

Jorge Sacido, ed. 2012. *Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Short Story in English*. Amsterdam and New York: Peter Lang. 269 pp. ISBN: 978-90-420-3557-7.

CARMEN LARA RALLO

Universidad de Málaga

carmenlara@uma.es

In her essay collection *On Histories and Stories* (2000), A.S. Byatt claims that “storytelling is intrinsic to biological time, which we cannot escape . . . Stories are like genes, they keep part of us alive after the ending of our story” (166). This statement could be transferred to the domain of literary history, as the short story genre emerges as a privileged site for the staging of the (hi)story of literary creativity and criticism, and in particular of the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Enacting the move from modernist autonomy and subjectivity to the postmodernist emphasis on literary artifice, the short story becomes an apt tool for the reassessment of modernism, postmodernism and their interrelationship, as *Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Short Story in English*, edited by Jorge Sacido, demonstrates. This study offers a collection of critical essays by internationally renowned scholars who examine the modernist and postmodernist dimensions of the short story from the perspective of both critical theory and textual analysis.

In the context of contemporary literature and criticism, Sacido’s edited volume proves to be an enlightening and timely contribution because, apart from addressing the always controversial issue of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, it also approaches the current debate on the prevalence of the postmodern paradigm in the twenty-first century. At a moment when critics like Pelagia Goulimari (2007, 1) are asking questions such as “do we still live in postmodern times? What is the moment—the time, but also the force and significance—of postmodernism?” the opening chapter of *Modernism* convincingly argues for a continuation of postmodernism in the short story nowadays.

This chapter, by the editor of the volume, is followed by four main parts, chronologically arranged and with a mainly (though not exclusively) British-oriented approach in terms of the writers and texts considered. In his theoretical chapter, before part one, Sacido examines the defining features of modernist and postmodernist short fiction, exploring the role of the short story in the rise of modernism in terms of autonomy and subjectivity, and analysing how in postmodernism “interpretation is blocked and representation becomes impossible” (14). Significantly, Sacido’s interest in the interrelationship between modernism and postmodernism is mirrored in part two and the first two chapters of part three, which all approach the short story genre from the point of view of the relationship

existing between both movements. This signals the balance in contents and structure of the book, since the other chapters in the volume are devoted to each paradigm separately: the two chapters in part one (“Refocusing ‘Modernism’ through the Short Story”) focus on modernism, while the final chapter of part three, together with part four, is devoted to contemporary short fiction.

The attention paid to the interplay between the modernist and the postmodernist short story is already announced in the title of part two, “The Subject Vanishes: Modernist Contraction, Postmodernist Effacement and the Short Story Genre,” with contributions by three international experts on the short story: Tim Armstrong, Fred Botting and Paul March-Russell. These essays share a similar interest in the related ideas of incompleteness, fragmentation and spectrality. The notion of incompleteness figures prominently in Armstrong’s chapter, which aims at showing how the incompleteness of desire works as a marker of the relation between totality and fragmentation in the short story. Comparing two classic modernist stories—Joyce’s “The Dead” and Mansfield’s “The Stranger”—with postmodernist short fiction by David Mitchell and David Forster Wallace, Armstrong analyses how the partial and limited self in the modernist short story enters into a traumatised relation with the other in contemporary fiction, as “the madness which briefly assaults Joyce and Mansfield’s [*sic*] characters . . . has become a full-blown narrative mode—a ghost-writing” (95). This element of trauma and mourning recurs in the following chapter, where Botting finds in spectrality a useful tool to prove the existence of a continuity between modernism and postmodernism through the ghost story subgenre. As he examines stories by Angela Carter, Virginia Woolf and May Sinclair, Botting identifies a process of un-familiarisation associated with the uncanny, discovering the presence of “spectral screens” that foreground the similarities existing between the modernist short story and the ghost story, as well as the playful dimension of postmodernist short fiction.

While Botting takes the ghost story as a central point in his chapter, the following contribution, by March-Russell, focuses attention on the relationship of the short story with science fiction. March-Russell reassesses his working hypothesis in the influential study *The Short Story: An Introduction* (2009) with the goal of exploring the distinctions between modern and postmodern short story theory in terms of the influence of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “minor literature.” Through the analysis of J.G. Ballard’s short fiction, which “offers a distillation of the strengths within both science fiction and the short story” (134), March-Russell revises the Deleuzian image of writing as a machine, coming to the conclusion that Deleuze and Guattari’s postmodern critical approach fails to capture the essence of Ballard’s writings or of the short story in general.

This concept of “minor literature” recurs again in part three, “The Subject Reappears: Postcolonial Conflict and the Other’s Stories,” in whose second chapter J. Manuel Barbeito and María Lozano propose a modernistic reading of Salman Rushdie’s collection of short stories *East, West* (1994). By focusing on the figure of the migrant subject, this chapter convincingly demonstrates that, although paradigmatically postmodernist, Rushdie’s stories allow for a close reading from the perspective of modernist poetics,

considering that the short story “is arguably the genre that encompasses the fragility, ellipsis and fragmentation called for by modernist practice” (186). Such a reading reveals how Rushdie’s work juxtaposes the positions of the citizen and of the diasporic subject, and so the author comes to terms with the discontinuity inherent in the experience of the world and of language.

