Research Article

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Short-Story Writing as the Art of Ordinary Aesthetics

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Abstract: Though ordinary aesthetics is self-evident as a principle, fruitful as a method, it remains partly undefined. It seems the major difficulty is to mark out its territory, so much so as, after Wittgenstein, it endorses the most part of what used to pertain to ethics. Our hypothesis is that starting from art forms may prove helpful in defining ordinary aesthetics; and the article suggests that short-story writing is a paradigmatic pathway to ordinary aesthetics as it is to the ethical unsaid.

Keywords: aesthetics, ethics, latent philosophy, *Lebensform*, ordinary language, short story, Wittgenstein

The inscription of ethical issues in everyday life may be novel to philosophers, but in no way for literary authors. As for aesthetic considerations, they have, as early as the Middle Ages, been part and parcel of the artist's dedication to illuminating Man's work on earth. What may be new, however, is the fusion of the ethical and aesthetic standpoints through the agency of such concepts as the ordinary or the form of life. With Wittgenstein these analytical instruments have brought back ethics to our home, a down-to-earth approach though it may seem. The question then becomes: by what means will it be possible to seize, capture, and encapsulate the myriads of attitudes, choices, and constraints that are involved in human action? The sources for ethical investigation are many, and some are more time-consuming than others; films, TV serials, photos, songs, plays, and life-writing have already been a common stock for research, and Ludwig Wittgenstein himself paid close attention to the ethical aspects of novels and tales. The point I would like to make here is that the art of short-story writing may well be instrumental in defining ordinary aesthetics. This is probably due to its unequalled virtue of questioning the very limits of ethics; to quote but one example, the status of the irrational and its place in every man's mind threatens, beyond doubt, the no-judgement, no-rule approach to ethics.

After historical considerations regarding the genre itself, and a survey of the features that characterize the art of story-writing, the article tries to determine in what way short stories can be instrumental in defining ordinary aesthetics. Beyond the strong connection between subjectivity and the dimensions of narrativity, such notions as brevity, single design, priority of meaning over construction, latency and the ineffable, democratic[1] ethical teaching qualify for the new criteria of ordinary aesthetics. After demonstrating the function of life-form as eliciting awareness of the meaning of a given short story, the article eventually questions the concepts of simile and the ordinary.

1 By this adjective, what is meant is that no specific culture or education is required to access the ethical content of the story. Furthermore, I use "democratic" in the Deweyian sense, i.e. almost synonymous with "emancipatory," with a strong emphasis on equality in culture and education, "modern life means democracy and democracy means freeing intelligence for independent effectiveness – the emancipation of mind as an individual organ to do its own work." Dewey, *Democracy in Education*, 229.

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1 Short-Story Writing and Aesthetics from a Historical Perspective

1.1 Useful Clarifications

Clarifications are needed regarding aesthetics, ethics, and its difference to morals. Historically *aesthetics* refers to the study, born from the theory of sensation (αίσθησις), of a particular area defined by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1750) comprising the judgements of valuation of beauty, either natural or artistic; this subject eventually came to include the ancient poetics or theory of artistic creation. On the contrary, ethics is a long-lasting legacy from ancient philosophy, assuming various forms arising from repeated attempts to define the right action, the end (τέλος) of man's conduct (ήθος), the necessity and cognition of the Good. My understanding of ethics owes much to the modern re-definition undertaken by G.E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica* ("The peculiarity of ethics is … that it investigates assertions about that property of things which is denoted by the term 'good'"[2]), which I have tried to reconcile with Wittgenstein's view that ethics and aesthetics are one and the same reflection of the undue desire for transcendence. Wittgenstein says, "The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics."[3]

Duty is at the basis of morals, while the power of acting freely, or free-will, is at the basis of ethics. Whereas the moral lesson in any works of art – whether it be a story or a painting – is mostly explicit, the ethical content is often implicit or underlying; accordingly, enabling the perception of this content, a perception which is strongly connected to the observer's culture and may depend on the knowledge of the creator's intention(s), is strong evidence of the author's art.

1.2 Short-Story Writing in Relation to the Ordinary

Given that ethics is the outcome of a long history and aesthetics a modern method, the question is to know how short-story writing fits into this dual history. The evolution of short stories as a genre demonstrates that the views on the self and the dimensions of narrativity are strongly linked. At the beginning of the European Renaissance period, a new genre appeared, the *nouvelle*, blending the flexibility of its oral Persian origins and the minimal length of medieval *fabliaux* and epigrams. But the characters involved (including the personal destiny of each of them) are unique; unlike legends or fables, this new category of narratives is supposed to be true, devoid of style effects (non-normative uses of words and figures, aiming at creating surprise or emotions), and to provide an accurate reflection of society. In that respect, the subject is the hero of the modern times. It is generally said that, as early as the mid-Trecento (the *Ars Nova* period), the first collection of short stories/ *nouvelles* was Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349–53).

