# LEO SIMPSON AND THE COMIC MOMENT

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Nietzsche says that writers behave shamelessly toward their experiences: they exploit them, and I suppose critics are woven of the same, dubious, moral fibre. Nevertheless, without intending to be ungracious, I confess this occasion of confrontation between literary exploiters strikes me as slightly pornographic.[1] Some privacy, more fundamental perhaps than that of the bedroom, seems to be at risk. Surely writers and readers, even critics, that admittedly squalid subclass of readers, have an ancient right to the fuzzy fantasies they concoct about each other without having to confront the actuality in explicit eroticolour. And I must assert that in this orgy of mutual exposure writers have the advantage of experience. Regularly from the lonely isolation of writing in stuffy university residence or airy farmhouse (the Canadian Muse, I take it, knows no other habitation) they emerge to meet their public: obsequious patrons in department store book-sections solicit their autographs on title-pages; sleepy undergraduates or earnest interviewers on educational television probe their creative privates. Critics are more modestly timid. They have no public, and seldom talk, even to each other. They seek the benighted seclusion of palatial libraries and clothe themselves in the shrouds of authors decently dead. The critic in an arena such as this resembles nothing so much as a virginal matriculant of the ballet school suddenly thrust into the cage of a topless go-go club. Both must reveal their professional attributes in an entirely new light, and both must hope that no one, especially the more experienced performers, laughs.

"Leo Simpson and the Comic Moment" is the title of my particular violation of the intimacy between writer and reader, and I suspect that the instant of bizarre collision between fantasy and actuality experienced by my critic and ballet dancer would constitute one sort of "comic moment" that Leo Simpson might exploit with relish. Even a superficial reading of his stories would justify my suspicion. Simpson consistently builds upon what has traditionally been one of the enduring strengths of the short story as a form: its capacity to capture and bring into sharp focus crucial junctures where the course of life alters radically, for better or worse. Such moments may be sad or funny, poignant or horrifying — recording everything from minor adjustments in the rhythm of existence to cataclysmic metamorphoses, monitoring those crises of experience that may affect equally an individual consciousness or an entire cultural pattern. Whatever their scope or tone, all such moments are "comic" in the

[1] This paper was first prepared for delivery to the Canadian Short Story Conference held at the University of Ottawa, November 7-9, 1975, at which ten writers and an equal number of their critical commentators faced each other in an understandable mood of highly-charged uncertainty. I have kept, as far as possible, the somewhat informal, colloquial style of the original version in the hope it might preserve rhetorically some of the tone and atmosphere from that memorable occasion.

technical sense: they reflect our common bond with all creatures that, as Susanne Langer puts it, "live by opportunities in a world fraught with disasters."[2] The human imperative to adapt to the environment — social, psychological, or moral — is the primary motive of the comic vision.

Of course the short story is not the sole custodian of this vision, but its very "shortness," its imposed spatial restraints, gives to that vision an intense integrity and to the form itself a special freedom of movement along the spectrum of literary genre. It shares much with other forms of prose fiction, particularly the devices of narrative structure and perspective, but to consider it simply as a kind of novel-fragment is, implicitly, to see "shortness" as a form of poverty: limitation of matter becomes subtly limitation of potential. Perhaps this attitude owes its critical prevalency to the number of writers who use the short shory as a means of apprenticeship for the novel. No doubt, too, a lot of between-novel pot-boiling diluted the quality of the general product during those heady times when both authors and popular magazines found mutual profit in a lucrative, if critically undemanding, market for short, escapist fiction. While legitimate and abundant, however, these uses of the form are not definitive, as Balzac, Maupassant, Lawrence, and Joyce, to name but a few, have made brilliantly clear. Spatial restrictions are no more a *priori* cause of impoverishment for the short story than they are for the lyric poem or the stage-bound drama. Indeed, the short story shows significant kinship with poetry and drama: their mutual limitations force a common dependence on the rhetorical potential of synecdoche; they achieve full realization by epitomizing an implicit whole in an explicit part. There are no limitations on synecdoche. Provided the author's choice of focus for explicit concentration, or "moment," as I have termed it, does not seem arbitrary but inevitable, or decorous (to use another term from classical rhetoric), it may generate a sense of congruence large enough to encompass such categories as individual and community, past and future, cause and effect, the experiential and the mythical. The short story, then, while relying heavily on the resources of prose-narrative, may drift toward the reflexive devices of poetry, on the one hand, or the dynamic strategies of drama, on the other.

