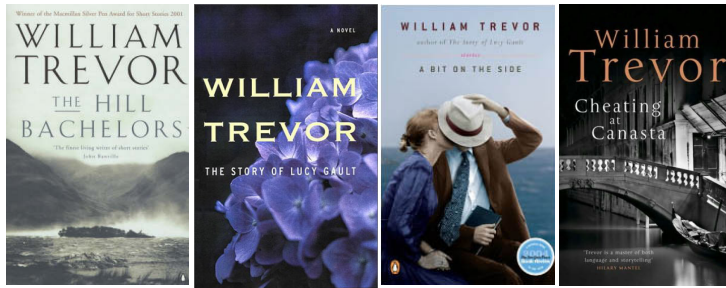


William Trevor's Late Short Stories



Rüdiger Imhof

William Trevor has, since publishing his first novel, *The Old Boys*, in 1964, occupied a commanding position in contemporary Irish fiction, proving himself masterfully at home in both the full-length form and the short story. With thirteen novels, many of which are of the first water, three novellas, and eleven collections of stories (his *The Collected Stories* of 1992 comprises 1261 pages) to his name, Trevor can look back on an *œuvre* that scarcely any other Irish fiction writer of his generation, let alone of a younger one, can equal. Furthermore, it is an *œuvre* that has reaped a deluge of literary prizes. Of course, only fools go by numbers; a writer may publish merely four books, say, that exceed in quality and long-term significance the two dozen works another author has produced. In Trevor's case, it is appropriate to take into account that his fiction output has been outstanding throughout: he has gone on from strength to strength.

Increasingly during his career as a writer he has focused his thematic interest, in the greater part of his novels and quite a few of his stories, on the exploration of evil. What possibly fascinates most is the light-hearted manner in which he goes about that business, effecting an almost inimitable blending of the hilarious with the poignant, of farce with tragedy. This blending clearly works towards a mutual intensification of the comical and the dreadful. A particular event becomes the more heart-rending for forming the climax of a series of laughter-inducing incidents in which a number of exceedingly eccentric characters are involved: so eccentric, in fact, that their oddity is little short of being Dickensian. Thus, for instance, *The Silence in the Garden* (1988) uncompromisingly engages with aspects of violence and division that are seen to characterise Ireland's troubled history, and yet the narrative contains one of the funniest scenes in Irish fiction of the last fifty years or so, featuring a woman who arrives well-oiled with a few glasses of whiskey at a wedding-party, in the course of which she nudges the elbow of the Bishop of Killaloe with her own, saying: "Errah, go on with you!". She then starts conveying jumbled facts of local history to the Bishop, most of which escape him:

She wondered if the man was affected in the brain. She watched him eating his fish, the fork going up and down, the single face becoming two and then one of the faces sliding away altogether. It was Dowley who killed the butler, she explained in case the man was ignorant.¹

Those oddballs and crackpots have vanished from Trevor's world, and some of his readers may deplore their disappearance. From *The Hill Bachelors* and the superb *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002) onwards, he has ceased to leaven his narratives with humorous or even hilarious features. Particularly in his last three collections of stories – *The Hill Bachelors*, *A Bit on the Side* (2004) and now *Cheating at Canasta* – he has focused his attention on small-scale lives, trapped existences, broken dreams, missed opportunities and memories of things that never occurred, done in a style that is quite unique: impressively unspectacular, yet utterly arresting, relying on the exact phrase and nothing but the exact phrase, honed to perfection – a style that leaves the reader in silent awe.

In *A Bit on the Side*² there is a story, "Sitting With the Dead", in which a widow, on the day of her husband's death after twenty-three years of marriage, receives a visit from two Legion of Mary women, although the dead man had been without religion. They have come to lend succour. However, in the course of the conversation, the widow is inadvertently made to come clean about things she has never admitted even to herself and should certainly have kept from complete strangers. There is no grief in the house, she says, because all her married life she had to bear the power of her husband's anger, the husband having, in his commitment to horse-racing, been an utter failure. He married her for her money, and she accepted him since, until he made a bit for her, she had, as a Protestant girl, got passed by. "Traditions" deals with a variety of traditions in a boarding school, including a maid who "had in her girlhood been, herself, a fragment of tradition, supplying to boys who now were men a service that had entered the unofficial annals" (34). Even today, she admires one particular boy, who in turn finds her attractive and who, in his imagination, sees "her stockinged feet and laughter in her eyes, and then her nakedness" (38). In "An Evening Out", a woman and a man, brought together by the Bryanston Square Introduction Bureau, meet in the bar of a theatre. She is naggingly aware of the falsity inherent in the situation, and as thought to bear out the truth of her insight, it soon becomes obvious that the man is only looking for a car-owner who would transport him and his photographic equipment from one area of London to another. In the end, he tells her about the photographs that he is ashamed of because she herself doesn't matter, and she realises that without resentment. When they part, there is modest surprise: "that they had made use of one another was a dignity compared with what should have been" (83).