Goethe's twenty-one-page *Nouvelle* (1828) is sometimes regarded as the model for short stories, "What is a nouvelle if it is not an unprecedented event?," he said.[4] Here again, in its original state, the short story is not in the least "ordinary," being instead described as unique, surprising, unusual, and unprecedented! So the question arises, what is meant by "ordinary," and in what sense can short-story writing pertain to the province of ordinary aesthetics?

Once B. Russell, G. E. Moore, and L. Wittgenstein had laid the foundations for "analytic philosophy," an undercurrent began to gain importance, favouring "ordinary language philosophy" and the rejection of problems born from the technicalities of the logical–philosophical language; Wittgenstein joined that group.

2 Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 87.

3 Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914–1916*. See Laugier, *Wittgenstein. Les Sens de l'Usage*, esp. 317–321.

4 Quoted by Eckermann, "Conversation, 29 Jan. 1827," 726.

Understood this way, such phrases as ordinary ethics or aesthetics simply refer to an approach substituting to formal theorizing a flexible wording, obeying the rules of ordinary language.

Our subject is what makes a work fall into the category of art, and short-story writing is distinct in its quest for the fragmentary, the sketch, the condensed. In that sense, it is our conviction that short-story writing is one of the arts that best open the way to an ordinary aesthetics. So the article has to do with the primal intention, the creative desire – bearing in mind that the best way to elicit definite answers is to pay attention to the result of this intention (types, language, and contexts).

1.3 Relevant Features

Edgar Poe is one of the first writers who tried to produce a theory of short-story writing; in order to create a sense of unity, it has to be read "at one sitting," to be limited to "a narrow space," and each detail must serve a single design.[5] From Poe onwards, space and time as components are of paramount importance. An expert on the *nouvelle* as a literary genre, Franck Evrard says that it endeavours to "*figer l'instant*/freeze the moment,"[6] adding that "the short story fits into the passage from the topological order to the structural model"[7] – as illustrated by Poe's assimilation of shapes and places to mental disorders.

Even the descriptors "short/long" have been expressed in arithmetic terms in the English-speaking world.[8] In 1951, John Steinbeck invents, "a new form, the play novelette," a 60-page story in which the episodes are identified in theatrical form ("Act one, act three scene 1"), each in a different place.[9] If, in French, the stress has been placed right from the beginning on the idea of novelty (*une nouvelle*), in English it has been placed on the brevity (*short* story,[10] while *novel* was restricted to the longer narratives). Yet the common point remains the comparatively short dimension, the little number of characters, and a single event as the basis of the narration.

On the whole, the evolution of the short story from Boccaccio onwards has brought to light specific features like the emergence of subjectivity (throughout history, the closer society gets to a valuation of the Self, the more precise the definition of the short story as a genre has become), the convergence of means towards a single design, the strong connection to a given society, the brevity, along with such qualifiers as unprecedented, artless, true-to-life (there is novelty in describing the world around us without using the *topoi* of the traditional narrative); these features seem to advocate for the placement of the short story under the heading of ordinary aesthetics. After all, the same characteristics would perfectly describe Vermeer's *De liefdesbrief* [*The Love Letter*] or *Het Melkmeisje* [*The Milkmaid*] while providing an access to an ethics of the ordinary.

In diachronic terms, short-story writing and ordinary aesthetics have several points in common: born from a tendency to single out the particular, they avoid general statements and acknowledge the primacy of the subject. From a synchronic standpoint, they involve the idea of (in)novation, uniqueness (each situation is unique[11]), meaning as prior to construction (though given in the end, the meaning is often the starting point, as

5 Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," 3.

6 Evrard, *La Nouvelle*, 27.

7 '[L]a nouvelle épouse le passage de l'ordre de la topologie à la structure de [...] la topique.' (Ibid., 22).

8 British and American specialists have adopted three precisely defined classes according to the length of the narrative: "short story" for a text under 7,500 words, "novelette" ranging from 7,500 to 17,500 words, and "short novel" for stories between 17,500 and 40,000 words.

9 Steinbeck, *Burning Bright*, 83.

10 In other languages too: Spanish *Novela*, *racconto* (Italian) *Kurzgeschichte* (German), and in Arabic قصيرة قصة (literally meaning "a momentary story").

