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Short but Seldom Sweet

THE OLDEST LITERARY FORM is generally acknowledged to be epic poetry. Antedating the alphabet, it was chanted by bards accompanying themselves on a stringed instrument. But it seems likely that the anecdote is just as old or even older. Only because it lacked the prerequisites for chanting by bards—standard reusable tropes, formulaic phrases, and length—it did not register as an art.

What, we may ask, is the definition of the anecdote? The word comes, via French, from the Greek and means "something unpublished." This is the sense in which the historian Procopius coined it for his *Anecdota* or *Secret History*, the intimate annals of the Byzantine court during the reign of Justinian and Theodora, featuring nastily funny revelations about Theodora:

> Though she brought three apertures into service, she often found fault with Nature, grumbling that Nature had not made the openings in her nipples wider than normal, so that she could devise another variety of intercourse in that region. . . . She would lie on her back and some slaves, whose job it was, sprinkled grains of barley over her private parts, and geese trained for the purpose picked them off with their beaks one by one and ate them. So far from blushing when she stood up again, Theodora actually seemed proud of this performance.

Such things, then, were previously unpublished secrets, early anecdotes. Accordingly, Dr. Johnson, in the first edition of his *Dictionary*—as James Sutherland tells in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* (1975)—defined anecdote as "something unpublished; secret history." Thus in the first edition of 1755. By the fourth (1773), he had to admit a further meaning: "It is now used, after the French, for a biographical incident; a minute passage of private life."

In the OED, the second, i.e., more modern, meaning is given as "the narrative of a detached incident, or of a single event, told as being in itself interesting or striking," a sense that, as Sutherland notes, was "only gradually establishing itself during Johnson's lifetime." *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus, American Edition* puts it a bit differently: "A short account . . . of an entertaining or interesting incident," which introduces two important attributes: short and entertaining. *The*

Random House Compact Unabridged Dictionary offers, "A short account of a particular incident or event of an interesting or amusing nature, often biographical," adding the concept of biography, which I take to mean something characteristic of a life worth recording.

The Penguin, i.e., latest, edition of J. A. Cudden's masterly *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* confirms, "A brief account of or a story about an individual or incident," which reinforces the possible, though not mandatory, aspect of connection to an individual, which is to say the biographical interest.

But it is John Gross, editor of *The New Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes*, which I am reviewing here, whose Introduction opens with a desiderated bang: The urge to exchange anecdotes is as deeply implanted in human beings as the urge to gossip.[1] Certainly anecdotes satisfy our need for gossip; specifically literary anecdotes, about writers, who, in olden days, corresponded to today's movie stars and sports champions.

Literary anecdotes are the ancestors of today's newspaper and magazine gossip columns. Still, why literary? Because literary folks are colorful, more vivid versions of ourselves. Because literary anecdotes not only concern writers, but are also told by writers—whether by themselves or other literati who know them. Sutherland, in his introduction, cites Boswell, Lockhart, Carlyle, and Osbert Sitwell as ones "who can not only recall or envisage a total situation, but who have the creative ability and verbal felicity to shape it into a memorable anecdote."

Gross supplies plenty of literary-historical, social, psychological, and critical data in his much longer, but still quite succinct, Introduction. He adduces similarities and differences between his and Sutherland's editorial practices, as well as Donald Hall's in *The Oxford Book of American Literary Anecdotes* (1981). Thus although the anecdotes have to be in English, Gross alone includes material from outside England and the U.S.A.

He mentions the current popularity of literary biographies, yet the anecdotes about writers may have bypassed the biographies. They may be delightfully typical of what we associate with a given writer or, on the contrary, surprise us with some new aspect. If, Gross says, a writer slips on a banana peel, it may be no different from an ordinary man doing so. "But if the writer is someone whom we have read [I would add or have read about], we are likely to bring a whole complex of feelings to bear on the story."

"Anecdotes often point out inconsistencies in writers' behavior, which emphasize the difference between the ideal (the work) and the real (the life). They reveal that writers, despite a special aura, are no better than other people—sometimes, indeed, worse." The anecdote is "a natural home for disabused views and unflattering close-ups, for a ludicrous or disreputable detail which you can't find in official tributes."

