At first glance, we even have the feeling that, for once, Chekhov gives each of these characters a certain credibility. The story begins by portraying the doctor without any attempt at distance. Through a powerful description of his distress at his son's death, he is sympathetic to the reader. Chekhov takes great pains to detail — concretely and very vividly — his terrible exhaustion. His shock has left him no longer in possession of his faculties: he cannot find the door of his study, for example, and he lifts his right foot

3 Bakhtin (1984), p. 5.

4 Anton Chekhov, *The Schoolmaster and Other Stories*, trans. by Constance Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1921), pp. 15-34 (hereafter Garnett). The original Russian can be found in Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, 30 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-1983, VI, pp. 30-43 (hereafter Nauka). Page references will be given first to the translation, then to the original in brackets.

too high to cross the threshold.⁵ The reader is “with” the character because of his vulnerability, and ready to react to the total incongruity of Abogin’s demands on him. At the beginning of the story, Abogin is one of those classic characters of Chekhov, the “prisoner of his own preoccupations”,⁶ who treats a child’s death on the same level as a mild discomfort.⁷ Kirilov, then, obviously interprets his own adventure as a simple antithetic tension: an exhausted doctor, affected in both body and emotions, is taken twenty kilometres from home to be used as an accessory in an adulterous episode.

What is remarkable here is that the entire story prohibits the reader from sharing in Kirilov’s interpretation. After bringing the doctor into true proximity with the readers’ sympathies, it then distances him and brings Abogin closer. Faced with the unfortunate doctor, Abogin is not, in fact, the tedious person we first see, but a man “in whose face there was a suggestion of something generous, leonine”;⁸ he is truly suffering over his wife’s illness and is afraid she will die. The story then reveals that the young woman’s father died from an aneurism, making the landowner’s anguish all the more understandable.

But the interest of this unusual closeness to the character becomes clear as soon as we see the portraits that Chekhov draws one after the other. The essential trait is then revealed: Chekhov, by reversing their roles, creates an absolute *symmetry* between his protagonists. Abogin — the annoyance — is described in a purely meliorative way, whereas the doctor — for whom we were ready to feel sympathy — is distanced:

The doctor was tall and stooped, was untidily dressed and not good-looking. There was an unpleasantly harsh, morose, and unfriendly look about his lips, thick as a Negro’s, his aquiline nose, and listless, apathetic eyes. [...] Looking at his frigid figure one could hardly believe that this man had a wife, that he was capable of weeping over his child. *Abogin presented a very*

5 Ibid, p. 18 (pp. 32-33). The absence of distance in this opening is summed up in the strange passage on the “subtle beauty [...] of human sorrow [...] which... only music can convey” (p. 19 [p. 33]): to define the beauty of this grief is to invite the reader to share in this truly musical emotion.

6 See Kataev’s analyses of this incapacity of Chekhov’s heroes to emerge from their preoccupations, which is one of his great methods of discrediting. V. B. Kataev, *Proza Chekhova: Problemy Interpretatsii* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1979), p. 62. For a partial translation, see Vladimir Kataev, *If Only We Could Know: An Interpretation of Chekhov*, trans. by Harvey Pitcher (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2002).

7 When hearing of the death of the child, Abogin is upbeat: “A wonderfully unhappy day... wonderfully! What a coincidence... It’s as though it were on purpose!” Garnett, p. 17 (Nauka, p. 32).

8 Ibid, p. 25 (p. 38).

different appearance. He was a thick-set, sturdy-looking, fair man with a big head and large, soft features; he was elegantly dressed in the very latest fashion. In his carriage, his closely buttoned coat, his long hair, and his face there was a suggestion of something generous, leonine;⁹

The phrase in emphasis clarifies the antithesis present in every feature. The portrait of the doctor is astonishingly clumsy, and the narrator goes so far as to make an improbable judgement: “one could hardly believe that this man had a wife, that he was capable of weeping over his child”. The portrait of Abogin, on the other hand, is enough to moderate his violent arrival in the grieving household. The two presentations, then, are balanced so that neither one is favoured.