The subject in transit, this time not in the form of the migrant but of the *flâneur*, plays a central role in the other chapter of part three that focuses on the interrelationship between modernism and postmodernism: Esther Sánchez-Pardo’s “Postmodernist Tales from the Couch.” This chapter offers a comparative study of Samuel R. Delany’s postmodernist short story “Atlantis: Model 1924” (1995) and Hart Crane’s modernist poetic sequence *The Bridge* (1930), providing an original approach to these works. Like Botting, Sánchez-Pardo argues for a continuity between modernism and postmodernism, stating that postmodernism is a product or revision of modernist literary practice and theory. By resorting to the concept of “betweenness,” Sánchez-Pardo shows how Delany’s story enters into an enriching dialogue with Crane’s work not only from the intertextual perspective, but also from the point of view of how both texts share a similar attempt to challenge borders, “celebrating multiplicities of identity, race, sexuality, language and history” (152). As she combines twentieth-century Anglo-American texts with contemporary (literary and psychoanalytical) theory, Sánchez-Pardo convincingly demonstrates that “modernist texts offer ground-breaking insights to the postmodernist enterprise” (154).

While this “postmodernist enterprise” emerges as the object of analysis of the last two chapters of *Modernism*, its first two chapters, which make up part one of the volume (“Refocusing ‘Modernism’”) are devoted to the study of “modernist texts.” In “The Short Story and the Difficulty of Modernism,” Adrian Hunter explores the pre-history of the modernist short story by providing an archaeological insight into the concept of “difficulty” and its amenability to modernist aesthetics. As he argues that this “difficulty” of the short story—under the guise of plotlessness, incompleteness, openness and allusiveness—made it a favourite genre in modernism, Hunter traces the debates about the challenges of the short story back to the Edwardian period, identifying “how to” guidebooks and critical studies in the early twentieth century as forerunners of modernist short fiction.

Linked with this idea of difficulty, the next chapter of part one, José María Díaz’s “Allegory and Fragmentation in Wyndham Lewis’s *The Wild Body* and Djuna Barnes’s *A Book*,” considers the concept of fragmentation as a central notion. Here, Díaz distinguishes two strands of fragmentation: that of modernism, which is associated with symbolism, and that of the *avant-garde*, related with allegory. From this perspective, he examines works by Lewis and Barnes to contend that in their practice, “modernist short fiction cannot be fixed as a homogeneous genre with a common underlying discourse” (51). As he argues that these texts are closer to the allegorical fragmentation of the *avant-garde*, Díaz explores short fiction that developed alongside the hegemonic modernist movement, thus providing an original approach to the modernist short story in the line of Hunter’s analysis of the pre-history of modernist short fiction.

The originality of Hunter's and Díaz's approaches has an echo in the last two chapters of *Modernism*, where Manuela Palacios and José Francisco Fernández analyse the postmodernist short story from the point of view of, respectively, otherness in contemporary Irish short fiction and innovation in recent British short stories. On the one hand, Palacios's contribution, which shares with the other chapters in part three an interest in race, ethnicity and nationality, examines Irish short fiction written by women, from both Northern Ireland and the Republic, between the late 1970s and 2010. Taking feminist and postcolonial criticism as its theoretical framework, this chapter convincingly argues that stories by Fiona Barr, Anne Devlin and Mary O'Donnell portray Britain as an inspiring Other by bringing the encounter with otherness to the domestic sphere, as "the private, domestic space, which is also the realm of emotional life, becomes a site where the genuine encounter with the Other can be achieved" (222).

On the other hand, Fernández's chapter ("Short Notes from the Contemporary Underground"), the only essay in part four of the volume, addresses the phenomenon of the remarkable development of the short story in Britain since the end of the twentieth century in the light of "its energy, its variety and its ambition to innovate" (232). The chapter pays attention to different anthologies of recent short fiction, particularly to *All Hail the New Puritans* (2000), in order to identify the daring qualities of these new narratives by young writers who are described as provocative, irreverent and disrespectful of tradition. As Fernández clearly explains, these collections show the energy of youth subcultures, being characterised by their commitment to current times in their unashamed portrayal of fragments of young people's lives in contemporary England.

With their subversive quality, these collections aim at a re-evaluation of the short story genre, which as Fernández conclusively proves, is alive and flourishing at the turn of the new millennium. Indeed, Fernández argues, "there is always something inescapable in the genre that allows it to transcend particular interests and fashions," while, as Sacido puts it (viii), "stories go on being told." This inescapability of the short story not only reflects the biological need for storytelling mentioned by A.S. Byatt, but also accounts for the centrality of the genre for the development of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. In this context, and at a time when the current validity of postmodernism is being questioned, *Modernism* emerges as a useful and timely contribution to the fields of critical theory and literary history. What is more, Sacido's essay collection offers an original and ground-breaking approach to the role of the short story in modernist and postmodernist aesthetics that neither specialists in the short story genre nor those interested in twentieth-century literature or criticism should miss.

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Carmen Lara-Rallo is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Málaga. She has published books, book chapters and articles on different aspects of Anglo-American literature and criticism. Her works include a monograph on intertextuality and a book-length study of A.S. Byatt's fiction, which was awarded the 2007 research prize by AEDEAN. Her main areas of interest are contemporary British fiction, critical theory and comparative literature.

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Campus de Teatinos. 29071, Málaga, Spain. Tel.: +34 952131794; Fax: +34 952131843.