[1] THE NEW OXFORD BOOK OF LITERARY ANECDOTES, ed. with an Introduction by *John Gross*. Oxford University Press. $29.95.

Then again, "there are many more anecdotes in the book from which writers emerge with their reputations strengthened—stories in which you can feel the force of their wit. Their originality and (when it is there to be felt) their greatness."

Gross's Introduction, no less than his picks, suggests that whereas Sutherland's choices tended to be more academic, Gross's are rather more those of a writer. "My selection reflects my personal preferences," Gross writes. "I haven't steered clear of classic anecdotes, but neither have I felt any obligation to include them. When there didn't seem much to choose between a familiar and an unfamiliar item, it is the unfamiliar one that I have usually opted for." True enough: there are hardly any anecdotes in the book that I already knew, and a good many I fully expected to find there didn't make the cut.

Is that a good thing? Sutherland doesn't tell us how he handled this problem, although he states that "If an anecdote is to live beyond its own day, it should not only be worth the telling, but it should be well told." (That sentence desperately needs an "also" and should drop the "but"—the sort of lapse you won't find in Gross's writing.) This allows us to infer that the better-known versions were the ones he chose. Now it seems to me that anecdotes—especially when funny, as they preponderantly are—function like jokes: the less we have heard them before, the better. So, at least for the literate reader, Gross's method is superior.

Next, Gross informs us, he has followed Sutherland and Hall in picking "roughly speaking" anecdotes about what used to be called standard authors. That makes perfect sense on the principle of gossip being of interest only if it concerns people we know or celebrities, which comes to much the same. Still, he allows for the inclusion of anecdotes involving lesser lights, because "roughly speaking covers a multitude of exceptions and variations."

He intended to include also anecdotes involving "popular authors" as well as those only very roughly speaking litterateurs, e.g. "philosophers, statesmen, scholars, and the like." Owing to limitations of space, however, he had to settle for a few token specimens. Another problem was with contemporary authors, there being too many well-known ones and too great a profusion of anecdotes. Time, moreover, hasn't yet "done its editorial work, determining whose stories should take preference." Against the charge of arbitrariness, Gross proffers, "Good anecdotes spring up at random. An anthology ought to preserve something of their haphazard spirit."

Anecdotes, he decided, are dynamic. They should "describe the unfolding of a short, self-contained action." As his work progressed, though, he realized that one should not be that procrustean. There is also such a thing as "anecdotal material—oddities of behavior which weave two or three incidents together." Sure enough, some of the best items in the book are of this kind.

One of my favorites is a page and a half from Ford Madox Ford's reminiscences, *Return to Yesterday*. Ford reflects on the time when he was

editing the *English Review* (1908–10), and some of the day's most famous writers were contributors. Almost to a man, they made sure not to come to see him when another famous writer would be there. Moreover, he writes:

> I think that only one contributor . . . did not tell me that the *Review* was ruined by the inclusion of all the other contributors. James said: "Poor old Meredith, he writes these mysterious nonsenses and heaven alone knows what they all mean." Meredith had contributed merely a very short account of his dislike for Rossetti's breakfast manners. It was quite as comprehensible as a seedsman's catalogue. Meredith said on looking at James's *Jolly Corner* which led off the prose of the review: "Poor old James. He sets down on paper these mysterious rumblings in his bowels—but who could understand them?" So they went on.

And the piece goes on, just as funnily, about tea parties in the editorial offices.

Rightly, Gross observes: "Many of the stories hinge on something that someone said, but only when it arises out of the immediate situation. Witty observations in themselves are not enough." On this basis, he is justified in including the following from Mrs. Piozzi: "A young fellow, lamenting one day that he had lost all his Greek—'I believe it happened at the same time, Sir (said Johnson), that I lost all my large estate in Yorkshire.'" A great putdown surely is worth noting and anecdoting.

A ticklish question arises: Is a given anecdote true? Did it actually happen, and, if so, is it told as it was initially described? Gross decides that some anecdotes are as accurate as an honest legal deposition, some deliberately manufactured. Most, he figures, are true but "to a greater or lesser extent improved in the telling." He goes on about this at some length but comes to an eminently sensible conclusion: "Anecdotes are a form of entertainment—at their best, an art form. Most of the time it is enough if they are broadly true (and even some of the whoppers are acceptable, as long as nobody takes them seriously)."