11 So is the subject; says McKale in her dissertation on *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics,* "For Wittgenstein, the ethical man is unique because, as a metaphysical subject, he determines by and for himself the rules governing his relation to the world." McKale, *Ethics Aesthetics*, 8.

opposed to the novel which highlights the stages the story has to go through), and mistrust of principles (obvious in ordinary aesthetics, and common in short stories, whose characters are often put in a position to counter the principles that usually guide their actions). As for the resources, they are found in a free expression (on the one hand, aesthetic description has now got rid of technical, philosophical language as released from the concept, on the other hand, short stories have always been free from rhetorical or stylistic demands).

The specific dimension of the short story makes it the prime location for the *fantastique* (as a subgenre of fantasy), exploring the in-betweens, questioning the borderlines between normality and madness, life and death, being and non-being, as evidenced in Edgar Poe's works. Commenting upon a narrative by Barbey d'Aurevilly ("*Dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist*"),[12] Pierre Tibi insists on the effects of dramatic tension and suspense based on the resources of surface and instant – a blend or combination phrased as follows, "isomorphism of the brief and the acute."[13] Even as the fantastic narrative ceased being the standard in fiction, some of the writing (and reading!) uses inherited from that period have remained ingrained in the characteristics of short-story writing, namely the fact that, unlike in novels, the reasons for the characters' behaviours remain unstated; the reader, as a human being, is now entrusted with the task of understanding human action, with assuming his share of humanity – which no doubt reflects a philosophy in which man's first duty is to understand the world. Here again, the aesthetic approach verges on the ethical.

2 An Art of Ordinary Aesthetics: The Pros and Cons

2.1 Wittgenstein as a Short-Story Reader

Several authors who had been acquainted with Ludwig Wittgenstein insisted on his great interest in shorter fiction.[14] As essential properties of this art, latency and the ineffable echoed some of his major concerns. He admired Tolstoy's *Twenty-Three Tales* (especially "The Three Hermits," "Two Old Men") and often advised students or even colleagues to read the novella *Hadji Murat*, saying in a letter "It seems to me [Tolstoy's] philosophy is most true when it's latent in the story." Nicola Sanchez Dura says he particularly approved a sentence by Tolstoy,

> Every man bears within him the germs of every human quality, and now manifests one, now another, and frequently is quite unlike himself, while still remaining the same man.[15]

For him, short stories were the expression of a "moral teaching" (his words); by this, he meant that they can be understood by everyone, and the teaching they convey, and their applicability, is not limited. He actually regarded this form of expression as "philosophy."

The author of the *Tractatus* found another benefit in poems and also in Tolstoy's stories, a new dimension that was already partly condensed in the adjective "latent": for these are mediums offering, in Sanchez Dura's terms,[16]

> the inexpressible in language as a way of seeing, as a picture that establishes a perspective which changes the way in which life is considered. After *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein maintained his distinction between 'saying' and 'showing', beyond the pictorial theory from which it originated.

Therefore, the interest in short fiction is not limited to the moral aspect of its teaching; this is part of a wider concern for the way one captures the ethical information (i.e. related to a quest for the Good, not limited to

12 In Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Les Diaboliques,* 135–80.

13 "[I]somorphisme du bref et de l'aigu." Tibi, "La Nouvelle," 9–78.

14 He was impressed by Dostoievski, Tolstoy, writers on the borderland between philosophy, morals, religion (Wright, "Biographical Sketch," 19; O'Connor Drury, "Notes," 94; Wittgenstein, "Letter by Malcolm," 379.

15 *Resurrection* Part I, ch. 59, quoted by Malcolm, (p. 99).

16 Sanchez Dura, "Wittgenstein, Ethics and Literature," 158.

performing some duty). In addition, if ethics gets rid of former (classical) definitions of moral behaviours, descriptions can be an alternative – like if I want to know what a virtue, say magnanimity, can be, I may use a dictionary, Merriam Webster's, Lalande's, whatever …, but the most striking, democratic one will probably be found in a short story where roles, imaging, space-and-time context will be unequalled.

So the features listed here are indicative of the way one can read short stories from an ethical-aesthetic point of view: Wittgenstein and Sanchez Dura's words ("latent, inexpressible, showing, seeing, pictorial") qualify the writer, the reader, and the text at a stroke. Tolstoy's short fiction involves latent philosophy (no demonstrative apparel is required for the meaning of life to appear), easy understanding (a democratic discourse on human life), and applicability (a useful access to possible perceptive and behavioural changes enhancing the value of one's life). This is not exclusively Tolstoyan, it is true of a lot of stories, though probably more perceptible and more immediate in the shorter ones.