Within this range of possibilities, Simpson tends to favour the dramatic, not simply in the thematic preference he shares with playwrights for those particular comic moments that stress a collision between fantasy and reality, but more fundamentally in the structures of dramatic rhetoric he chooses to develop the synecdochal potential of those moments. A full examination of Simpson's method lies beyond the scope of this paper, but I shall try to be as synecdochal as possible. My principal aim is to encourage further critical examination of his work.

The most useful place to begin an exploration of technique, because most obviously dramaturgical, is "The Ferris Wheel," a *tour-de-force* in dialogue.[3] Indeed, the story could be adapted for three actors without dropping more than one hundred words of narrative bridgework, most of which simply identifies the speaker. Appropriately, the issue at stake is

[2]Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3rd edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 121.

[3]Simpson's collected short stories have recently been published (Fall, 1976) by the University of Ottawa Press under the title *The Lady and the Travelling Salesman*. Their inaccesibility at the time this paper was prepared for delivery accounts for its uneasy marriage of summative review and critical analysis.

nominalism — specifically, the implications of status in gestures of speech. Mr. Merryweather and Mr. Grayson, two employees of an unnamed, because wholly synecdochal corporation, meet in the office of a third, Edward Seager, the personnel director. Merryweather complains that Grayson addresses him as Harry instead of Mr. Merryweather. Grayson counters that Merryweather calls him George, to which Merryweather responds: "I have fifteen years seniority and I'm four scales higher in grade. I'm management." Situation, participants, setting, and issue are all clichéd: at best it seems a trivial example of the struggle for existence, a "tempest in a teapot," as Grayson calls it, using yet another cliché. We tend to side with Grayson and sympathize with the personnel director.

Simpson's art, however, reflects the comic satirist's recognition that every truism conceals a truth. As the participants go on using words, our perception of them, the situation, and the significance of language itself alters radically. "Mr.," the most banal of all titles of respect and station, becomes a catalyst for self-analysis and revelation. At first, Merryweather's demand is for the mere form of respect:

> Grayson said: "Listen, Harry, I don't respect you, even if they make me call you Your Excellency."
> "Your feelings aren't important to me, George," Merryweather said. "I don't care what you *feel*."

Abruptly, however, failing in an effort to make words serve the demands of a logical distinction, Merryweather's stilted idiom of demand collapses into the fragmented idiom of agonized confession. His loneliness, defeat, and despair well to the surface, breaking the bubble of one cliché only to form another. Wife, child, mother, colleagues, all hate and shun him; at night he retreats to his room with television and tea-kettle; he memorizes the commercials; he carries ten keys on a ring, although he only needs two, "because a man should have a hefty bunch of keys. Who can respect a man with only two keys?" Now he is a caricature, the "born loser" personified. Grayson chides him: "He's a big cry-baby, that's what. I mean, all of us have our own problems, haven't we? What's the point of crying in an office? I can give you another Kleenex but that's about it." Seager advises him judiciously to take a tranquilizer and the day off.

Neither makes any impression on Merryweather; he does not hear them. Now at full spate, at last totally indifferent to appearances, he recounts a moment of spiritual insight conveyed by the absolute faith of a parish priest, "built like a wrestler," as he bellowed the words "CREDO IN UNUM DEUM, I believe in one God." The priest's conviction breathes new life into language deadened by ritual repetition, and in recounting this moment Merryweather's language too rises in dignity and eloquence:

> "Not a measly *prayer,* nothing *holy* or anything the way he said it. A bellow of happiness, that was it, just bursting out, he had it. I knew he was right. We were crawling around in the dirt, and he . . . He was a man with a *God* to answer to. I got caught in the *savage* part, the body and the voice, *savage joy,* that was what came out of his lungs, and I swear I looked up and saw the man's God, oh I saw the power, bigger than all the distance of space. Farther away than the stars, farther away than we can ever see or ever know, and better, better than —"

Like his sense of spiritual release, Merryweather's moment of clarity passes. His language again declines into cliché, this time into mindless commercial propaganda:

> "Of course I'm not stupid, I knew it couldn't last. There was too much happiness, far too much — *happiness.* I only wanted to keep some of it, a bit. The next week was the week I remember because it stayed. I hardly noticed at first when the slipping started, everything happened so slowly, changing so slowly I didn't notice, like growing older. I didn't *feel* anything draining away, but it did. So I lost all of it. I lost the thing I got, and I lost the first thing of my own, that was gone too. Everything just trickled away, like the sink-water when the girl pours in a capful of Ease-Flo, the Magic Drain Cleaner, slowly. As they say, an Ease-Flo chore the more you pour, down it goes lower and lower."

