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The Novella's Long Life

DESPITE THE AMBIGUOUS REPUTATION it has weathered for centuries, the novella need not be the red-headed stepchild in the family of literature. Before the novel became firmly established as a genre in the mid-eighteenth century, much shorter prose narratives had been in vogue in Europe and America. These novels manqué owed their genesis to Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, written in the middle of the fourteenth century. Boccaccio, now the acknowledged father of the novella, hadn't the slightest intention of fashioning a new prose form, and certainly not one whose identity seems destined to be disputed into perpetuity. The hundred antic chapters that comprise *The Decameron* owe their storytelling fervor to scenes in the only tomes that mattered to Boccaccio: *The Divine Comedy*, *The Aeneid*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*. Greeks such as Heliodorus and Longus had been writing long pastoral romances in prose since the second century A. D. Boccaccio simply nixed all the romantic silliness and shortened the individual narratives. *The Decameron* was the first and finest prose masterwork of the Renaissance.

The common assumption that the word "novella" derives from "novel" is incorrect: our English word "novel" comes from the Italian word *novella*, which is not a diminutive although it literally means "little new thing." Complicating matters, the term "novelette" is often used as a synonym for "novella" but can also refer to popular drugstore pulp. According to the English writer and scholar J. A. Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (finished in 1975 but updated and revised until Cuddon's death in 1996), a novelette is "a work of fiction shorter than a novel but longer than a short story," although "in America the term applies to a long short-story somewhere between the short story and the novella." The term "novella," meanwhile, "is used to distinguish a long short-story from a short story and short novel from a full-dress novel." Cuddon then goes on to describe many world-famous novellas as "stories," including those of Boccaccio, who himself doesn't help matters, since in the preface to *The Decameron* he rather

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cavalierly calls his work a collection of “one hundred novellas, or fables, or parables, or histories, or whatever we want to call them.” Henry James, perhaps the last word on the large and small of prose fiction, muddied the already murky water by referring to his shorter narratives as “nouvelles.”

In their *Anatomy of the Novella: The European Tale Collection from Boccaccio and Chaucer to Cervantes* (1977), Robert Clements and Joseph Gibaldi write of the novella’s “lexical dilemma,” although lexical disaster is more like it: “At present English and American scholars variously employ the term to designate three separate and distinct types of fiction”: Boccaccio’s Renaissance yarns, the German *Novelle*, and of course the prose narratives of medium length that we now commonly think of as novellas. Perhaps little has changed on this front in academia since 1977, but for the common reader today the dispute over the definition of the term has nothing at all to do with Boccaccio or nineteenth-century Germans, but rather with the ever-shifting line between a short story and a novella and between a novella and a novel. The guidelines that Clements and Gibaldi proposed—that “novella” be used for the Renaissance form, *Novelle* for the Romantic German form, and “short novel” or “novelette” for modern narratives of medium length—never caught on.

The seventeenth-century novella was the forerunner of both the novel and the modern short story, a fact that gets neglected in our foregrounding of the novel and the short story while brushing aside the novella like a refugee who has arrived unannounced from a distant land and forgotten his own name to boot. English writers were not particularly enamored of the novella form and indeed, with some possible few exceptions—J. A. Cuddon cites Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688) and William Congreve’s *Incognita* (1713)—they seem to have skipped over it and gone straight to the novel. Only after Defoe and Richardson helped establish the novel as a genre did some English novelists return to the novella: Collins, Kipling, Mary Shelley, Eliot, and Stevenson among them.

It was the Germans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—Goethe and Kleist primarily—who made the *Novelle* their own, assigning to it definite guidelines reminiscent of fifth-century Athenian tragedy. They limited the *Novelle*’s central conflict to a single, suspenseful incident that leads to a surprising reversal of fates, what is known in tragedy as *peripeteia*: the turnaround that instigates the ruin of a great figure. With their overt symbolism and silly, rollicking plots, the German *Novelle* had almost nothing in common with the Italian novellas of Boccaccio and others. And the quasiclassical guidelines were

only loosely in place when in 1912 another German, Thomas Mann, published what is—along with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—the most famous and influential novella in world literature, *Death in Venice*.