Nevertheless, it cannot be called polyphony. The central direction of the text is to position these two characters *back to back*. We could say that Abogin is only rehabilitated to the precise degree to which Kirilov is discredited: he is Kirilov’s pendulum, negative and positive to exactly the same degree. Once again the proximity permitted by the short story is *transitive*. The two enemies have been built in perfect symmetry in order to make it possible for Chekhov to state the dilemma.¹⁰ To achieve this it was necessary that the two men not despise each other at the outset — their hatred had to come from the situation itself. If Abogin had been a comic cuckold, there would have immediately existed the classic tension between the “heroic, dutiful doctor” and the “amorous, ridiculous landowner”, both well-known types in Russian literature. Instead the diptych allowed Chekhov to clarify the abstract problem he is dealing with, a problem whose terms he explicitly articulates at the very end of the text: instead of bringing the characters together as we expect, their misfortune makes them loathe each other.

Even the unusual nuances of the characters do not prevent Chekhov from judging them definitively and conclusively. Half way through the story, Abogin will again be discredited. The moment he discovers his young wife’s deception, he burdens Kirilov with his complaints about the fugitive as well as a very complete picture of his family life. Chekhov ironically disowns him, as is clear in a short passage about the remedy which should be applied to this so-called incurable grief: “If he had talked in this way for an hour or two, and opened his heart, he would undoubtedly have felt

⁹ Ibid (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ We can only comprehend the meaning of the title *Enemies* when we recognise that it refers to the fundamental confrontation at the heart of the text, and not to the history of either one of the characters.

better".¹¹ That is: if he had received a sympathetic reception from the doctor, his burst of confidence would have allowed him to assuage his grief and prevented him from doing "anything needless and absurd". Chekhov here takes his distance from the grief of Abogin.¹² For his part the doctor will be explicitly discredited at the end, in two almost identical formulae: he will retain "unjust and inhumanly cruel" thoughts from this confrontation, a conviction "unjust and unworthy of the human heart".¹³

In this indictment of the two men, neither one is given preference, yet, for all that, neither logic is shown as valid. Superior to them both, the narrator dispenses abstract explanations, and unyieldingly contrasts the two behaviours, carefully and symmetrically discrediting first one and then the other. What is gained from this is a proof: a precise and utterly inescapable vision of the narrowness of these two worlds. Chekhov is using, in a particular way, the essential techniques of the genre, such as I have been describing from the beginning of this book. What makes this very different from the other short stories is his thematic exploitation of tension. Instead of simply being used to structure a story and give it sufficient autonomy, the tension serves to bring the two worlds face to face, revealing their radical narrowness. In every other respect, these "stories with a dilemma" are very standard. They operate on paroxysms.¹⁴ They are based on the reader's preconceptions: the figure of the doctor caught between his duty and his personal grief and the landowner trapped in his ideas of "modern" love are typical. The confrontation serves to invert each of the presupposed concepts (doctor who is scarcely human, amorous

11 Garnett, p. 30 (Nauka, p. 41).

12 Following the pattern with which we are now so familiar in the classic short story, all the techniques converge to prevent our comprehension of Abogin's behaviour: once he has got hold of Kirilov in his car, he does not give a single word in response to the doctor's request to return home for a moment to get someone to stay with his wife, who is all alone in the house with the dead child. Both men sit without any communication, and their perception of nature is purely mimetic of their own feelings, whereas we know that for Chekhov the capacity to see the beauty of nature for itself is the touchstone of a character's soul. On the importance of "details" in Chekhov, see Aleksandr P. Chudakov, *Poetika Chekhova* (Moscow: Nauka, 1971).

13 Garnett, p. 33 (Nauka, p. 42).

14 Examples of paroxysms in the story include not only the death of the child but also the fact that Kirilov and his wife are too old to have another ("Andrey was not merely the only child, but also the last child", p. 19); Abogin's arrival *just* when the boy has died; the trivial reason for the drama (adultery); the extreme style of the character portraits; the fact that Abogin loves his wife like a slave; and Abogin's risible readiness to apply all modern ideas.

landowner who has nobleness). When the short story does present two voices, it sets them back to back, like fraternal enemies.