As Merryweather lapses, Grayson and Seager reactivate. Grayson simply revises his opinion of Merryweather and closes ranks with a fellow human being: "Harry, who knows about this God stuff?" Grayson said. "It seems to me we're wide open on it. We're still wide open on the big ones. We're pretty ignorant as we stand. We don't control anything much that's happening, do we?" The Madison-Avenue argot does not undermine the sincerity of Grayson's gesture. He, like Merryweather and, indeed, the priest, is forced to follow the well-worn grooves of language. Their struggle to revitalize dead metaphors signifies their humanity.

Seager, by contrast, feels threatened by both this sudden vitality of expression and the human values it asserts. In Seager, caricature has become character: he is a cliché by conscious choice: "A good businessman operates under special conditions, like a good soldier in war. A soldier would lose battles if he kept remembering that he was a human being." Like the automaton he chooses to be, Seager when threatened threatens in turn: the equal and opposite reaction of mechanical physics. Merryweather buckles under, frightened equally by the image of himself he has glimpsed for a moment and by the possibility that he might no longer be able to hide from that image within the empty forms of corporate routine. The brief bond between Merryweather and Grayson is broken; they go back to the issue of "Mr." again. Seager is relieved: they are again having a clichéd disagreement about a cliché. Grayson, however, has glimpsed a truth. His contempt for Merryweather now rests on substance, not formal appearance, and the contempt rebounds on Seager and himself: "A gift so rare that we can't understand it, an interruption of oblivion. We're flinging it away as if we had a thousand years." Thus, a comic moment, a petty crisis in office politics, becomes an ultimate penetration beyond the web of illusion to reality, an "interruption of oblivion." That is what I mean by the generative power of synecdoche.

Despite the inevitable reductiveness in my sketch of "The Ferris Wheel," I hope you can discern an outline of Simpson's method. The basic elements of his synecdoche are different forms of cliché: dead metaphors and banal commonplaces, caricature, stock-situations. These are the technical analogues of dead institutional forms, closed minds, unexamined attitudes, and stock-responses: all the social, psychological, and political sources of narcotic fog desensitizing us to the substance of our humanity. As "The Ferris Wheel" demonstrates, revitalization of cliché and

resensitization to reality are coincidental processes in Simpson's art. This process is complex, but it is founded on two basic rhetorical strategies: hyperbole (or exaggeration) and oxymoron (the collision of diametrical opposites). Their relationship to Simpson's basic synecdoche reflects the parallel relationship between cliché and habit. Unconscious repetition breeds the comfort, rather than the contempt, of familiarity, and we no longer notice or question the meaning of what we are used to until, for some reason or another, the complacency of habit is challenged. One method of challenge is to draw attention to the familiar by casting it in an unfamiliar setting. Hyperbole and oxymoron allow Simpson to do precisely that: cliché collides with antithetical cliché, throwing both into sudden relief; characters and situations are pushed to extremes of exaggeration where they can no longer be oriented with habitual landmarks.

Such devices constitute Simpson's real affinities with the dramatist. Both stress similar strategies involving not simply the primacy of dialogue, but also the collision of protagonist and antagonist, the importance of artificial setting, and the stock-situation. Little imagination is required to feel the spirit of Beckett and Pinter in the claustrophobic office-setting, verbal gymnastics, and frozen grouping of complementary caricatures that comprise "The Ferris Wheel." Like such dramatists, Simpson creates the effect of hyperbole through extreme simplification: environment is reduced to a single room; character is deprived of protean humanity and reduced to static caricature; the communal power of language is reduced to a trifling issue of semantic gamesmanship. There is nothing simplistic about such hyperbolical simplification. On the contrary, it sharply exposes the substance of a problem in a new context by stripping away the accidental irrelevancies made familiar through habitual association. Surrealism, of course, has the same purposes and effect. We have quite a new perspective on a Campbell's Soup tin when it appears in a context we have learned to think of as Art, spelled with the capital "A." "Mr.," likewise, becomes refocused in "The Ferris Wheel," exposing how short is the step from treating a title of respect as an inert cipher to treating the one addressed as an inert cipher, denied even the respect due him simply as a human being.