Of course, the nineteenth-century Russians and French would not be bested in any prose fiction genre, and so the maestros of the novel went short: Tolstoy with *The Cossacks* and *The Death of Ivan Ilych*; Turgenev with *First Love*; Gogol with *Taras Bulba*; Dostoevsky with *Notes From Underground* and *The Eternal Husband*; Flaubert with *A Simple Heart*; Maupassant with *The Horla*; Balzac with *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*. Ordinarily long-winded geniuses like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky—and Solzhenitsyn in the twentieth century with a jewel called *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—were capable of limiting their tremendous scope. The heavy-hitting American novelists had the same capability: Melville, Howells, Wharton, James. But are the two capabilities really much different from one another? How does the structure of a novella differ from that of a novel?

The novella is not destined to be stuck inelegantly between a short story and a novel, with none of the strengths of either. Indeed, the opposite is true: an expert novella combines the best of a short story with the best of a novel, the dynamic thighs of a sprinter with the long-distance lungs of a mountaineer. In her 1975 study *Forms of the Modern Novella*, M. D. Springer claims that the novella’s length—between fifteen thousand and fifty thousand words (Forster is responsible for the second number—is uniquely “equipped to realize several distinct formal functions better than any other length,” those formal functions being a list of concepts only an academic could care about.

For “formal functions” substitute “range and vision,” and this is the primary difference between a novella and a novel. Tom Jones *demand*s eight hundred pages to develop; his character requires that space; once he came to life Fielding was helpless to limit him. A writer cannot pack the complicated rise and fall of a heroine, an Emma Bovary or an Anna Karenina, into the tight immediacy of a novella. A narrative chooses its own length, dictates its own boundaries. One can push or bang or bend one’s narrative into whatever length one wishes, but when the composition of a narrative is going very well, when the characters have assumed pulsating lives of their own, then the writer is pulled along by their authority, guiding the narrative’s natural range into the shape it wishes to have, the one in which it is most comfortable, most fully itself.

In its immediacy of range, then, and in its restrictions on time and number of characters, the novella has more in common with the short story than it does with

the novel. It is difficult to get an effective short story to span more than a week (although the most adroit story writers, such as Alice Munro, have a miraculous ability to do so), and just as difficult to get a novella to span more than a month. Development and change take time the way psychological excavation takes space. A character's business in a novel is to develop or to change—to suffer—and despite a lot of writing workshop nonsense to the contrary, a character's business in a short story is simply to act or to react, since he has neither the time nor the space to develop or to change beyond baby steps. We need not attempt to establish new guidelines for the novella, guidelines that take into account something other than page length, because page length alone dictates what a novella is and is not capable of. Page length reveals the size of its engine and thus how fast and how far it can go. A novella like *Death in Venice* can feel as penetrating as a novel, as profound and psychologically astute, because a genius condensed the action—what little there is—into a short time period and then dedicated nearly every page to Aschenbach's mental and emotional turmoil. Still, Gustave Aschenbach does not demand eight hundred pages the way Tom Jones does, and one would have a difficult time trying to argue that *Death in Venice* is as full, as complete a vision as Fielding's novel.

What does one do with the many world masterpieces that are clearly novellas but not recognized as such, Camus's *The Stranger*, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* chief among them? Salinger calls *Franny and Zooey* a "story" even though it's a hundred and fifty pages long, and, of course, he's right: it is a story, in the same way *The Iliad* is a story, but not the same way Hemingway's "The Battler" is a story. And what of Andre Dubus's "Adultery," dubbed a "short story" in his *Selected Stories* but a "novella" in the paperback of *We Don't Live Here Anymore*? (For the record, "Adultery" is a short story, not a novella.)

American publishers have no incentive to establish an accepted nomenclature for prose fiction of medium length because American readers don't seem much interested in prose fiction of medium length, the same way they don't care much about the short story. Sadly, when most American readers want fiction, they want a novel only. Since we are told *ad nauseam* that our attention spans have been obliterated by electronic enticements, it seems a very improbable and thus very odd fact that the short story and the novella aren't more widely read: after all, they take less time to read than a novel. American literary journals and the New York slicks that still publish fiction cannot be more supportive of the novella for the simple reason that they don't have the space. As with so much in America, the

mighty marketplace is the culprit partly responsible for the novella's widespread unpopularity.

But some of the best living American fiction voices have excelled at the novella form: Charles Baxter, Jane Smiley, Steven Millhauser (although it's curious that of the three greatest American story writers of the second half of the twentieth century, two of them, Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie, never penned novellas; Flannery O'Connor, however, delivered us the singular *Wise Blood*). The novella is everywhere, even if it is called by another name: two of the "long stories" in Richard Ford's *Women with Men* are really novellas, and Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* (called a story collection) and *The Name of the World* (called a novel) are also novellas through and through. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to find an important novelist or story writer in history who has *not* written a novella. The form is thriving at the desks of international greats—Garcia Marquez's *Collected Novellas* should be a staple in anyone's library—and of American scribes both known and unknown.