In this respect, the short story works counter to the great novel. For proof we need only examine James's different use of the international theme in his short stories and novels. James, a voluntary exile in England, loved the country enough to apply for citizenship: unquestionably he was predestined not to be able to choose between the often antithetic Old and New World. What is striking is that, in his short stories, this dilemma goes through a distancing of the two cultures, through a dramatisation of the conflict between them. We have a particularly clear example of this in the difference between the novel *The Golden Bowl* and its sketch, the short story *Miss Gunton of Poughkeepsie*. Both are centred around the marriage of a young American woman and an Italian prince. In the short story, the prince is desperate to marry Lily Gunton — a fresh incarnation of Daisy Miller — and she burns with the same ardour. The obstacle that arises between them is none other than the symmetrical intransigence of Lily and the prince's family over one of their many different social customs: the prince asks that Lily be the first to write to his mother, and the young woman absolutely refuses.

As in all short stories that deal with an international theme, the tension in *Miss Gunton* is created between the two opposite worlds. It is further emphasised by the use of a young English woman as reflector, Lady Champer, through whose eyes we see Lily. From her first words — "It's astonishing what you take for granted!" — Lady Champer poses the problem of different, irreconcilable concepts; for an English lady as for an Italian prince, what Lily considers "natural" is constantly a source of amazement. As Lady Champer explains to the prince, it is the responsibility of the family in the American's universe to welcome a young fiancée, especially if she is an orphan. But, nevertheless, Lady Champer goes on to explain to Lily that, for an Italian princess, there is no question of sacrificing the homage due to her rank, especially if the fiancée is a foreigner. Lily ends up marrying an American, to the prince's great despair. It is not really surprising that James was able to publish the text at the same time in both countries: in the London *Cornhill*, and in *Truth in America*. He is not in fact dealing with either Americans or Italian princes, but with the gulf that separates them both. The strangeness of each custom is delineated and underlined, because the presence of the other universe puts it in perspective.

We never find in James's great novels this unyielding opposition between the Old and the New World; instead there is a progressive discovery, a true interpenetration. In *The Golden Bowl*, the two worlds interact in a much more subtle, dialectic fashion than in the short story. The friend of the two young people is no longer an English noblewoman, but an American.¹⁵ The interior world of the young woman and her value system are not a source of surprise for her as in the short story. She no longer serves to reveal the potential foreign quality of the character of the young American; rather she allows us to penetrate more deeply the subtlety of her feelings and attitudes.

Clash, confrontation, unyielding opposition: the pictures of Europe and America in the short stories are based on radical incomprehension. James's *The Modern Warning* perhaps provides the most exemplary expression of this dilemma between the two worlds: in it the heroine dies from having tried to be faithful to both universes at the same time. The young American, Agatha, marries a high-ranking English conservative, Sir Rufus — ignoring the warnings of her brother, a Yankee patriot lawyer. For many years she is untroubled by her "international" position, living as a married woman amid her house and her garden, her children and her social circle. But after a journey to America, her English husband decides to write a book explaining the mistakes and perversities of the young democracy. Agatha tries to persuade him that he has misjudged her country, just as she had tried to convince her brother of his unfairness towards Sir Rufus. Unable to reconcile the two countries' world visions, she finally commits suicide.

This death is more than a melodramatic end to a story that had dangerous leanings in this direction already. It is the *only* possible conclusion if we are to take into account both sides of the problem as presented by James throughout his tale. Obviously, like many an aporia, it is perfectly possible to go beyond this fundamental tension, but only within a dialectic framework. Having built its characters as exemplary representatives of their category, defined by their bizarre or ridiculous foibles, the short story does not have sufficient flexibility to change them in any meaningful way.

We should note in passing that, in the best of cases, the short stories with dilemmas can lead the reader to question his or her own values. When an English person reads *Miss Gunton of Poughkeepsie*, *An International*

15 James often used confidants like this, who play the role of a reflector: they show the hero outside of his own self-awareness, and they also make it possible to understand the richness of the feelings and thoughts he articulates.

Episode, or *The Modern Warning*, the symmetrical and reciprocal distancing of the two universes brings about a “boomerang effect”, in which even the reader’s values are also discredited. At the beginning of *An International Episode*, an Englishman laughs at the bizarre qualities of the New World, but ultimately he will be dislodged from the comfortable position he usually occupies in the short story. If the reader is ready to accept the distancing in the first panel of the diptych then she will hardly be able to deny it in the second, even when it concerns her directly.