Indeed, any literature based on the admixture of cliché, exaggeration, and violent oxymora is bound to seem surreal, and Simpson's often does, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how far he pushes his hyperbolical devices. In "Where Does A Giant Gorilla Sleep?" Simpson makes his deepest incursion into the surreal as a short story writer. To pinpoint the hero of this mock-epic is difficult because the narrative perspective, like every other conventional straw, keeps shifting beyond one's clutches. The cast of characters, however, includes Garth Abertyte, president of the Rockhouse and Steem advertising agency; Miranda, his secretary and living embodiment of the Playboy philosophy; her boyfriend, W. A. Dongerkery, an Indian shepherd who needs one million dollars before August to build a dam in India and prevent the elimination of his village by flood; Crom Grauch, a Druid enforcer who wanders the world sacrificing doves and virgins against the powers of Urapit and eliminating its agents, whose names appear in Celtic script on a list he carries in the pocket of his anorak. Abertyte lives in dread of the day "They" will recognize he is mad. From the kneehole of his desk, he plans and executes the greatest advertising campaign of his career, creating a

raging consumer demand for "Lash," a product whose nature is unspecified and which, in fact, does not exist. At the climactic moment of the story, the cast assembles in Abertyte's office while a roaring mob of frustrated consumers riots in the streets below. Crom Grauch recognizes the apocalyptic dangers in the situation:

> "Can't you see the danger?" Crom Grauch asked, studying the crowds again. "They're stretching their imaginations. They've got to be given something cheap and pointless soon or I'm in trouble. If we don't stop them they'll keep on reaching out and out. Asking questions, questioning traditional answers and certainties."

This was precisely Abertyte's aim — to give mankind a goal beyond its reach, a quest, a revitalized heroic perspective:

> "God, the poor miserable consumers! Searching for Lash, all of them. Just like lost bodies searching for souls. Holy grails, golden fleeces, and now the enchanted label . . . . I wanted to give them everything, before the game ended. I've dreamt of it all my life, while promising odds and ends, bits and pieces of the whole thing."

Thus the gods meet on a Madison-Avenue Olympus to decide the fate of Man. Abertyte, like some lunatic Prometheus, would give Man the gift of fire, including its most precious spark, as Aeschylus notes, the gift of vain hope. Grauch, like Zeus, counters with the timeless response of the tyrant: "There's a way of turning the situation to my advantage, I think. I'll be using naked power. You'll love that too, everybody does." Grauch wants the "Lash" account: he will become the "Lash" client, and turn "Lash" into a whip that will bring to heel and direct to his own purposes the mythic energies tapped by Abertyte. Prometheus was nailed to a peak with a spear of adamant; Abertyte is threatened with a straitjacket. He is no Titan, although he has glimpsed the Promethean truth, and he dies of fright. Thus is Grauch defeated: he has overplayed his hand. Naked power has back-lashed, recoiled on itself.

Here the strategies of extremity, of oxymorom and hyperbole, have themselves been pushed to the limit in the service of surreal mock-epic. By tradition, mock-epic is a satirist's weapon, uncovering rot at the core of modern culture by juxtaposing contemporary standards against those of a more heroic age. Simpson provides the myth of the golden fleece, the legend of Prometheus, shepherds and floods, sacrifices and Druid mysteries, the suggestion of apocalypse: all set within the context of commercial advertising and the consumer culture. Here is synecdoche with a vengeance: advertising cliché and grotesque stereotypes fuse with primal archetypes of Western culture, and the resulting potential interpretations of this short story are limited only by the generative infinities of myth itself. Yet Simpson's satiric perspective is well-defined: the ancient role of the epic poet, to find reality at the heart of illusion and incorporate the highest ideals of his people in the allegories of spiritual quest, has been usurped by institutions that manipulate and corrupt language to obscure truth and direct mythic aspirations into the banal channels and easy gratifications of commercial, political, and sexual consumerism. The modern Homer becomes a retailer of slogans, and fantasy becomes pandemic in the culture. Thus, the real "comic moment"

of collision between fantasy and reality in this story is faced, not primarily by any of its major caricatures, but by the shadowy mob rioting in the streets. They must find their truth through, and beyond, the clichés of consumerism.