In "Graillis's Legacy", the eponymous character hands back the legacy he has received from a deceased woman whom, as a married man, he had befriended because of a mutual interest in books. Nothing indecent ever took place between them, still

Graillis finds himself caught in this predicament: “the wronged wife haunting restlessly from her grave, the other woman claiming from hers the lover who had slipped away from her” (92). “Solitude” has a fifty-three-year-old woman recount how as a seven-year-old girl she had paid undiscovered witness to her mother’s making love with her lover and how afterwards she was instrumental in making him fall to his death down the stairwell. That event led to her parents’ leaving Ireland with her and living in different hotels all over Europe. She now lives in Bordighera, Italy, where her parents first met. The dining-room waiters, and the porters in the hall, and the bedroom maids are her only friends, and the waking hours of her solitude are nagged by the compulsion to make known the goodness of two people. But no one wants to listen to her story, because “the truth, even when it glorifies the human spirit, is hard to peddle if there is something terrible to tell as well” (120). Eventually, though, she acquaints an Englishman who is willing to lend an ear, telling her: “Theirs was the guilt [...] His that he did not know her well enough, hers that she made the most of his not knowing.” (126).

“Sacred Statues” shows a married couple in dire financial difficulties, brought about not least by a Mrs Falloway’s persuading the husband to give up his job in a joinery and carve sacred statues. Mrs Falloway, who had believed in the husband and had understood his problems, had lent the couple the money for their house and garden. When he now turns to her another time for help, he is forced to discover that she herself has little funds left. Since the wife is pregnant again, she hits upon the plan to sell the child to a childless couple, reasoning: “it surely was not too terrible a sin, too redolent of insidious presumption, that people should impose an order of their own on what they were given?” (150). She is overcome by a raging anger when the other woman shies away from the offer, and it is only in her husband’s shed, while she is looking at the saints who have become her friends, that her anger gradually abates and she comes to realise: “The world, not she, had failed” (152). In “Rose Wept”, Rose, being a borderline case in all her chosen subjects, goes to Mr Bouverie for private tuition. She soon learns that, while her husband is teaching downstairs, Mrs Bouverie is entertaining her lover upstairs, an activity in which she also engages when Mr Bouverie has gone to have dinner in other people’s houses. While he is spending the evening with her parents and herself, Rose weeps: “She wept for his silent suffering, for his having to accept a distressing invitation because of her mother’s innocent insistence. She wept for the last golden opportunity the occasion provided for two other people, for the woman whose sinning caused her in the end to turn her face to the wall, for the man whom duty bound to a wife” (167).

“Big Bucks” charts the deterioration of a love relationship, when the man goes to the US to make the big bucks everyone has kept telling him about. Letters between the couple become more and more infrequent, until she eventually comes to believe “that she [is] less alone than if she were with John Michael now” (191). In “On the Streets”, Cheryl is suddenly accosted by her divorced husband, a man who since childhood has followed people on the streets, to find out where they live, to make a note of the address and add a few details that will remind him of the person. Furthermore,

since childhood he has stolen. In the end, it becomes obvious that he has shortly before killed a woman, a dribble of whose blood has got onto a sleeve of his jacket, the kind of thing, he points out, “that [is] discernible beneath a microscope, easy to overlook” (210), which is why he wants to wash the jacket in a launderette. Cheryl envisages him going about his business: “Her tears, tonight, allowed him peace” (212). “The Dancing Master’s Music” has a scullery maid in a big house for once in her life, together with the other servants, listen to the supreme music of an Italian dance master. Afterwards the spread of deterioration comes over the place, the house going quiet in its distress, the family getting broken; but the dancing-master’s music does not cease. “She knew it would be there when she was gone, the marvel in her life a ghost for the place” (227). “In a Bit on the Side”, a man, mid-forties, has an extra-marital affair with a thirty-nine-year-old woman, the relationship having begun as an office romance. These days they always meet in the same places during the day. She suddenly realises that their relationship is based on lies, lies of silence. She has had a divorce and imagines him feeling trapped by the divorce, sensing that she is no more than “his bit on the side”, despite his saying that he cannot do without her. At the end of the day during which the reader accompanies them, they draw apart and walk away from one another, “unaware that the future [is] less bleak than now it [seems], that in it there still [will] be the delicacy of their reticence, and they themselves as love had made them for a while” (245).