Nicely put. If it were in English, I might cite a *boutade* of Anatole France's: "Voilà une histoire plus vraie que la vérité." And there is also in the book a telling excerpt from Victoria Glendinning's biography of Elizabeth Bowen, concerning how badly Bowen treated her undistinguished husband, as when, giving a dinner party, she made him eat off a tray, alone in a small room. Possibly apocryphal, Glendinning concedes, but "Apocryphal stories have a poetic if not a historical truth; they express what a sufficient number of people feel to have been the truth."

Still, Gross admits to some compunction: "Every so often I felt moved to point out, in an accompanying note, that the truth of an anecdote had been denied or called into question. I could have added more comments along the same lines, but I was afraid of boring the reader,

and of suggesting that I set more store by accuracy—accuracy in anecdotes that is—than I do."

Now about those notes. The methodology of the book is exemplary. There are headnotes, when some background information, usually biographical, is called for. For instance, "Between the ages of 16 and 21 Hardy was articled to a local architect, John Hicks." After an anecdote, there may be a useful comment such as, "The two volumes of biography published under his wife's name after his death, were in fact largely written by Hardy himself."

In the Introduction, Gross relates how he attempted to provide notes where necessary, but explains that he did not wish to underexplain and cause puzzlement or overexplain and seem condescending. He concludes: "I can only plead that I have tried to strike a balance, to be reader-friendly without being reader-patronizing." So in their concise thoroughness, the notes are spot on. Also, whenever appropriate, witty. When there is no note, the anecdote concerns persons of sufficient celebrity, or else the story itself provides the needed information. Protagonists are identified up top in bold print, with life dates. At the bottom, we get the source, with date. Much better than in Sutherland.

Chronologically, the anecdotes extend from Chaucer to J. K. Rowling. If the teller is more important than the subject, he or she is duly introduced. There are several hundred items on 350 pages, ranging in length from a few lines to a page or two. In reading, I checked my favorites, of which there were many, some even rating double checks. But even the unchecked ones are of considerable interest, and it is very hard to find an item that just possibly might have been omitted. Herewith, more or less at random, three good ones.

From an article by the editor Edward Garnett: "Great quickness of eye was one of Conrad's gifts. I remember while sitting an evening with him in the Café Royal I asked him, after a painted lady had brushed haughtily past our table, what he had specially noticed about her. 'The dirt in her nostril,' he replied instantly."

Here is the great critic William Empson, as reported by George Watson in a *Hudson Review* article: "After 1961 he never saw a book through the press. Revision claimed him. 'I still have to put in the careless ease,' he once remarked, sitting by the pond in his Hampstead garden, when I reproached him gently for not collecting his essays. 'The careless ease always goes in last.'"

The brilliant scholar E. R. Dodds relates in his preface to the *Journal and Letters of Stephen MacKenna* how Synge and his friend and fellow Irish writer MacKenna eked out a miserable journalistic existence in Paris. "Both Synge and MacKenna were distressingly hard up. 'How do these two young men live?' said an inquisitive person. 'Oh, Synge lives on what MacKenna lends him, and MacKenna lives on what Synge pays him back.'"

Note how all three of these anecdotes are extremely succinct—not an

excess word in any of them, only the tiniest bit of descriptive or atmospheric detail. So, in the first, we get the setting: the Café Royal, favorite hangout of the literary set, and the surprising haughtiness of the demimondaine. But the acute writer's glance, unimpressed by the obvious, picks out a telling detail ordinary eyes would have missed.

In the next item, there is Empson's garden with pond in pleasant Hampstead, in which the critic adds carefree ease to his demandingly cerebral writings. Happy bygone days when an uncompromisingly highbrow critic made enough money for such luxuries.

In the third anecdote, nothing descriptive or atmospheric. But here the wit and perfect phrasing of the epigram concisely and compellingly convey bohemian life in its desperate ingenuity. How Murger would have loved this!

It should emerge from these samples that perusing the hundreds of choice items in *The New Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* provides more than pleasurable and informative reading: lessons in style that any aspiring writer or raconteur can profitably study. Above all, though, John Gross's florilegium supplies the reader with the carefree ease of a garden of earthly delights only just short of a pond.