A similar, if less extreme, example of Simpson's strategies occurs in "The Ivy-Covered Manner," which also reveals another variation on the affinity for drama. In this story, situation and plot, rather than dialogue and character, carry the burdens of the comic moment. The hero and narrator sets out, successfully, to murder three fellow scholars before they can maliciously write unfavourable reviews of his forthcoming book on Browning. Everything here is extreme. All the characters are stereotypes: the professors, to a man, are willing to sacrifice any moral principle in their scramble for academic recognition; the women, without exception, are in libidinous heat. Their ruling passions are different in form but identical in substance. Ruling passions, cuckoldry, and unprincipled social ambitions are the stuff of Restoration satirical farce, and there is more of Congreve and Wycherley than Beckett and Pinter in this story. Indeed, Simpson casts his climax in the form of a "screen-scene," that most stock of all stock-devices in Restoration comedy. As the hero sits in his darkened room awaiting his third victim (who is, in turn, intent on murdering our hero), female after female arrives, students, departmental secretaries, colleagues, and widows of previous victims, all seeking bed and sympathy. All are hidden in various parts of the dark room, each, we are to understand, without knowledge of the others' presence. Only extensive quotation can convey the tone and style typical of this scene and the story as a whole.

> I chose an ordinary service revolver, a weapon I normally use only for intimidation. I put the holster under the bedclothes, and began my vigil in the alcove. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Who can predict the behaviour of a cornered rat? My patience had the immobile menace of the Indian scouts one sees peering over cliff edges at wagon trains. Half an hour. A gentle tap sounded on the outer door. I gasped. Was he mad? Why alert me? The man was no unfledged newcomer to acts of scholarship.
>
> I opened the room door, and stood for a moment, holding the outer door handle in my left hand, the pistol in my right. Then I whipped the door open with lightning swiftness. My reflexes were in good shape, or Mrs. Coringby would have received a copperjacketed .38 bullet in the lower stomach, where it really smarts. She was wearing a fur coat and high heels. "Free at last of the iron hand!" she shouted. "My will is the wind's will! How I have ached to come thus to a man's room, to lock myself until dawn with him in animal pleasure! Professor D'Arcy, take me to bed!"
>
> . . . Before I reached the alcove, the outer door rattled. Routine was inhibiting my cautions, but I remembered to close the room door. A whip was the first thing I saw, a monstrous thonged affair, then Greta appeared holding the butt. "Our night at least, my sweet sadist," she intoned. "George is at an emergency session with his psychiatrist, and I got away." I pulled her in, explained simply, gave her two quick cuts of the whip on the calves to hold her and put her on the balcony, crouching down.
>
> My faith in Thomas' rodent mind was still strong, but now I waited in the hallway because of the crowd. Tap, tap. A coquettish

> Semple Rogers. "Did I interpret our exchange of looks tonight correctly, Professor?" A kiss that felt like her very first, into the wardrobe, only barely in time to reach the door for the next knock. Bobby, demurely bringing her dewy youth to me like a sacrifice. I sampled her briefly and put her under the bed.
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> . . . The silence was broken only by the gentlest of noises: a sigh, a low mew, silken rustle. The latch raised itself, and the door was pushed forward a careful inch. Another inch. Ten seconds, fifteen, twenty . . . Had I heard the door closing? I stepped forward, and there was Thomas with a double-barrelled shotgun at his shoulder, pointed at the bed. "So it's *you,* Profesor Thomas?" I roared. "You got the others, and now it's my turn?" He twisted wildly, firing the first barrel, and plaster sprang from the wall in a shower. "You murdering swine, Professor Thomas!" I said. "Take that!" I got him, fairly messily, through the heart as he tried to draw a second bead on me.