John Gardner once observed that there are essentially only two plot lines in all fiction: a stranger arrives in town or someone goes on a quest. In Cary Holladay's new novella, both happen. *A Fight in the Doctor's Office* is an unfortunate choice for a title because it suggests that what unfolds between the covers is a John Cleese comedy and not a beautifully calamitous tale, as serious as hellfire, of one woman's unraveling. The unraveling woman has occupied literature for millennia (from Eve to Medea to Lady Macbeth to Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina) and has helped to fashion the now-comfortable tradition of viewing women as the more hysterical and irrational gender, eager to fall to pieces at the whims of their mighty emotions. Holladay's antiheroine, Jenny Havener, is another in this meandering line of distraught and flawed females, although her undoing results not from a man or an overweening ambition, but rather from her own moral clumsiness.

The year is 1967, and Jenny and her wealthy parents have arrived in Glen Allen, Virginia—a destitute, mostly uninhabited town—to hunt down Jenny's rascally husband, an academic who has deserted her and disappeared into the southern mist (although the more one learns about Jenny, the less one can blame the fellow for bolting). One afternoon Jenny spots a blind black child in a front yard, instantly falls in love with him, and decides to remain in Glen Allen with the sole purpose of spiriting away this child from the great-grandparents who are his legal guardians. Her father buys her an abandoned, lone-standing piano and furniture

store near the railroad tracks—with an apartment above and the pianos still below—gives her the family sedan, and leaves her in this southern netherworld to conspire to the theft of a human being.

Holladay immediately establishes her command with flawless dialogue that reads like transcripts from Alan Lomax's famous interviews with southern blues musicians. This is when Jenny first approaches the baby boy she spots playing in a yard:

“He deaf, all right,” the old woman says. “Can't hear, don't cry, don't make no sound. I keep clapping. Keep hoping.”

“Can he walk yet?”

“Mmm-hmm. He does right well. He just like to be held.”

The dialect here is spot-on, the subtle cadence expertly measured, devoid of the exaggeration that lesser writers believe makes credible speech. This precise dialect never falters for an instant and can come only from a writer steeped in its patterns (Holladay, the author of four previous works of fiction, was raised in Virginia and currently resides in Tennessee).

After this initial encounter with Benjamin and his great-grandmother, Jenny decides impulsively that she will acquire the boy by whatever available means. The textbook motive for her desire to steal Benjamin is to occupy the absence left by her husband, but why does she not just find another man, or take up gardening? Plenty of hobbies and people are capable of simply occupying absence if that is what one yearns for, and so there's much more to Jenny's motive. Or much less. Despite the answers handed down from sages such as Kierkegaard and Freud, some aspects of human motivation remain hidden, or inexplicable, or just plain strange. As her story progresses, Jenny proves herself more and more alienated from reality and increasingly propelled by impulses she cannot control.

In addition to being destructively wacky, Jenny is quite naturally very stupid, and racist at heart. She condescends to Benjamin's great-grandparents—a compassionate, dignified pair who love the boy—and believes that because they are black and poor they must surely lack the acuity to prevent her—a wealthy white girl from Washington, D.C.—from abducting their grandchild. Her supposed love for Benjamin himself is really nothing more than her view of him as an adorable curiosity, a receptacle for her neediness; he is a pet, not a person. She begins an erotic affair with Benjamin's biological father—a white man named Clell—in the hope that she might recruit him to her cause. She despises a local nine-year-old girl for no other reason than her own mean-heartedness. By the novella's end, Jenny will demon-

strate that her bigotry, like all bigotry, does not aim at one target alone: Murad, the photographer who comes to her rescue—suffice it to say that Jenny’s hare-brained quest lands her in a position from which she certainly needs rescuing—“might be a swami” who burns “incense” and eats “some kind of strange food.” Most damningly, Jenny thinks of Murad as “Aladdin” and as a “breed.”