As we have seen, the short story concentrates on a “case”, an abstract little problem, a dilemma for which no character has a satisfactory solution.¹⁶ The reader is generally invited to remain above the fray and can therefore maintain a position of superiority in relation to the spectacle. But here, as in some of Chekhov’s short stories, the reader is encouraged to use her superior position to distance herself from her own ideas and prejudices and gain a new perspective on her own preconceptions. The “short story with a dilemma” belongs at the outer limits of the universe of classic “exotic” short stories, while still functioning in essentially the same way.

Readers’ emotional response to the classic short story

In his work on Nikolai Gogol’s influential *Shinel’* (*The Overcoat*), Boris Eikhenbaum has made clear the profound dual aspect of the short story genre.¹⁷ The story’s central character, Akaki Akakevich, is defined mostly by his persona as a “pitiful” hero, someone who simultaneously stirs both our sympathy and our ridicule. Eikhenbaum laid bare the signs of what I have called distancing in this idea of ridicule. In particular, he showed that the famous passage with the refrain “why are you mistreating me?” is not a plea for Gogol in favour of his pathetic hero.¹⁸ Rather, the passage creates a contrast with the neutral, impersonal tone of the narration. Eikhenbaum’s analysis takes into account the puns and wordplays on the name of Akaki, the heroic-comic tone, and the use of absurd-sounding “grandiose and

16 “We’re simply the case...” as the character of Stuart Straith says in *Broken Wings*. Henry James, *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. by Leon Edel, 12 vols (New York: Rupert Hart Davis, 1960), XI, p. 232.

17 Boris Eikhenbaum, “How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ is Made”, in *Gogol’s “Overcoat”: An Anthology of Critical Essays*, ed. by Elizabeth Trahan (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1982), pp. 21–36.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

fantastic" words like "hemorrhoidal".¹⁹ This total strategy establishes what Eikhenbaum calls a "grotesque" relationship with the subject in which "the mimicry of laughter alternates with the mimicry of sorrow".²⁰

One of the most common manifestations of this tension characteristic of the classic short story is the coexistence of ridicule and sympathetic emotion, although some stories unite "sordid realism" and emotion (without ridiculing the characters) or intellectual understanding without compassion — in all three cases, however, the framework is provided by the essential monologism of the genre. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, in particular, has manipulated with extraordinary dexterity this mix of cruelty and pity for his characters. At the heart of a short story such as *Imogayu* (*Yam Gruel*), there is both distancing and the recognition of the hapless hero Goi's humanity — which will lead to our pity for him.²¹

What is interesting is the extreme to which distancing is carried in a story that also portrays the hero as one of our "brothers". Not only does Akutagawa prevent the reader's attachment to the character at the beginning of *Yam Gruel* by interrupting his argument under various different pretexts, but he also provides a portrait of Goi that is deliberately paroxystic and predictable: he is ugly, cowardly, slovenly and is seen as the anti-hero, adorned with an Homeric epithet "the red-nosed Goi".²² Akutagawa then inflicts on Goi an heroic-comic treatment with the great theme of "the unique goal of existence": Goi lives in the hope of one day eating his fill of yam gruel, and on the day when a practical joke fills him with disgust for this meal, he will literally no longer have an existence.

It is strictly within this framework that there arises another aspect, latent in the very definition of the character: the pathetic being, worthy of our sympathy. Like Akaki Akakevich in *The Overcoat*, Goi complains pitifully that he is being persecuted. This takes the form of an antiphon of drawling echoes: "'Why did you do that'".²³ Such disarray interjects a few seconds of

19 Ibid, p. 27. This does not, of course, explain why the text has always been understood as the expression of a sympathetic point of view. Note, however, that Gogol's tone is grossly distorted in translation by the suppression of the frequent play on sounds considered ridiculous by the Russians.

20 Ibid, p. 29.

21 Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Japanese Short Stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa*, trans. by Takashi Kojima (New York: Liveright, 1952), pp. 45-71. For the original Japanese, see Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, 19 vols (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1954-1955), I, pp. 85-105.