Thus might Micky Spillane have written Restoration comedy: an hilarious oxymoron to be reckoned with! Beneath the hilarity, however, we notice that "war of words" and "battle of sexes" have ceased to be figurative clichés; they have become literal. Again, the violent juxtaposition of literary conventions corresponds to the violent incongruity between the conscienceless inhumanity of the narrator and the values inherent in the humane letters he both professes and imitates. Like those of Browning, Simpson's "dramatic monologue" allows the speaker to condemn himself. Simpson has no need to supply an explicit satiric perspective: it is implicit in his hyperbolical strategies of Restoration farce. If manners constitute the ritual civilizing of the instinctive volition to indiscriminate aggression, and if literature embodies the ethos of civilization, then this "comedy of manners" evokes a sense of total recitivation and becomes something more than another exercise in anti-academic clichés. Simpson, as satirist, asserts what ought to be even as he attacks what is. When the university uses its stewardship of literature — as the advertising agency does — as a weapon of individual advantage, it becomes for Simpson, rather than a civilized community, the antithesis of what it ought to be: a synecdoche epitomizing the forces that return the life of Man to something nasty, brutish, and short.

This story also brings to the surface an issue that has perhaps, by now, become subliminally obvious. The "comic moment" is almost always in Simpson's work something more than a temporal entity or definable instant of crisis within the plot. In "The Ivy-Covered Manner" as in "Where Does A Giant Gorilla Sleep?" the significant crisis lies on the periphery of the story or outside its boundaries: with the mob in the streets or within civilization itself. Accordingly, the challenges faced by the characters in the story are met and passed without recognition or change of attitude on their part. Even "The Ferris Wheel" returns to a state of rest with oblivion having survived its interruption effectively intact. This apparent lack of resolution is, I believe, a central strategy in Simpson's satiric rhetoric. Having used the devices of cliché, exaggeration, and violent juxtaposition to evoke a sense of extreme disequilibrium and thereby throw a moral issue into sharp relief, he then brings the plot to an arbitrary conclusion without bringing the moral issue to a satisfying resolution. The resulting dissociation between plot and issue, between the

stimulus and the response it clearly demands, forces a corresponding dissociation between the issue and the fictional illusion. Simply put, the onus to produce an alternative resolution appropriate to our sense of "what ought to be" falls squarely on the reader. Rhetorically, therefore, Simpson stands in the epideictic tradition of Humanist satire: he aims to persuade audience attitudes into alignment with a clearly-defined set of ethical perspectives.

A rhetorical purpose of such scope demands some expansion in the meaning of "comic moment" if the term is to serve as a shorthand description of the method supporting that purpose. Like all makers of titles — even Simpson — I was being slightly arch when I called these remarks "Leo Simpson and the Comic Moment." I had in mind the definition of "moment" not only as a brief period of time but also as the hypothetical point around which lines of force twist, the locus of momentum. As I have indicated, Simpson sets up the locus of forces in a variety of ways, using verbal clichés such as "Mr." or "Lash," stock-situations, or caricatured stereotypes; sets them in motion with violent oxymoronic tensions (mock-heroic, farcical, or absurd); and carries their momentum, through hyperbole, outward even beyond the confines of the fictional entity. By concentrating on stories that in one way or another are extreme in their strategies, I hoped, in a Simpsonian way, to demonstrate the principles of his method by focusing on its most obvious, because extreme, examples. In doing so, however, I have stressed centrifugal effects at the expense of the method's power to create an internal, cohesive tension. By way of redressing the balance somewhat while giving a more representative sample of Simpson's range as a story-teller, I should like to examine briefly two less eccentric examples.

"The Lady and the Travelling Salesman" is a superb story, intricate as a tapestry, and I can only outline its major pattern. The protagonist, Patricia, is the young wife of a socially super-conscious doctor who spends two months of his earning year ministering *gratis* to sick Mexicans in a swamp. Patricia's self-definition is totally derivative from her image of her husband, Robert. She admires his commitment to good works, humanitarian ideals, and the rights of minorities; she adopts them uncritically as her own. As a result, she is a walking compendium of unexamined social clichés. Into this volatile suspension of complacent assurance Simpson introduces a catalyst in the person of Harry, Robert's oldest, most admired friend and moral antithesis. Harry is everything Patricia, or rather her husband, is not: pragmatic, amoral, politely lecherous, male-chauvinistic, and a private dealer in weapons.

In their encounter, we again have a structural tension between oxymoronic ethical opposites, and Patricia's consciousness becomes the narrative locus of the twisting forces of momentum inherent in this polar tension. Loyalty to her husband and the seductive attraction of Harry, physical and ideological, become the concrete narrative embodiments in Patricia's mind of these abstract forces. She feels the tension as a choice between two men, one wholly good and the other wholly evil: in basic form the story is a psychodrama.