Here lies the message of *Hadji Murat*; at the end of the novella, the protagonist has to fight to rescue his family, but, betrayed by both the Russians and the Chechens, he no longer belongs to either of the opposing sides. Beyond his people and his culture, he now fights for himself only. So Wittgenstein comments, "Not funk but funk conquered is what is worthy of admiration & makes life worth having been lived."[17]

2.2 Doubtless Food for Thought

A few examples are enough to illustrate the capacity of short stories to give sense and to do so in an utterly different way from other forms of fiction, including the novel. The reason for this probably lies in the short-story writer's need for the piecemeal approach, the perfection of the embryonic. In Tony Wilmot's "Skeleton in the Cupboard,"[18] a childless couple lives a quiet life, neither knows that the spouse has a terrible secret he/she wants to protect; this leads to the assassination of a young lady who has been endeavouring to find out who her parents were before she was adopted; discovering her birth-mother's name, she sends her a letter of explanation. The husband who by chance gets to know her (and helps her in her research) misunderstands her intentions and kills her, on the very day when his wife, thanks to a letter she has just received, understands she has a daughter – alive. In this story, which was adapted into a TV film (*Tales of the Unexpected*), the sequence of events is totally absurd, enhanced though it is by the only element that makes sense – sense both ethical and unsaid: life has the same ways to bring about the Good as it has to bring about Evil.

Another story that was adapted for the screen several times, particularly in Asia, is "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry written in 1905.[19] Set in Greenwich Village during an epidemic, it is the story of Johnsy, a young artist, dying of pneumonia, who, everyday, sees an ivy lose its leaves, and she is convinced that the day when the last leaf falls will mark her own death. The doctor tells her friend, Sue, that only a strong belief in her own life would save her. Just one leaf remains, and Johnsy survives. Hearing this, an old painter, Behrman, who has failed in every respect in his own life, spends a whole night in the cold, painting on the wall the last fallen leaf till it can be mistaken for a real one. The doctor eventually announces the girl she has recovered for good and incidentally informs them the old painter died of pneumonia during the night. Thus, a very moving text, with practically no appeal to the reader's emotion through style or pathos, with characters using the street parlance, becomes a lesson in ethics: saving someone's life by giving them the will to live, giving life its full meaning since it is something you can withdraw from yourself, root out of yourself.

Now what would it change if these two stories were written in novel form? There would certainly be more psychological analysis, a full description of the elements that contribute to creating a context – not mentioning the pathos that would abound – probably keys to a better understanding of the characters' behaviours, actions, and possibly an inkling of the writer's position regarding the story he/she is telling and the society he/she is

17 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 43–4.

18 Wilmot, "Skeleton," 22–31.

19 Henry, *The Trimmed Lamp and Other Stories*, 198–207.

describing. It means the readers would suffer explicit or implicit guidance as to their perception of the characters; like in Western movies, there would assuredly be the goodies and the baddies! This is a risk you seldom run with short stories. Another difference from usual fiction lies in the admission that the basis of creation in a novel is the principle of belief (believe/make believe in the character, the events, the circumstances, etc.). In a short story, whether you believe in the elements of the narrative or not does not matter, the constant aim is "how it ends," the ultimate enlightenment of life experience.[20]

Conversely what sort of philosophical discourse would convey the same message? The difficulty in answering lies in the adjective "same," for it could never be the *same* statement; any changes in language, in the present case changes affecting the expression, break the alleged identity of messages. In the first example, shirking one's moral responsibility entails the destruction of a double source of bliss and ends up driving one to one's death; in the second, saving a life at the expense of one's survival is bound to leave a positive mark of one's passage on earth. Can these be facts, likely to contribute to a scientific or rational discourse? At best they would be used as images ("similes," to quote Wittgenstein's words) examples or models, but could not be conceptualized.

