

A Short Note on Micronarrative: Much More than Short Stories

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There is no simple or single answer to the question: what is micronarrative? Any attempt to define the term generates a wide range of related questions, which are anything but secondary. As a starter, technically speaking, one should stress that there exist two main types of micronarrative. The first can be described in terms of *shortness* and *concision*. A micronarrative is then the brief or abridged version, at the level of text or discourse, of what we call a story. The concept of the minimal story remains a contested one (see Bédrane, Revaz and Viegnes), but we will stick here to the very general idea that a story has a beginning, a middle and an end, and that the trajectory leading from beginning to end should not be trivial. Typical examples of micronarratives are Caesar's classic dictum "veni, vici, vici," which autobiographically summarizes his military and political career as Emperor of Rome, or the famous six-word narrative—"For sale: baby shoes, never worn"—that has been attributed to Hemingway.

The second type of micronarrative is of a totally different nature. It is not defined in terms of abridgment only, although this also plays a role, but in terms of *incompleteness* or *fragmentariness*. It is the abridged version of a story where something is lacking—either one of the basic units: beginning, middle, end, or, more radically, the relationship between them. An example of a missing beginning is the well-known short story "The Dinosaur" (1959) by the Guatemalan author Augusto Monterroso: "When he woke up, the dinosaur was still there." As examples of a missing ending, one might quote all the unsolved riddle stories, such as for instance the enigma of the sphinx—as long as Oedipus ignores the answer, of course. Meanwhile, the cultural historian Daniel Arasse has discussed stories with a clear beginning and ending but no middle in his book *The Guillotine and the Terror* (1991). According to Arasse, beheadings accomplished with the guillotine went so fast that all witnesses (and there were many, given the educational role of the guillotine executions in the building of the nation) agreed on the fact that "nothing" happened between the beginning (the living body) and the end (the dead body). This existential mystery provoked, in turn, many stories about the narratively fertile "middle" that no one was capable of observing in unambiguous ways.

Useful as they may be, these basic definitions—which purposefully ignore questions of genre: short story, reader's digest, flash fiction, etc.—do not tell us

very much about the real stakes of micronarrative, which have less to do with *what* micronarrative is than with the question *why* one is actually writing or reading it. Here as well, two different perspectives can be distinguished: a stylistic or *rhetorical* one and a *theoretical* one, though the theoretical perspective itself has considerable practical consequences.

First of all, one should stress the *paradoxical nature of shortness* in storytelling. For one thing, short in this context does not mean simple or poor or elementary; hence the great connoisseur of classic rhetoric, Giorgio Manganelli, coined for one of his short story collections the oxymoronic term of “small roman-fleuve” (literally: “small river-novels”, see Manganelli 2007).¹ But also and more importantly, the concepts of short and long prove shift from being opposed to being analogous as soon as the focus shifts from technique to effect, as brilliantly demonstrated in Judith Schlanger's recent study of saying or telling “too much” or “too little”. Suggesting the impossibility of drawing a sharp line between “enough” and “not enough,” Schlanger argues that the greatest ellipsis is often the best way to suggest “everything” (unless of course one goes too far and ends up with a story that is so opaque that it is no longer capable of catching the attention of the reader), while the most exhaustive and detailed way of writing can rapidly turn meaningless (unless one succeeds in using it in such a way that it becomes fascinating once again). Short and long, in other words, are never literary values in themselves. It is its effect on the reader that should guide the author in deciding whether a given account provide too much and not enough detail. Yet one should never forget that not all effects can be programmed, and that readers’ tastes shift, individually as well as culturally and historically. As discussed in *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway’s “iceberg theory” or theory of omission is a good summary of why certain authors and readers prefer short to long and what risks are at stake in choosing less over more:

If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. (Hemingway 169)

Hence it is important to acknowledge that debates on micronarrative touch upon fundamental rhetorical and literary issues such as, for instance, the notion of *digression* (Bayard) and the relationships between constituent versus

supplementary events (Abbott 20).² At issue, too, is the notion of *boredom*, rightly emphasized by Schlanger as the hidden continent of most theories of reading--though the concept has been discussed in recent studies by Lehtimäki, Karttunen and Mäkelä and, even more explicitly, Schneider.

In addition to questions about the rhetorical impact of short versus long, micronarrative raises also theoretical questions about narrative itself, more specifically about the relationship between micronarrative in particular and narrative in general. All studies of micronarrative have an implicit or explicit comparative dimension, trying to see whether micronarrative is just narrative on a smaller scale or really another way of storytelling. Often the distinction is purely a matter of efficiency or elegance. Why bother the reader with lengthy novels, Borges famously asked, if one can tell the same story in five pages? In the introduction to his first published volume of fiction, *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941) he wrote:

It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books, setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them. (Borges 67)

In this case, the theoretical debate on the difference between narrative and micronarrative coincides with the stylistic and rhetorical issues already mentioned. But sometimes other issues are at stake, and here we come closer to the aims and ambitions of experimental fiction, including experimental graphic novels. In an essay called "Brefs" (*Short forms*, a chapter of his eponymous collection of essays), French writer and critic Pierre Alféri strongly criticizes certain forms of micronarrative that merely repeat, although with fewer words, the strands and structures of traditional narratives. His main target is flash fiction, which he accuses of being a reactionary return of worn-out formulas that tend to emphasize the punch line--that is, as a linear plot structure aiming at a final wow effect. From this point of view flash fiction, as caricatured by Alféri, could be approached as a kind of lower middle-brow version of Hemingway's iceberg method of composition. By contrast, Alféri praises micronarratives that fundamentally disrupt what we think the basic structure of a story, namely the meaningful connection between a beginning, a middle and an end. His favorite example is the genre launched in 1906 in the French newspaper *Le Matin* by a maverick critic, Félix Fénéon: the *novel in three lines*, a kind of literary rewriting of true stories of murder, mayhem and everyday life (Fénéon; see Barnes for a good

presentation of the form for English readers). What makes these micronarratives so special, Alféri claims, is neither their shortness nor their humor, but rather the way they make it impossible to process the stories they project in traditionally narrative terms. One feels all the material for a story is there and that nothing is withheld, yet at the same time one does not know how to handle it—an effect that Alféri convincingly links to the anarchist convictions of Fénéon. For Alféri, the novels in three lines are the literary equivalent of the anarchist bombings of the turn of the century, whose social and political effects were highly praised by many avant-garde and left-wing authors.

Accentuating the gap between traditional narratives, on the one hand, and certain forms of micronarrative, on the other hand, is just one approach to the comparison, though. It is important to move beyond clear-cut opposition between the two categories, narrative and micronarrative, such that a story belongs in one or the other domain. In practice, the two categories are frequently combined—a micronarrative can be part of an "average" narrative, and a string of micronarrative snippets can constitute a larger-scale narrative—and it is as easy as well to imagine that there are cases in which the very distinction between narrative and micronarrative is shattered or deconstructed.

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¹ The French term of *roman-fleuve* refers to an extended sequence of novels that, as a whole, acts as a commentary on a society or an epoch. Unfortunately the English translation has not kept this nuance.

² Debates about short versus long stories also bear relevantly on discussions of action versus description and the sequencing of strong and weak moments in narrative--and vice versa.