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"All Stories Overlap": Reading Keith Ridgway's Short Fiction

John McCourt

"I weigh characters in my hand like I am buying
fruit"

Hawthorn & Child (151)

- 1 In 1987, still a student at University College Dublin, I wrote a play entitled *Called Apart* which was performed by UCD Dramsoc and directed by Keith Ridgway. Having read a revised draft of my script, we met for coffee in the university restaurant. Ridgway's comments were short and to the point and can, twenty-five years later, be summarized as follows: *Do you really need all this material? What are you trying to say here? What is essential?* Not exactly thrilled, I went home and took out the scissors. The play went off well, but Keith was the one who went on to become a widely acclaimed writer. His time at UCD was an apprenticeship in which he did his best to avoid the obvious and not always exciting demands of a UCD Arts degree and prepared the ground for what would become his own highly successful creative trail. Throughout his distinguished writing career the strikingly underestimated Ridgway has applied a singular discipline to his own work, always avoiding the predictable and striving to write what is necessary and essential while at the same time lurking very naturally in an experimental space which allows him to work freely in at least three genres: the short story (especially in his 2001 *Standard Times* collection), the novella (for example his 1997 *Horses*), and the novel, with *The Long Falling* (1998) (winner of both the Prix Femina Étranger and the Premier Roman Étranger), *The Parts* (2003), *Animals* (2006), and *Hawthorn & Child* (2012). But the short story, a form that functions through reduction, distillation, a focus on the essential, is in a way the core component of Ridgway's aesthetic armory sometimes standing alone, sometimes a vital component of a larger fictional structure which resists the neat classification of "novel."
- 2 As has often been stated, the short-story has always been seen as somewhat liminal genre, although it could be argued that this is less the case in the Irish tradition in which quite a number of short stories occupy a position of cultural centrality rivaling that of the novel. One thinks of seminal stories such as Joyce's "The Dead," Frank O'Connor's "The

First Confession" and "Guests of the Nation," as well as Seán Ó Faoláin's "The Trout," to name but a few. The short-story is perhaps better suited to the fragmented nature of Irish history and of contemporary Ireland, to a history that seems distinguished by dead-ends and wrong turns more than by a powerful drive towards a successful conclusion, not to mention a happy ending. Perhaps for this reason the Irish short story is an appropriate genre especially given its focus on vital moments in individual lives.

- 3 Elizabeth Bowen writes that "the first necessity for the short story, at the set out, is *necessariness*" (260), that is, she implies, that it is a story that needs to be written rather than one that is written because the writer needs to come up with a story. Ridgway's deeply original stories are saturated with this quality of *necessariness*. But what is essential for Ridgway might not immediately appear so for other writers or readers. In his dark, grim, and sometimes hilarious novel, *Animals*, a multi-voiced homage to Dublin, the *incipit*—an 18-page internal debate about whether or not to poke a dead mouse—would not be everyone's idea of the strictly necessary. But the rodent is not the point. It happens to be the focus of the protagonist's somewhat anguished reflections, his dangerously precarious take on reality. As Bowen tells us, the "necessary subject dictates its own value" (260), and in this case the subject is not the mouse but the sole narrator-illustrator's perception of himself, the world, and his relationship with the world. Thus the story fulfils what Bowen suggests is the short story's role (as against that of the novel), that is, to place a protagonist on that "stage which, inwardly, every man is conscious of occupying alone" (260). If this is a common gene in the short story, for Ridgway it is also true with regard to the novel. He is not content to limit studies of the isolated individual to the short story but to show that the precariousness of individual experience in which things risk spiraling out of control in an instant can also be an essential component of longer fictional forms.
- 4 All of Ridgway's works share a common relative disinterest in external events and are less concerned with action, plot, and forward movement (although a dark, violent, everyday is ever present) than they are with a focus on individual thought processes, personal stasis, alienation, and, at times, collapse. As he put it, in an *Irish Times* interview: "Most of the things I write tend to be character driven" (Hegarty). Ridgway's focus is far less on outer events than on the functioning and malfunctioning of the mind and with the mind's way of perceiving the world. *Animals* started life as a story called "The Mouse in the Body" which was posted on the Liffey Project website (Ridgway is something of a pioneer among his Irish peers in seeking to make creative publishing use of internet publishing). The fact that the novel grew out of what was initially a short story that remains of interest in its own right and not simply as a (slightly altered) part of a larger whole, signals to the reader Ridgway's interest in both genres. There is no sense of a hierarchy between the two forms. For him there is no doubt that a short story that later becomes part of a larger narrative structure retains a separate value on its own, original terms.
- 5 Long before Ridgway began to mix genres, his 2001 collection, *Standard Time*, which won the Rooney Prize for Irish literature, provided ample evidence of his mastery of the "pure" or autonomous short story—as against the short story that later is connected to a novel by either preceding it, appearing as part of it, or appearing after it. And yet the collection contains stories that are carefully and, at times, profoundly interconnected and is far more than an aggregate of individual pieces. It is a book about relationships between couples, gay and straight, between individuals and their cities, within families. But it is also a book which focuses on how individuals interact in their communities and