F. Evrard[21] observes that the short story calls into question the process of belonging to a group: children, artists, the exiled, misfits, outcasts, the whites, the segregated, etc. In Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), a college student tries to fit in with his wealthy friends ("After the Race"); in "The Dead" (a novella), Gretta tells her husband about a friend she was in love with as a young girl, and her husband meditates on human connection, the meaning of life, the Irish identity. Another striking example may be found not only in Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat,* but in J.-M. Keynes's "Dr Melchior" too (which he calls "a memoir," 1949) in which the two main characters, initially from opponent groups, the Allied and the defeated Germans, but with outsider feelings on their own sides, eventually become friends. As for Nadine Gordimer, she is probably the short-story writer that dealt the most with the damages of split societies and non-communicating groups, yet the first of her books with a coloured protagonist was written after the end of the apartheid (1990: *My Son's Story*). This shows that short stories are not mere narratives or film scripts, they are what photography is to the cinema: the capture of a moment able to clarify, to make complexity understood – what James Joyce in *Dubliners* calls an "epiphany," the experience of a sudden, life-changing realization, the unexpected understanding of others or oneself. Anthony Burgess probably has the keyword, both regarding "The Dead," O. Henry's "Last Leaf," Wilmot's "Skeleton in the cupboard" &c, "Joyce used to talk of the epiphany … meaning the showing forth of **some great truth in the presentation of the ordinary.**"[22]

2.3 Borderline Cases for Ethics and Literature

Short stories allow discovering the props of reality (from time structures to the social context, from the unusual to the obscure). Through the writer's attention, an uncommon experience ("out of the ordinary") may be used as a metaphor for making life understandable. In addition, there may be cases when short-story writing goes beyond the aesthetic-ethical realm, thus integrating new forms into aesthetics. This happened in painting with the famous *Nu descendant un escalier* (1912) by Marcel Duchamp; it may be true of a number of life-writing experiments that often lead to aesthetic accomplishments.

This is also the case with an unprecedented editorial project by the American writer Paul Auster, related in a book published under the title *True Tales of American Life* (2001) – a lesson in lifewriting for which he played the unusual part of the editor.[23] For this book, Auster offered some of the listeners who had taken part in his weekend radio programme to write about one event in their lives. This meant bringing together life's

20 Incidentally, this is very close to the final illumination, or SAMBODHI, in Buddhism.

21 Evrard, *La Nouvelle*, 53.

22 Burgess, *Preface to Modern Irish Short Stories*, 16.

23 Auster, *True Tales of American Life*.

ability to be condensed into an atom of experience and a solution to the problem of preserving reality for readers outside this experience. The result is stunning: without any literary aims or constraints, the stories show that people spontaneously turn their lives into narratives, and it appears that time structures and the social context are constant props of reality. And the distinction between life and experience becomes clear, and experience becomes a metaphor making life understandable. Simultaneously acausal connections (e.g. coincidences) are a recurring feature – a way of transcending (or is it a need to transcend?) space and time. In some cases, an aesthetic borderline is attained (turning non-art into art – Duchamp – or lifewriting into literature – Auster[24]), but there are other cases when the borderline is ethical, involving the key concept of *Lebensform*.[25]

In keeping with Wittgenstein's view that the linguistic cradle shapes each person's life, I made it clear that the concept of *Lebensform* (what is said about life initially and eventually forms your life itself) is what best explains why the stories make sense.[26] Lifewriting means discovering one's freedom, hence the question of what defines the subject: is he/she the one who is free? Or the one who has found oneself?

In one of these "true tales," one character, one *self*, in fact, describes her life as a child; says Donna M. Bronner, talking about her mother's lessons,

> Along with my mother's lessons came her stories – about how her mother could cut a man's suit pattern from a newspaper, and how, during the Depression, her own dresses were fashioned from flour sacks. I heard about a childhood filled with loss, about war, day-to-day survival, and my own birth. These stories were as natural as breathing, and I inhaled them the same way I inhaled the air.[27]

The mother's sewing lessons were also language lessons, lessons in dignity, and life-lessons, so much so that later – when Donna herself became a seamstress, and a mother – her own mother's story mirrored hers,

> While I sewed, I sang and … played with my son. Instead of sewing, my son built Lego castles at my feet. As he grew, my stories were replaced by his reading from the latest *Star Trek* or Piers Anthony novel.[28]

This "true tale" offers the reader a paradigm of what *Lebensform* (i.e. social tenets, a background for language, for praxis and mutual understanding) becomes within literature in the broad sense. Stories depict this *form* as a life support, to such an extent that stories *create* a life support.