22 Ibid, p. 48 (p. 87).

23 Ibid.

trouble in the mind of his persecutors, and Akutagawa develops this theme by introducing the character of a young provincial officer, who does not belong to the closed little world of this feudal court. Through his eyes, Goi suddenly changes status, for him and for us:

Of course, at first he, too, joined the others in ridiculing the red-nosed Goi without reason. But one day he happened to hear Goi's question, 'Why did you do that?' and the words stuck in his mind. From that time on he saw Goi in a different light, because he saw a blubberer, persecuted by a hard life, peeping from the pale and stupid face of the undernourished Goi.²⁴

Note the "pale and stupid face" from which this new visage of Goi is "peeping". In other words, the story works on the same material in two contradictory ways, in order to release the opposing potentialities. We are not led to question our judgement of Goi as an individual: we are offered a proof of an abstract truth. Basically Akutagawa is saying that every man is your brother, no matter how ridiculously wretched he may be.

This development in our perception of Goi's character is by no means the climax and end of the story. It goes on to tell us about a nasty trick played on Goi: a superior officer takes him far away from his home and serves him so many pitchers of yam gruel that he becomes sick. The revelation of Goi's "humanity" in the eyes of the young provincial functions as the background against which emerges our reading of this grotesque episode. His ridicule is constantly driven home at the same time as we witness his rehabilitation. The young officer's reaction enlightens our vision of the hero without destroying the effect of distancing: the constant insistence on Goi's cowardice, for example, does not allow us to ignore how ridiculous he is.²⁵

"Sordid realism" is another mode of the short story, in which the innumerable "little men" (to use Gogol's words) of the time are also subjected to a double treatment by the author. In these stories, scenes will be loaded with unbearable misery, making us feel an immense pity for the character, while at the same time firmly distancing him. Examples from our body of authors include: Maupassant's *The Vagabond*, Akutagawa's *The Tangerines*, Verga's *Nedda* and *Rosso Malpelo*, and Chekhov's *Sleepy*, *Vanka* and *Anyuta*. The latter of these stories provides an exemplary summary of

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 48-49 (pp. 87-88).

²⁵ Crossing the moor on the way to the officer's house, Goi trembles like a leaf. One day, he finally dares to defend an unfortunate dog because he is only dealing with children: "But on this occasion, since they were children, he could muster up some courage". Ibid, p. 50 (p. 89).

the problematic I am trying to untangle here.²⁶ First we should note *Anyuta's* extraordinary effectiveness: from Tolstoy to Lenin and the Moderns, this is one of the stories most loved by the Russians. It is also a complete anthology of the techniques of sordid realism, based on paroxysm. Anyuta is a poor girl who lives with a destitute medical student in a seedy hotel where they occupy the cheapest room. They have no fire, "no tobacco and no tea", and the young woman, who is extremely thin and pale, takes up sewing in order to support them both. The description of the state of their room speaks for itself:

Crumpled bedclothes, pillows thrown about, books, clothes, a big filthy slop-pail filled with soapsuds in which cigarette ends were swimming, and the litter on the floor — all seemed as though purposely jumbled together in one confusion.²⁷

This extreme misery is the backdrop for the development of the essential tension: the paroxysm of indifference on the part of the student, Klochkov, is contrasted with Anyuta's extreme devotion. There is an example that captures this tension perfectly: in order to review his anatomy lesson, the future doctor draws ribs in crayon on Anyuta's nude body, so that she looks "as though she had been tattooed".²⁸ Anyuta shivers with cold and is afraid that "the student, noticing it, would stop drawing and sounding her, and then, perhaps, might fail in his exam".²⁹ Klochkov scolds her when she complains timidly of cold hands, and leaves her to shiver even after he has finished: "You sit like that and don't rub off the crayon, and meanwhile I'll learn up a little more".³⁰

I will not elaborate here on the central development: Chekhov shows Anyuta's silent memory of all the students she had known, all of whom had gone on to achieve great success in life:

Now they had all finished their studies, had gone out into the world, and, of course, like respectable people, had long ago forgotten her. One of them was

26 Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*, ed. by Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 20-23 (hereafter Matlaw). For the Russian text, see *Nauka*, IV, pp. 340-44.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 20 (p. 340).