Holladay has set up an intricate narrative in which various contests play themselves out just beneath the surface of the story: wealth versus poverty; city versus country; North versus South; sanity versus insanity; and, of course, black versus white. However, the story is put in motion by the moral failing that causes Jenny to apprehend Benjamin as an article, as a thing that might receive her, and perhaps as an ostentatious badge of her liberalism (the novella’s setting in 1967 is not incidental). Nowadays one can visit any American metropolis and witness rich white couples parading through town their adopted Chinese and Vietnamese babies, their trophies of tolerance that betray a satisfied snobbery, that shout, “Look how enlightened I am, how sensitive.” Jenny is one of those pseudoparents, somebody who believes that compassion and acceptance should be displayed and that the display is more important than the application.

One blurbist has written that Holladay employs “the precise vision of Flannery O’Connor” (whatever that means). It seems that every southern writer with a double X chromosome must suffer the comparison to either O’Connor or Welty—the same way every southern male writer must contend with Faulkner’s looming ghoul—an easy and yet unfair enterprise if ever there was one. Nearly everything in O’Connor’s worldview is creepy and Christ-obsessed, her denizens spiritually desperate and seeking an elusive grace. Holladay’s worldview has none of this, and rightly so; her mission is altogether apart from O’Connor’s. Nor does her unaffected prose style ever reach for the labyrinthine imagery that marks so much of O’Connor’s fiction (think of the closing paragraphs of “The Artificial Nigger”).

Mostly unblemished, Holladay’s prose can sometimes be susceptible to exhausted jargon (“she cuts to the chase,” “they came out of nowhere,” and, twice in the span of just a few pages, “her heart pounding”), needless redundancy (“Jenny feels sick at her stomach”—where else does one feel sick?), or accepted inaccuracies (“Jenny’s jaw drops”—forget the dissonant alliteration: in the whole history of humankind not a single surprised person has ever experienced a jaw dropped on its own volition. Parted lips and a partially open mouth, yes; but a dropped jaw, never). Faulkner once remarked that in a novel a writer has room for some “shit” for some missteps; but in a novella there is no such room. If every sentence is not

labored over with the scrupulous attention a chemist gives a molecule, then the novella will begin to sputter.

Some sophomore readers will have you believe that if a character has no likable qualities then the narrative fails; but neither Achilles nor Odysseus is particularly likable, nor are Raskolnikov, Humbert Humbert, and scores of other protagonists. If, in the end, Holladay's narrative partially fails, that partial failing has nothing to do with her loathsome heroine, but rather with Holladay's conception of her narrative as a novella. These characters and situations scream out for expansion, for time, for a larger vision in which they can work. The single most alluring character in the story is not Jenny but Benjamin's estranged white father, Clell: this complicated recluse has presence you can smell, and yet he walks on- and offstage without ever influencing the trajectory of events. The great-grandparents, too, have a compelling history begging to be told. And what of Benjamin's biological mother, shot dead in a domestic dispute? Is she not part of this hurtful tale? Must she be usurped by the half-baked Jenny? Holladay didn't allow the narrative to be its own, to develop as it would; she strangled it in the service of a page limit.

The clearest evidence that this novella needed to be a novel is the chapter entitled "Tap Dancing," in which Holladay switches point of view for the only time in the narrative, making for an irregular structure. The chapter gets told through the perspective of a nine-year-old girl named Shirley—the same child Jenny despises—who happens by Jenny's piano and furniture store just in time to save her from suffocating inside a coffin (Jenny accidentally locked herself inside it, a further indication that she lacks a developed cerebrum). This chapter also happens to be the sturdiest in the novella; the urgency of Jenny's ordeal gives off heat, and, more important, one is granted respite from her rabid narcissism.

But a novella, unlike a novel, doesn't have the machinery necessary to shift points of view. M. D. Springer's statement, "The concentration on a single character accounts in part for the novella length," works better in reverse: the novella length accounts in part for the concentration on a single character; many novels, after all, maintain one point of view throughout. In his scrupulous essays and criticism, Poe argued for the maintaining of a single point of view—for unity, economy, cohesion—and his tales contain no secondary points of view, no digressions to distract from his task: storytelling with alacrity, the mining of a single character's psyche. Poe's own novella, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, takes on a lot of water and ultimately sinks because Poe could not follow his own credo. The novella proved too much for this master of the short tale.

And so, alas, the poor novella, always a bridesmaid never a . . . But no. The uncertainty of forms, what Henry James called “kinds,” belongs to the past. “Kinds,” James wrote,

are the very life of literature, and truth and strength come from the complete recognition of them, from abounding to the utmost in their respective senses and sinking deep into their consistency. . . . The confusion of kinds is the inelegance of letters and the stultification of values.