There cannot be a better transcription of what *Lebensform* is all about: what we find here, summed up in a nutshell and supported by the double lexical/semantic string of (a) storytelling and (b) learning life, are such crucial facts as tradition (a body of knowledge handed down from generation to generation), social circumstances (poverty), physical trials (pain, starvation), human bondage (birth, death), and the reality of human evil (war). And what it all comes down to is the bare fact of breathing ("inhale"): the stories are equated to oxygen, they *are* the life support, the natural environment ("air"). Donna even discovers the permanence in storytelling, the invariants that remain basic whether your topic is *Star Trek* or the pains of previous generations. The essential lesson here is that narrative practices are part of the human environment.[29] In other words,

> The same picture may be living or dead, dumb or speaking according to whoever apprehends it is or is not acquainted to the life form in which it is inserted. … The phrase 'life-form' [*Lebensform*], with Wittgenstein, refers to the background datum

24 I use the phrase "borderline" as Auster himself distinguishes the major part of the collection from literature: "What interested me most were … true stories that sounded like fiction …. Only a small portion of [the book] resembles anything that could qualify as 'literature'." (Ibid., xiv, xx) This, however, is not enough to exclude lifewriting from the field of ordinary aesthetics, no more than denying the artistic quality of Duchamp's work would exclude it from ordinary aesthetics.

25 Wittgenstein, "*Philosophical Investigations [Philosophische Untersuchungen, 1951]*," 17, 23.

26 Gouverneur, "Auster in?," 96–119.

27 Auster, *True Tales of American Life*, 431.

28 "Sewing Lessons" in: Auster, *True Tales of American Life*, 433.

29 On this point it is worthwhile reading Warner, *Managing Monsters*, 1994.

upon which our language practices can be displayed, a datum whose sharing is one of the conditions ensuring a possible mutual understanding.[30]

3 Meaning and Beyond

3.1 *Lebensform* as a Key to Grasping the Full Sense of Short Stories

Inverted backgrounds of captured *Lebensformen* can sometimes result in exalting the beauty of care.[31] John Updike once published a story under the title: "Dear Alexandros."[32] It consists of two letters exchanged between two connected people in totally different situations; the first is written by a Greek orphan, Alexandros, who lives with his sister and grandmother; he is supported by "Hope Incorporated," an international charity organization. The second letter is the reply to the first, by Mr Bentley, an American parent, now in separation (or perhaps divorced), from his wife and two children: behind his confusion and depression, one perceives utter resentment. He appears to be critical of other nations, other people in the United States, even his friends have become "very tedious people".[33] So, the proposition that "those who possess have the better life" is doubtful, owing especially to the comparison with the orphan's sense of belonging in life ("I am keeping well, for which I thank God, and hope that it is the same with you. May God keep you always well, and grant you every happiness and joy").[34] Deeply, the meaning of "Dear Alexandros" is that a young boy can educate an adult, showing him, through his resilience, the way to happiness; indeed he sees life in terms of pleasure (friends, school, the sea). Conceivably, the story is totally ethical: no events, no adventures, no news items, just a situation in which the quest for happiness [ἐυδαιμωνια] – what the Ancient Greeks called the Ultimate Good – is seen through a confrontation between two cultures, two attitudes to life. But the one that must apologize (i.e. present a formal defense for a mistake with implied admission of guilt) is the one that has been spared the tragedies of existence.

The common phrase "Who cares?" is a sort of colloquial equivalent of "general indifference," along with such expressions as "while the world is silent," "totally under the radar for most people," "listless way/manner/feeling." In Updike's story, Bentley acts through an organization that cares, cares for others, for post-WW2 orphans in poor, devastated countries; yet the one who cares for others is precisely the Greek orphan, whose gratefulness to his American "parents" and generally to life is the perfect expression of his care. Regarding aesthetics, there is beauty in this thanksgiving manner despite the agony he suffers and keeps *unsaid* (a manner reminiscent of Behrman's in O. Henry's "Last Leaf") – beauty in the sense that higher than art itself, there is sublimity in the message a human can send.

3.2 Rethinking the Ordinary and the Extraordinary

From the examples that have been considered, there seems to remain a contradiction between what *Lebensform* refers to (a real *and* symbolic background for action and interaction) and the aim of short-story writing: the former emphasizes the primacy of the group, the latter, directly or indirectly, questions the

30 Piaud, "Vie du Langage," 53–71. ["[U]ne seule et même image peut être vivante ou morte, muette ou parlante selon que celui qui l'appréhende est ou non familier de la forme de vie dans laquelle elle s'insère. Comme on le sait, l'expression de "forme de vie" [*Lebensform*] renvoie, chez Wittgenstein, au "donné" d'arrière-plan sur fond duquel nos pratiques linguistiques peuvent se déployer, donné dont le partage est notamment une condition de possibilité de la compréhension mutuelle." (See also Laugier, "Voice as Form of Life and Life Form", 73)