struggle (sometimes failing) to maintain an outer mask of normality to cover an inner world of turmoil. Lurking behind every protagonist's everyday mask are doubts and insecurities, dark shadows, discomfort, disturbance, an inability to continue to play a role even if that role is what defines them for others and gives their lives an outward sense. Furthermore, the characters in Ridgway's short stories do not correspond to Frank O'Connor's description of a "submerged population group" (18), or the socially marginal. The dilemmas depicted in the stories are made all the more pressing by the fact that the protagonists are not, as O'Connor put it, "outlawed figures wandering about on the fringes of society" from a "submerged population" (41), but represent people drawn from a variety of mainstream social groups, ages, backgrounds and classes. They are on-page incarnations of the "normal" people one encounters daily on the Dublin street: the Belvedere College schoolboy, the golf-playing, mass-going suburban father, the still-youngish returning Irish emigrant, the retired gay writer, the menopausal department store saleswoman.

- 6 Writing about Dublin and Dubliners is of course to court or to risk comparison with illustrious predecessors, but this is not an issue for Ridgway, who sees Dublin on his own terms (he has lived abroad most of his adult life). The issue will not be to do justice to Dublin, but to see it as a rich and complex backdrop which can just as easily be negative as positive. The polished stories of the collection very deliberately play with views of the city. The first-person narrator of the opening story, "The First Five Pages" (it actually runs to nine), is an exile returning to visit Dublin with his foreign partner. The city has a somewhat unreal sheen especially when first seen through his eyes from the airplane approaching Dublin airport. As described from the sky by the narrator, it could be any modern city:

We descended over housing estates and motorways that I had never seen before. We skimmed the tops of call centres and warehouses, distribution networks and technology parks, software development clusters and the green belts tightened by a future that I had missed. (ST 1-2)

- 7 For the narrator of the opening story, the conclusion about Dublin will be preemptory (and with serious meta-textual consequences implying the author's own connection with the city at the time of writing):

I have deserted Dublin. Dublin has failed me. It has failed to act, failed to facilitate me. It has simply carried on, as if I had never been away, as if I had never come back, not seeming to realise that it was the major player in my plot. It has been such a disappointment'. (ST 8)

- 8 This negative vision of the city will be reversed in subsequent works including *The Parts*, which has been described as a "great Dublin novel," one that leaves "a long, dark and compelling shadow" for future generations of writers of the city (Battersby). The Dublin of this novel is a variegated city containing multiple distinct realities, some of which Ridgway enjoys listing: "Working Dublin, queer Dublin, junkie Dublin, media Dublin, party Dublin, executive Dublin, homeless Dublin, suburban Dublin, teenage Dublin, gangland Dublin, Dublin with the flags out, mother Dublin, culchie Dublin, Muslim Dublin..." (TP 41).

- 9 In "The Ravages," the city is again initially sketched in a neutral way: it could be anywhere and yet it is a place, a canvass almost, that Cathal, the protagonist, covers and makes his own with his dawn drives: "He drove to the north of the city and turned then and drove south to the southernmost point of the city and drove northwest then to the western reaches and turned once more and drove east to the sea and the sun appearing."