28 I had the opportunity to see this story "performed" by Soviet actors in Paris in 1988. The audience of course laughed at the assimilation, in the same breath, of Anyuta and a skeleton ("One must study them in the skeleton and the living body... I say, Anyuta, let me pick them out", p. 21). The actors were following the "drift" of the text by emphasising the effects: after Klochkov had drawn her ribs, Anyuta really did look like a skeleton.

29 Matlaw, p. 21 (*Nauka*, p. 341).

30 *Ibid.*

living in Paris, two were doctors, the fourth was an artist, and the fifth was said to be already a professor.³¹

We simply note that this is the great Chekhovian theme of “deceptive representations” of reality. Anyuta, an unreliable reflector, unleashes a chain of logic that is in no way acceptable to the reader: because they are now “respectable people”, they have forgotten her. What follows will also develop the deceptive representations of Klochkov, who wants to get rid of Anyuta when a painter friend makes him ashamed of his “unaesthetic” life. Blinded by his wish to be “respectable”, he wants to remove Anyuta from his life, and does not understand that it is she, alone, who gives his life substance.

In Russian society at the end of the nineteenth century — bathed in good sentiments and an atmosphere of Christian piety that dictated values if not behaviours — such a story was a powerful denunciation. It revealed with terrible force the hypocrisy of the time and showed readers that it was wrong to allow such situations to happen around them. But it is important to understand that the very source of this effectiveness, of this powerful emotion that has captivated generations of readers, is created *in and by* the radical distancing. Anyuta is worthy of all our pity, but her world vision is not in the least valid. We are moved because we see the degree to which she errs, the degree to which she is excluded from society as a whole and incapable of even participating in its ways of thinking. The author places us totally outside the world of the young protagonists, in a place where he can show us the architecture of this strange spectacle, and the inescapable destiny awaiting its characters.

Presenting us with characters whose behaviour we shall understand, but from afar, is another of the usual ways of creating emotion in the classic short story.³² A good example of this is found in a simple and also famous story: Maupassant’s *Le Vieux* (*The Old Man*), also known as *Les Douillons* (*Apple Turnovers*).³³ The Chicots are a peasant couple in Normandy. The old

³¹ Ibid.

³² Although he does not see distance as a characteristic trait of the short story, I find parallel analyses in Martin Scofield, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See especially his analysis of Ambrose Bierce’s *Chickamauga*, pp. 70-71.

³³ Guy de Maupassant, *Complete Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant*, trans. by Artine Artinian (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1955), pp. 544-48. For the original French text, see Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles*, ed. by Louis Forestier, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, collection La Pléiade, 1974), I, pp. 1130-37.

father is dying, and the couple is annoyed because he is taking his time to do so. Since they are sure his death is imminent, they decide to invite the neighbours immediately to his funeral, so as not to delay the farming work, and the wife makes apple turnovers to offer to the guests. But, as we know, the father will not be dead when the guests arrive, and the peasants will have to give another burial reception.

What is interesting about this short story is the extreme clarity of what is at stake; the logic of the characters is convincingly followed through to the end. And yet the comprehension of the reader is essentially limited, and allows for the defining of our emotion. The author makes it clear that the Chicots are not departing in any way from the rural customs in counting on the father's death. They know that the mayor will authorise them to hold the funeral immediately after he dies, despite the law, as he did for "old man Renard, who died just at sowing time":³⁴ in this community, farming comes first. The reader feels convinced of this: we are ready to recognise the necessity of not endangering the harvest in order to follow what is no more than a simple custom. In a world that is so poor, it seems normal to ignore the sentimentality of a death, since the deceased will not know any difference. But acknowledging this necessity can only be done by establishing a radical difference between our universe and theirs. The portraits, first of the wife and then of the husband, are predictably marked with bestial imagery:

Her bony figure, wide and flat [...]. A once white bonnet, now yellow, covered part of her hair, pulled tight over her head. Her dark face, thin, ugly, toothless, showed that wild animal-like expression peasant faces often have. [...] probably no more than forty, but he looked sixty, wrinkled, gnarled [...]. His outsized arms hung down along his body.³⁵

This description does not prepare us to share in the logic of these characters on an equal footing and accept the validity of their reactions, their judgements and their behaviour. Signs of their strangeness continue to accumulate: the legions of rats which scurried about "day and night" in their attic; the "earthen floor, rough and damp" which seemed slippery with grease; their rooms separated by a "ragged piece of local calico".