The recent collection *Cheating at Canasta* pursues comparable thematic interests. In “The Dressmaker’s Child”, Cahal, a young man working in his father’s garage in the west of Ireland, drives two Spanish tourists to see a miraculous statue that every local person knows isn’t what it is said to be. Fifty euros are his incentive. On the way back, the car collides with the dressmaker’s child, who is in the habit of running out at cars. Several days later, the girl is found dead in an exhausted quarry, having been carried there by her mother, who witnessed the accident and recognised Cahal. After being told about it by the dressmaker, he knows that he will be enslaved to her. “The Room” has a forty-seven-year-old woman enter upon an extra-marital affair to punish her husband, who nine years before had a sleazy relationship with a classy prostitute, who one day was found murdered. The husband was accused of the deed. Whether rightly or wrongly so and why he betrayed his wife was never found out by them, above all because “[t]here’d been no asking [...]” (40), “[...] there had [always] been silence in their ordinary exchanges” (41). In “Men of Ireland”, a down-and-out who twenty-three years ago went to England comes back to Gleban to blackmail a priest with a fabricated story of sexual harassment. In the end, the priest reasons: “Guiltless, he was guilty [...]. He might have managed to say something decent to a Gleban man who was down and out in case it would bring consolation to that man [...]. Instead he had been fearful, diminished by the sins that so deeply stained his cloth, distrustful of his people” (58f.).

“Cheating at Canasta” tells of a widower who has come to Venice because he promised his wife to do so before she died. While having dinner in a restaurant, he wonders whether his trip does not represent an act of sheer foolishness, for, after all,

“how could it matter if a whim [...] was put aside, as the playing cards that fell from her hands were?” (63). Then he overhears a couple fighting at a nearby table, and that experience brings about a complete change in him: “His manner had dismissed the scratchiness he’d eavesdropped on as the unseemly stuff of marriage. It was more difficult to dismiss his own silly aberration, and shame still nagged” (71).

“Bravado” deals with the show-off violence of Dublin youths and the enduring guilt of the girl who watched them kick someone to death. “An Afternoon” features an unloved fourteen-year-old girl being groomed for abuse by a man she “meets” in an internet chat-room. He is on probation for having, to all intents and purposes, molested another girl. This story, in particular, ties up with previous Trevor studies in human evil and depravation, such as *Felicita’s Journey* with the sinister Mr Hilditch. The Catholic gentry family in “At Olivehill” has the two sons, after their father’s death, tear apart the ancient landscape for a golf-course, which hard-headed decision sends the mother into a form of self-enforced internal exile that Trevor parallels with the lives lived by previous generations in the era of the Penal Laws.

In “A Perfect Relationship”, a couple briefly separate because they had not realised that a relationship means losing a little of oneself and requires communicating with another: “Prosper didn’t say much and nothing at all of what he might have, not wanting to, although he knew he must” (148). “The Children” has a daughter, after her mother’s untimely death, prevent her father from marrying again since her “honouring of a memory was love that mattered also, even mattered more” (172). “Old Flame” treats of a wife observing her husband’s long-treasured infidelity of the spirit. In the end she realises: “The old flame bore him now, with her scent and cigarettes and her cellophane butterflies [...] One day, on her own, she’ll guess her friend was false. One day she’ll guess a sense of honour kept pretence alive” (190). “Faith” has a Protestant clergyman, despite feeling a stirring in his vocation, hold on to his belief because of the intensity of his sister’s faith in the face of her exceptional suffering. “Folie à Deux”, finally, is about two men, friends when young and one of them presumed dead, who accidentally encounter one another in Paris, whither the one believed to be no more has fled. They are connected by an act of cruelty committed when they were children. The encounter causes a radical modification in self-esteem: “and yet this morning he likes himself less than he likes his friend” (232).

There is a touch of the Wordsworthian about these late stories of William Trevor. In the “Preface” of *Lyrical Ballads* (2nd edition), Wordsworth laid down that poetry, or rather his kind of poetry as distinct from that of his collaborator, Coleridge, should concentrate on the mundane, ordinary things in life, which tenet at first glance may read like a recommendation for sending coals to Newcastle. For why on earth should a poet of Wordsworth’s ilk write about something that everyone is thoroughly familiar with? But, then, Wordsworth asks of the poet to present those thoroughly familiar things in a new light, so as to make them yield fresh qualities, or aspects, hitherto undiscerned. One may be put in mind here of the Joycean concept of epiphany or of what, roughly at

about the same time that Joyce was developing his ideas, the Russian Formalists called the act of defamiliarisation and regarded as the essential function of all worthwhile literature. Interestingly, John Banville, in *Eclipse*, seems to be referring to this phenomenon when he has his main character discuss the process of “making strange”.³ Both defamiliarisation and ‘making strange’ aim at rendering objects, say, as if we were encountering them for the very first time and through this manner of representation freeing us from automatic or habitual perception, which enables us merely to recognise what we think we know and not to take in the things for what they essentially are. Trevor would appear to be pursuing the same goal, and the things he makes us see, not least the aberrations of the human heart, are surely astounding.

Notes

- 1 William Trevor, *The Silence in the Garden*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, repr. 1989. 151ff.
- 2 William Trevor, *A Bit on the Side*. London et al.: Viking, 2004.
- 3 John Banville, *Eclipse*. London: Picador, 2000: 46.