All this at dawn so that he can claim to himself: "And that was the city blessed" (ST 119). Cathal's quiet satisfaction and the false calm of this description will soon be ruptured. There is zero nostalgia in the collection's many depictions of Celtic Tiger Dublin and there is precious little looking back in any of Ridgway's works which are relentlessly written to the moment, and which, on the rare occasions they are set in the past, are inevitably narrated in a way that stresses their immediacy. In a 2012 interview, Ridgway stated his desire to be contemporary, saying simply: "I want to write about what surrounds me" (Breathnach).

- 10 In "The First Five Pages," it is clear that the narrator left before the economic boom took root but little is said about this. Travelling to this "city on the edge of Europe, on the edge of the world, a city from the back of our minds" allows the narrator to see himself in its mirror "to see how I had changed" (ST 1). The focus is not on the past but on how things are now. The collection enjoys playing with time, personal and communal, which is anything but "standard." However it also plays with space and the narrator's trip to Dublin is also about getting a different sense of his partner by taking him to his home place for the first time "to see what you really looked like, sounded like, to find out how wrong I'd been" (ST 1). The homecoming becomes the occasion for the narrator to abandon his partner and he makes his intent clear early on, when wishing he could abandon him in the airport arrivals hall. The sense of dislocation is constant as the taxi takes them "on a road which I didn't recognise, past homes and businesses which I didn't fully see" (ST 3). All is "familiar, somehow, but altered as if by special effect, which is I suppose, what time may be" (ST 3). Shortly after they have arrived in their hotel, the narrator wonders about the five years he has spent with his lover and tots up the balance with an alarming lack of emotion:

I realised that we were five years into it. Five years. Into it. Which is too long for a seaside romance with a man you hardly understand. And I entered the counting room—located somewhere between the heart and the stomach—that dour, fearful little place where the books are kept, where the tallies are made and the sums done and the imbalances are justified, and where the present is divided by the past to give the future. And other formulae follow. And there I tried to make sense of you and couldn't. I pored over the ledgers and the receipts and I tried to make us solvent. And all I found was an accumulation of debts and promises and failures and dodgy practices, and I came to the conclusion that we had been simply an accounting sleight of hand, a convenient, unexplained statistic, a false item, a fraud. (ST 4-5)

- 11 Having come to this hasty if clever summation, he simply walks out: his arrival home becomes the occasion of his definitive departure from his lover. But it is a departure he will later come to regret. Once again alone, he finds he is not able to move on and his conclusions can be read as the text's own commentary on itself and as Ridgway's signaling of his own literary method:

Put one story behind you and start another. That is the theory. But I find that what should be new is polluted by what should be old. That there are no endings, that all stories overlap, and that all you can do is decide where to begin. When to begin. I don't know where you are and that is the start of it. (ST 9)

- 12 The reader is left shocked and will be shocked again by the surprising turns each of the subsequent stories in the collection takes. Another of the very best stories, entitled "Headwound" is told from the point of view of a seemingly devoted father who is also a betrayed husband. The reader is lured into sympathy with his account of his own and his family's life and their problems. It begins crisply and in a matter-of-fact tone which

implies that the man is a bastion of common sense, devoted to his five-year-old boy and supposedly keeping the family show on the road (including the "very wretched terrier, Ninny," one of a vast cast of often disturbing animals that populate Ridgway's fiction), despite the misdoings of his cheating wife:

I took my son to the park while my wife, who is not good with children, went to see her lover in my German car. It is not a particularly new car, but it is very solid, handles very well, and is good for maybe another couple of years. But I don't like my wife driving it. She is not a bad driver, but she is not smooth, does not conduct herself very confidently, is all fits and starts, jerks and tics. (ST 155)

- 13 Gradually, the reader begins to realize he/she has been taken in and to have doubts about the reliability of the narrator and indeed about his/her own capacity to know and judge. In the intimate prose narration, the reader is lured by the narrator's conversational asides: "You can imagine my surprise" (ST 164), "Anyway, I digress" (ST 169), and at least initially has sympathy for him as he walks his child and dog and has to tolerate the interest of an interfering neighbor and his French wife. Doubts are sown early, however, and it is difficult not to notice the narrator's jarring repetitions of phrases like "my wife, who is not good with children" (ST 155) It becomes increasingly apparent that the one with the problems, despite the consistent reasonableness of his tone, is the narrator. When his son takes down his trousers because he needs to urinate, the narrator, under the couple's surveillance, swiftly attempts to cover him up:

The French woman giggled, and scolded me, in a good-natured kind of way, for slapping my son, while her husband made some silly comment about park flashers or something along those lines. I fumbled with the boy's clothing, trying to cover him up, as he started to quietly whimper in a completely artificial way, feeling nothing more traumatic than sorry for himself. The couple were by now laughing openly, and as I was not laughing at all—I think it is fair to say that they were laughing at me. It was at this moment, annoyed and embarrassed as I was, that I believe I may have inadvertently, while trying to do up his shorts, somehow pinched or otherwise lacerated my son's penis, a difficult thing to do given its size. (ST 157)

- 14 Although he manages to calm the boy down despite what he calls "his continuing addiction to tantrums," it is clear that the narrator is struggling to maintain control and that things are set to go from bad to worse. When they are playing near the water and the father throws what he believes is a twig but is actually a rock towards (rather than at) his small son, but unfortunately hits the boy and knocks him senseless¹. The couple rush to help and the boy is taken to hospital, while the father-narrator is brought into police custody where his ultimate worry is not about his son, but about Ninny, the dog: "I wanted to see her. See that she was all right. That is what I wanted. Only that. Damn it" (ST 178). The tone remains reasonable if hard-done-by to the end, but the reader has long since realized that the head wound of the story is not only the small boy's physical one but the psychological trauma being lived by the narrator which causes him to lose all sense of judgment and reality. The reader has also been forced to ponder not only the reliability of the narrator's story but also the reliability of narrative itself and the capacity of the human subject to understand the reality in which he or she lives. The reader is impelled to consider whether the short story is in some way a realistic account of events or a delusional fantasy. Can the reader ever really know? Similar questions may also be evinced in Ridgway's longer fictions.
- 15 Even when writing novels, Ridgway is never far from the gene and the genre of the short story which so often is character rather than plot driven and he is far from alone in

creatively hovering between the two modes, in initiating what will eventually become a novel through the publishing of a self-contained short-story that will come to be a semi-autonomous component in the larger whole. In the introduction to her *Selected Stories*, Mary Lavin writes: "I even wished that I could break up the too long novels I have published into the few short stories they ought to have been in the first place. For in spite of these two novels and in spite of the fact that I may write other novels, I feel that it is in the short story that a writer distils the essence of his thought" (qtd. in Rafroidi 27). While Lavin would have wished to break up her novels, Ridgway effectively finds that the two genres can co-exist within the larger structure and can help fuel each other, and in so doing he uses the short story, so often seen as the quintessentially enigmatic modern form conveying contemporary fragmentation and dislocation, as the foundational blocks with which to build his novels. Even in his novels, Ridgway's reader cannot help but be struck by their splintered structures, their elliptical suggestiveness, their lack of comfortable resolution, features drawn most distinctly from the shorter fiction tradition. Thus *Animals* can use its opening to dwell at length on the unnamed narrator's thoughts as he looks at a dead mouse lying in a gutter. He wants to prod it but cannot decide what implement to use. He does not have his umbrella and the pen he has would bring him a little too close for comfort to the dead rodent. As an illustrator, he drifts into a reflection on how mice are depicted in cartoons before deciding to use his pen: "Cap on, or cap off?" he wonders, the reader's frustration rising.