And of course Maupassant's use of direct speech leaves no room for empathy. The author describes the dying old man as a disembodied sound: "A regular, rough sound — hard breathing, gasping, whistling,

³⁴ Ibid, p. 547 (p. 1134).

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 544-45 (pp. 1130-31).

with a gargling like a broken water pump — came from the shadowy bed on which an old man was dying, the peasant woman's father".³⁶ The peasant woman repeats the narrator's brutal image when she talks to her husband: "He's been gurgling like that since noon [...]. [It's] still gurgling [...] Doesn't [it] sound like a pump that's got no water?".³⁷ There is a rapid transition from indications of a person ("He's been gurgling") to those of inanimate objects: "a pump"; "it's" and "it" referring to the man. Mistakes and mispronunciations are another way of creating a contrast between our way of speaking and that of the peasants. So is, of course, the insistence on the material aspects of the father's death. French readers tend to remember the title of this story as *Les Douillons* (a French dialect word for "dumplings"), which embody the peasants' unemotional view of death: the peasant woman is so absorbed in the preparation of her dumplings, and so unwilling to lose any time, that she does not even check on her dying father.

Yet again note that there is as much sympathy for the characters as is possible in a classic short story: the reader is well aware of the peasant woman's anxiety during the aborted funeral, when she "kept going to the cellar for cider. Pitchers came up and were emptied with the utmost speed".³⁸ Food and cider are the woman's only thought: she is going to have to make another batch of dumplings, she and her husband will have to invite everyone again — it's a catastrophe for their poor household. We understand, but this understanding brings with it the recognition of the essential difference that exists between their world and ours, the gulf separating two kinds of humanity: one which honours the dead, and one which treats death with brutal practicality.³⁹

In a different, more political and less literary context, all this would no doubt have been considered classist.⁴⁰ Obviously the reader can always

36 Ibid, p. 545 (p. 1131).

37 Ibid, pp. 545-46 (p. 1131). I have modified the translation slightly to be closer to the original.

38 Ibid, p. 548 (p. 1136).

39 This is a recurring idea in Maupassant's representation of peasants. See for example this passage from *En famille*: "In the suburbs of Paris, which are full of people from the provinces, one meets with the indifference toward death, even of a father or a mother, which all peasants show; a want of respect, an unconscious callousness which is common in the country, and rare in Paris". Ibid, p. 1032 (p. 206).

40 And indeed when it comes to racism, the short story is recognised as the "most heinous" genre in the representation of black people until the 1950s. See Bill Mullen, "Marking Race/Marketing Race: African American Short Fiction and the Politics of Genre, 1933-1946", in *Ethnicity and the American Short Story*, ed. by Julie Brown (London: Garland, 1997), pp. 25-46.

decide to recognise a real connection between his own world and that of the peasants. This supposes, however, an external detour, a prior decision. If the reader decides *a priori* that the values of her own world are not superior to those of the peasants, if she assumes that her own are hypocritical, then she will praise the story for its honesty. But even in this case, the reader still remain within the framework described previously: it is not a question of adopting the peasants' values, but of comparing side by side their values and ours, one set challenging the other.⁴¹

The three different strategies we just saw for creating "sympathy" in a short story are profoundly akin to one another. In them, as in so many simpler texts, the short story brilliantly exploits its status as an "exotic" text in relation to its readers. Its own mode of action is precisely by way of establishing a maximum distance between the reader and the spectacle. The "Sirius point of view", of which we talked in the previous chapter, allows a familiar reality to be seen in a different light. By revealing, in *Kholstomer*, contemporary Russian society through the eyes of a horse, Tolstoy was extracting the maximal distance and most powerful emotion of which the genre is capable. All the short stories present, in a strikingly lively fashion, scenes we probably have not been able to see, and characters whom we have approached without realising: prostitutes and pariahs of all kinds, of course, but also the petty clerical workers whose mediocrity hides their misery. We no longer ignore them but rather recognise their spectacular strangeness.