31 Laugier, *"Qu'est-ce que le 'care'?"*.

32 Updike, "Dear Alexandros," in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*, 102–8.

33 Ibid., 151.

34 Ibid., 150.

process of belonging to a group. Now, the two statements do not necessarily stand in opposition to each other: the life form does not imply the initial or continuous belonging; it refers to the context (in the broader sense) one was born and bred in. Note that "born" reminds us of the physical, genetic, and vertical aspects of *life*, the continuation from ancestors to grandchildren in "Sewing Lessons" or "Hadji Murat," the persistence of life and ivy alike, versus pneumonia in "Last leaf," starvation in "Dear Alexandros," and so on.[35] Part of the question derives from how the word "*form*" is understood. In English, for instance, "form" can refer to social conventions ("a form to follow in a ceremony"/"it's bad form to do that"). In French too, the phrase "*forme de vie*" could be misleading due to the analogy with "*style de*" or "*mode de*." The way Wittgenstein uses "form" sounds closer to the secondary meanings of "*forme*" as "format" or even as the "container designed for a particular content," like in technical French.[36] It is then very close to the (Fr.) "*matrice*" (Engl. matrix or cradle).

In the same vein, the qualification of "ordinary," as illustrating a protection from undue theoretical extrapolations, may be misleading; for it may be felt to be tantamount to normal, commonplace, conventional, expected, traditional, etc. Following G. Agamben's method (Cf. G. Agamben, 2013),[37] it might be worthwhile retrieving some of the (historical) sources of the ordinary; in the catholic liturgy, for instance, the distinction is between *l'ordinaire* and *le propre*, the former referring to the year-long, invariant texts, the latter to the varying texts of prayers (*le propre du temps*). Incidentally, it is worth noticing that "epiphany" too is inherited from the vocabulary of religion; in a wider sense, in art history, some painters were referred to as "*peintres ordinaires*": Le Nain, Nicolas Poussin, and Charles Le Brun.[38] This means they were appointed and granted a pension, so their works were not commissioned, though they were far from being commonplace. So is it to be remembered that "ordinary" involves following a certain order of things.

This of course leads us to reconsider the dimension of the ordinary. Another attempt at pushing the limits is found in one of the characteristics of the nineteenth-century story, namely the interest in the extraordinary; it seems the period's double paradox of, first, the quest for the extraordinary and, later, of the obstinate identification of the all-too ordinary is in apparent contradiction with the aesthetics of the ordinary. On the one hand, Mérimée ("Carmen," "Lokis"), Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Edgar Poe, and others[39] were masters at inventing strangeness, monsters, cruel actors, mad men in extreme situations.[40] These features are inherent in the need to propose compensation in form for the thinness of the plot or the inconsistency of the narrative. But what supports it still falls under an aesthetics of the ordinary, i.e. ordinary language aesthetics. As opposed to this, the ordinary details in the story are often used as a way of hiding or delaying a critical situation, a climax that would turn it into a drama but just leads to nothing. Such are Chekhov's "stories about nothing" (Virginia Woolf), or "*Mots*" (*Words*) by Annie Saumont, in which a husband dares not tell his wife he has never been in love with her, but when he feels able to tell her, she has simply gone deaf. Woolf herself has written "The String Quartet," initially aiming at rendering a chamber music evening in London, but the whole text is about the many ways people have to avoid listening to music, to one another, to their pains and desires. Beauty then becomes an ideal that is soon left aside in favour of immediate egotistic satisfactions. So whatever the oratory precautions, qualifying narrative elements as ordinary and extraordinary in the usual sense of the adjectives may be difficult to associate with ordinary in the Wittgensteinian sense (ordinary language ethics/aesthetics).

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35 'Here, Cavell's critique in *This New Yet Unapproachable America* of usual interpretations of "forms of life" through the formula "forms of life" (not simply forms of life), the form of life not only in its social dimension but also in its biological dimension. Cavell insists on this vertical aspect of form of life, while recognizing the importance of the horizontal social agreement. (Laugier, "Voice as Form of Life and Life Form," 73.

36 In nautical terms, "*Forme de radoub*" is a "dry dock"; cf. "*plate-forme*/platform." In civil engineering, it is a thick layer of sand on which the pavement of bridges, roads, etc., is established.

37 Agamben. *The Highest Poverty. Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*.

38 Mathieu Le Nain was "peintre ordinaire de la Ville de Paris" », Louis Le Nain, Nicolas Poussin, Charles Le Brun were appointed "peintres ordinaires de Sa Majesté" (Louis XIII or Louis XIV).

39 Including Maupassant in "Le Horla," unexpectedly a horror story among his usually realistic texts.

40 As from 1856, Edgar Poe's shorter fiction became in French *Histoires extraordinaires* and *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires*.