- 16 And yet the long monological trip towards inconsequential action actually points to an important change, a sudden collapse for the narrator, who comments: "That was it. There was no way back then." While this points to an enigmatic conclusion in the short story, it signals a beginning in the novel, becoming, "That was it. That was how it started." What was started is then followed by nine chapters mapping out the narrator's almost inexplicable disintegration into paranoia. Again what is important is the inner world of the character's mind which seems to find confirmation in an outer reality—including a vague and shadowy Dublin—that is at least partly held back from the reader. The narrator's unreliability further complicates the reader's capacity to believe what is being described, as he is told on occasion: "None of this is true." The conduit for everything is character and narrative voice, the fictionality of the enterprise is constantly flagged and it is never clear if we are to take the minor events narrated as figments of an imagination or refractions of a reality seen through a distorting eye.
- 17 Ridgway's acclaimed recent novel, *Hawthorn & Child*, continues to play with the connections between shorter and longer fictional forms and is, in a very real sense, a book of short stories, each chapter with its own title, its own dominant character and narrative consciousness, its own autonomy, even if there is a distinct narrative voice and style maintaining an overall coherence. In part a crime novel, denying both solution and resolution alike, the volume, while focusing mostly on an edgy London world where crime is never far away, plays with the individual marginalities associated with the protagonists we find in the short stories by moving characters in and out of focus from chapter to chapter and allowing each one, no matter how marginal he or she may have seemed at the outset, to assume a moment of centrality while teasing the reader to make the link to the book's central dynamic and to its central characters, Hawthorn, a lonely and slightly down-in-the-mouth gay detective, and his seemingly tougher straight partner, Child. This strange, fragmented work revels in defying readers' expectations by refusing to offer a solution to the shooting incident that opens the book and that Hawthorn and Child are

called upon to solve. This refusal of the closure so typically demanded in the novel is, however, a central feature of the short story particularly in its modern form. Thus *Hawthorn & Child* is another Ridgway work that makes ample use of the short story and its techniques. Two texts that later became chapters in the novel appeared earlier as separate fictions, namely "Goo Book" which was published in the *New Yorker* and "Rothko Eggs," which was first published in *Zoetrope All-Story* in the spring of 2011. "Rothko Eggs" splendidly captures a teenage voice, an adolescent view of the world, a mixture of superficial understanding and genuine desire to find answers and to know more. It is the story of Cath, a teenager who splits her time between estranged parents. No different to adults, the teenager wants to understand things so as to be able to control them, to have a fixed sense of how things are in her world. Thus she explains in her school essay: "Churchill lost the post-war election because people were tired" (H&C 161). Fine as far as it goes, but of course it falls short of being an adequate explanation. Her reasoning continues on this assured but trite path: "When you have a fire in your house you want the fire brigade to come. When the fire is out you want them to leave" (H&C 161). She was, we read, "really pleased" (H&C 161) with this, but her straightforward, simplistic cause and effect conclusion, while clever, is only a very limited, somewhat clichéd and ultimately unsatisfactory explanation. Not surprisingly, she is given a mark of just 56% for her essay.

- 18 This is a novel of limited parts, fragments almost. On being asked whether *Hawthorn & Child* should be seen as a novel or a book of short stories, Ridgway, having initially claimed that the distinction was not important, asserted:

It's a book....I call it a novel because I feel that it needs everything that's in it and that the pieces—which can indeed be read separately, which can even I suppose be read in any order—are diminished by being taken away from each other. But it wouldn't do really to call it a collection of stories. That doesn't cover it at all. That would be misleading. So in that sense, the distinction does matter a great deal. People have talked about it as an anti-novel, and I accept that. Its structure is deliberate. Its fragmentation is deliberate. Its hesitancy about being a novel is deliberate. It doesn't want to be a novel. But tough. It is. (Breathnach)

- 19 The sense that the individual short stories cannot be contained within the novel and that they are in no way subordinate to it was reinforced by Ridgway's subsequent digital publishing of a long short story called "The Spectacular" which is also set in North London and has Hawthorn among its characters. This, Ridgway insists, is "definitely not a part of the novel" (Breathnach) although it belongs to the same fragmentary whole:

I started writing a book that I wanted to be entirely fragments. It was originally going to be as many as 70 or 80 of these things, with some relationship between some of them, but it was the fragments that interested me. How they would rattle together in the same container as it were. But that didn't happen. I drifted towards story, towards characters that reappeared, towards a more conventional coherence. So I tried to balance the two, and by so doing became very conscious of the tension between the desire for coherent stories and the facts and experiences of living, which are almost entirely fragmentary. (Breathnach)

- 20 Although the fragments grow by being juxtaposed with their companion pieces in the novel, "Rothko Eggs," by way of example, also stands, quite radiantly, alone. Cath, as we have seen, yearns for clarity and even simplicity. In tracing out her thoughts and feelings Ridgway does not eschew simple syntactical structures but rather embraces them to express this London version of *teenspeak* as in the following example after she and her boyfriend Stuart have had oral sex for the first time (and rather too quickly):

He said that no one had ever done that before.