We can now understand why the short story was celebrated by all the revolutionary governments (the prize for the "best short story" has been a characteristic trait of socialist countries, from Tunisia to Eastern Europe): it is the perfect vehicle for denunciation. It should not surprise us that Lenin was so fond of Chekhov's *Anyuta*. Not only did the short story succeed brilliantly in making the atrocity of a situation apparent, it was also able to show that the horror of the characters' behaviour was rooted in the "deceptive representations" which they had of reality, in their incapacity to understand correctly the relationships of power and their own situation.

41 In any case I do not think that this is the effect that the story was supposed to produce on the readers of *Le Gaulois*: the peasants are too clearly distanced and the discourse on peasant indifference in the face of death is too characteristic.

The short story is the tool of political awareness, and politicians like Lenin saw it as a wonderful means of enlightening their contemporaries.

But we can, of course, make the same reproach as Hegel made to the philosophers of the French Enlightenment: the very idea of philosophy bringing light to those who do not possess it, in the same way the idea of transforming the life of peasants in Normandy or the Russian petty bourgeoisie, implies a position of superiority. It implies belief in the universality of one's own values, in the necessity of establishing them in these foreign worlds — social or geographic. Postcolonial studies have taught us that the concept of exoticism is only apparently neutral, and that to consider an object or person exotic implies a very definite world orientation: on the one hand the West, and on the other a foreign world, perceived from the superior perspective of a "civilized" country. The emotion may be very strong, and the short story can impart to its readers a profound interest in the misery of the masses, or the fate of petty nobility like *Goi*. It makes no difference: the essential attitude is a form of condescension: one *looks down* on these characters.

In so far as this, the classic short story is quite naturally the progeny of the end of the nineteenth century, as is exoticism. Vincenette Maigne summarises the traits we have seen deployed in this chapter:

the term 'exoticism' itself appears moreover in the period of colonial expansion when all the representations of the French [...] comfort the country in its image of the superiority of western civilization, with a benevolent overture to the distant foreign lands, looked on as inferior, barbarous, but interesting (cf. the very formal 'orientalism' of this period which does not consider the indigenous representative to be equal in dignity, but simply a spectacle which is picturesque in its costumes or strange in its customs).⁴²

In this framework, the validation of the short story lies precisely in the belief in progress that ruled the last decades of the nineteenth century. When Chekhov treats the subjects of the story Peasants so harshly, when Verga willingly dwells on the sordid realism of his settings, and when Maupassant accumulates portraits of limited, ignorant and superstitious peasants, it is because they are all trying to advance "civilization".

Maupassant's *Le Baptême* (*The Christening*) is emblematic of this approach — an intellectual approach for once rather than the desire to make his reader

42 Vincenette Maigne, "Exotisme, évolution en diachronie du mot et de son champ sémantique", in *Exotisme et création. Actes du colloque international* (Lyon: L'Hermès, 1985), pp. 9-16 (p. 12, translation ours).

laugh or procure for him any strong sensation. In this horrifying story, a doctor relates how peasants, in order to show respect for the baptismal customs of their region, have exposed their baby to the rigorous cold of winter (their tradition has it that the baby should wait naked for the priest) then, having all got drunk, have left him to die of cold in the ditch where they had fallen. This story certainly belongs among the innumerable caricatures of peasants, and it displays the characteristic refusal to participate in the logic of the “other”. But in this case, the refusal is explicitly justified, and reveals the general direction of the genre: participation in the logic of the peasants would have meant granting validity to a pernicious practice.

It is almost always possible to accuse the short story of “western centrism”, and to show that it is based firmly on the reader’s values. But at the end of the nineteenth century, there was not an ethnology respectful of the rites and customs of so-called “savages”. Instead, there was a focus on the virtues of “reason” and “progress”. To publish short stories in the newspapers was to preach the “good word”, to try to transform the world (many publications — one of which is still published in Lyon — bore the title of *Progress*). This may be what makes the classic short story so very much a product of its time: its positivist belief in the virtues of education in the simplest possible terms.