3.3 Questions About Ordinary Aesthetics and the Ethical Unsaid

As a result of the indiscrimination of ethics and aesthetics, the risk of reversing the standpoints is quite likely. If one considers the sculpture entitled *Supermarket Shopper*, by Duane Hanson (1970), it is clear that what belongs to the field of ethics is not the represented subject; it is rather the painter himself, in his desire to make the audience more aware of the failings of the consumer society. And in short stories, the silence can sometimes be indicative of ethics more than the words uttered. Another view (expressed from the author's standpoint) of the art of short-story writing, of where the ethical dimension lies, is perfectly summarized by B. Malamud, asserting that the creative intention is, "to say everything that must be said and to say it quickly, fleetingly, as though two people had met in a restaurant or a railroad station, and one only had time to tell the other **they're both human**, and here, this story proves it."[41] In Malamud's concept of short-story writing, the author's goal is to tell, and share, the Self's and the Other's part of humanity. This may well be the purpose of any form of literature, with the slight difference that Malamud has introduced a paradoxical couple of terms, "everything" and "fleetingly," which makes the remark specific to the art of the short story. Precisely in this context, the writer's quest involves particular attention to the complexity of interactions, a point which Malamud emphasized in his introductory essay to his collection of stories, "the drama is tense, happens fast and is more often than not **outlandish**. In a few pages a good story provides the **complexity of life** while producing the surprise and effect of knowledge […]."[42]

This entails another question: How far can this or that language be said to be "ordinary"? In Edgar Poe's *The Tell-tale Heart* (1843), an unnamed narrator does his utmost to convince readers of his own sanity while relating a murder he committed; the story is based on the progress of guilt in a murderer's mind, and particularly the so-called "illusion of transparency," i.e. the tendency to overestimate the degree to which one's personal mental state is known by others, and conversely the tendency to overestimate how well one understands others' mental states. Malamud would certainly find this a testimony to complexity, but for "the common reader" the qualification as "ordinary" is doubtful.

In other words, does the fact that the philosopher's vocabulary serving to describe a given behaviour (or work) is not the usual ethical (/aesthetic) lexicon necessarily imply that one is in the realm of ordinary language ethics (/aesthetics)? We have already recalled the tendency to identify *l'ordinaire* with the invariant, as opposed to *le propre*; in that sense, the ordinary cannot equate the local, the contextualized: the philosopher's theme is baffled by his/her object. Just to quote one example reflecting this line of thought, Malamud, in the same text, touches upon the dialectics of brevity and the need to say much, "[…] a wonderful tension in letting few words say much … at the same time achieving quickly what Edgar Poe described as 'the immense force derivable from totality'." Complexity, transparency, the One and the Many – alternative wordings for the ordinary trapped in totality (*l'ordinaire pris au piège de la totalité*).

It is to be noted that in less than three lines, Malamud has used "say" and "tell" four times, leaving out, it seems, the fact that besides saying there is so much unsaid, in short stories, where endless developments are precluded, more than in other forms of fiction. Every reader has experienced it to such an extent that it may be the most common characteristic of shorter forms (think of the tales of our childhood). Doesn't Wittgenstein himself refer to the latent, the inexpressible, the ineffable? So what does the ethical unsaid consist in? Whether the writer wants it or not, there always remains something unexpressed, even after the moral decision, the verdict is made. This unchartered island may, on the reader's side, take the form of a question, a problem, a rejection, a misunderstanding, a need to know more, a thwarted desire to go further, and an obsession with reconciling opposed viewpoints. It is a state of things the writer is not responsible for. What could pass for an answer is necessarily "unvoiced" since the text is closed. Now in what way can this "unsaid" be qualified as ethical and not merely cognitive? If preclosure is one in substance with storyness,[43] then actual closure cannot enclose ethics, and the remaining unsaid is bound to be ethical.

41 Hicks, *Conversations*, 12.

42 Malamud, "Introduction," *Stories*, III.

43 Lohafer, *Reading for Storyness*, 18.

4 Conclusion

Both diachronically and synchronically, short-story writing perfectly fits the phrase "an art of ordinary aesthetics." Whether it be due to its features (brevity, condensed space and time, epiphany, totality etc.) or to the writers' skill, it has proved able to deliver a moral teaching of diverse sorts, all the while contributing to questioning the boundaries of ethics and aesthetics, especially in paying considerable attention to the reader's freedom. Wittgenstein, as we have shown, has made constant reference to short stories, perhaps more than he has done to the *art* of short-story writing. Yet in one way or another, choosing an aesthetic-ethical approach to understand the "art of story-telling" necessarily implies questioning the boundaries of ethics and aesthetics, if any.

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