He said that Byron had offered, but that was all.

He said that he and Byron had kissed once, and he had liked it, but he had stopped because he didn't want to do anything else and Byron did, and Byron had sulked for a while, but they were OK now.

He said Byron was his best friend. Him and Byron talked about everything.

He said she was a better kisser than Byron. [...] (H&C 178)

- 21 Gradually she becomes aware of the gaps and limits of her knowledge, especially when she goes to visit the Rothko exhibition: "There were some artists that she couldn't quite understand. She could see that they had left her lots of space, but she didn't know what to fill it with" (H&C 156). This dilemma corresponds very closely with the experience lived by the reader of Ridgway's fictions. Knowledge is withheld, information is unreliable, conclusive judgment is difficult. Ridgway leaves the readers of this short story just as he will leave the readers of the novel where the story re-exists and the readers of all his fictional works, long and short, with a similar burdensome message, one which is, in a very real sense, representative of the human condition: the desire for knowledge can never be adequately fulfilled and the knowledge of that same inadequacy can only be acquired alone. All of this both frustrates and entices. As the publisher in *Hawthorn & Child* puts it: "Knowing things completes them. Kills them. [...] They fade away, decided and over and forgotten. Not knowing sustains us" (H&C 152). Those who think they know are the superficial or the false, they are damned to eventual realization. Some hope remains for Cath who is last seen in the fiction as follows: "She went home. She thought about their day. Something had gone wrong but she didn't know what" (H&C 189) What she has learned is the limit of knowledge and the fact that no two people ever see the same thing in precisely the same way. And so aloneness, separateness is unavoidable. Facts work in ineluctably separate and different ways on different people. After an unsuccessful (for the couple) visit to the Rothko exhibition during which Cath is bored and Stuart so struck that he bursts into tears, she tries to tell him an anecdote about her father:

I made my Dad scrambled eggs one morning, yeah? When I was staying at his place for the weekend. [...] And he really liked it, and then he was trying to show off that he knew about art—he's always doing this—and he splutters ketchup all over the scramble eggs and he said, *Rothko eggs*. Pointing at the eggs, yeah? *Rothko eggs*. I didn't know what he was on about. *They look like a Rothko painting*, he said, all pleased with himself. And then I realized that he'd gotten Rothko mixed up with Pollock!

She laughed.

Stuart smiled. (189)

- 22 And in his smile their separation and impending separation is already apparent. Soon it is reiterated when we read: "And she laughed, to show how funny it was." As she reaches out with affection towards her father and strains to convey what she means to Stuart, Stuart chooses not to understand, preferring to establish his own distance from her. Their personal isolation and lack of connection is sealed. When she returns home she knows something has gone wrong, but she does not know exactly what it was. What she is left to feel is very close to what is experienced by the Ridgway reader. At the end of each story, the reader perceives that something, usually unknowable, always obscure, often terrible, has happened. However, alone before the text, all that the reader can fully know is that s/he will never know the full story, not to mention what it might mean.

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NOTES

1. Moments of almost freakish violence like this occur repeatedly in Ridgway's fiction—it happens again in "Never love a gambler" and they always precipitate a mental crisis or signals its prior if up-to-then concealed existence.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article s'intéresse aux nouvelles de Keith Ridgway, plus particulièrement au recueil Standard Time, publié en 2001, et à "Goo Book" et "Rothko Eggs" qui apparaissent dans le roman Hawthorn & Child (2012). Il vise à démontrer que le genre de la nouvelle est la pierre angulaire de l'oeuvre fictionnelle de Ridgway dont les personnages cherchent à comprendre leur place dans le monde. Incapables d'acquérir une quelconque connaissance à cet égard, ils partagent ainsi des points communs avec les lecteurs du texte.

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