Simpson's narrative perspective, however, denies the reader such an absolutist view because it allows us equal access to the minds of Patricia and Harry but not a glance into Robert's. Thus, simply because we know him better, Harry becomes more sympathetic than Robert. He genuinely admires Patricia's husband and envies him his "career of total use, clean

and healthy dedication"; and he regrets his own inability to continue in medicine because of an aversion to "cutting up dead bodies." He has, as it were, the right instincts. Even his frustrated attempts at lechery earn our sympathy: a "regular sort of fella" he seems, and we tend to sympathize with his outburst of impatience of Patricia's sententious homiles and prudish hysteria: "Good God, the new breed of conscience, the sheer brutal arrogance, we won't survive all these pretty consciences, you mark my words. Stupid little bitch, you can't even make a decent strawberry flan." Harry seduces the reader, in fact, just as he seduces Patricia: more accurately, the narrator seduces the reader into Harry's point-of-view. Our stereotype of the arms dealer, like Patricia's, does not hold; her epithets — "foul miserable bastard," "awful pig," and "murdering swine" — seem inappropriate and ill-judged. We cannot help but see Patricia ironically: she admires a man we know nothing about except he too seems a stereotypical do-gooder, and she hates a man we know to be not such a bad sort really. By touches subtle and obvious, Simpson builds on this ironic foundation. Both Patricia and Harry use the same telephone to conduct business of dubious ethical status — he to arrange arms deals, she to coerce female friends into anti-feminist good works against her stated principles of women's liberation. She then proves surprisingly competent to conduct Harry's business for him when he is injured, as does Harry to conduct her's. In the crowning irony, Patricia, the pacifist, becomes militant and only through a fluke misses killing the arms-broker by accident after she has failed to do so by intention with a rolling pin.

By mid-story, Patricia has undergone metamorphosis without change. She now mirrors Harry's values instead of Robert's, but she is still an uncritical reflector whose rhetoric sings different words to the same music. She is stifled by her husband's goodness, she says; she needs freedom, "simple animal freedom, I'm suffocating." Robert, she asserts smugly, would be baffled by such talk: "He lived within the proprieties like a fish in water." This total inversion from eulogistic to dyslogistic disposition toward the same object, Robert's goodness, is expressed with the same unquestioning conviction that marked Patricia's earlier declamations for women's liberation, social conscience and against gun-running. She adopts antithetical systems of values as easily, and as unconsciously, as she switched roles with Harry on the telephone.

Before the story ends, however, Patricia reconciles these oppositions within herself. The final scene provides a summative, visual pageant of her dilemma. Robert and Harry sit across from each other in the living room. Patricia is excluded from their community of mutual reminiscence. Thus Simpson makes her, schematically, an observer comparing two opposite alternatives, thereby recreating in a concrete scene the abstract structure of the psychodrama as a whole. This synecdochal moment also, for the first time, brings Patricia's perspective into alignment with that of the reader, neutralizing ironic distance. It is at this point that Patricia recognizes Robert and Harry as, not mutually exclusive, but complementary opposites. There are no absolutes; she is as much Harry as Robert, but is not wholly either. Here is a comic moment in the temporal sense, a moment of crisis between childhood and maturity, the confrontation of naive fantasy with the concrete recognition of evil in the world and the potential for evil as well as good in oneself.

Finally, for comparison, another story, "The Savages," presents a similar configuration of elements coalescing into an analogous but

crucially different pattern. The protagonist, Charles Polson, is a computer expert as dehumanized as the machines he serves with satisfaction in the sterile atmosphere of a corporation conducting weapons-research. As he lies in a hammock on the beach at his secluded weekend cottage, solutions to computer problems and his sexual relations with his wife take equally the forms of mathematical logistics and mingle with fantasies of himself as Etienne Brule, hunter, killer of Indian men and lover of Indian women, at home and invincible in the unspoiled wilderness.

Polson's fantasy of identity, like Patricia's, is put to the test in a moment of confrontation. His catalyst, like her's, comes in the guise of violence: four teen-agers, one with a rifle and another with a knife, invade his solitude and rape his wife. Unlike Patricia, however, Polson finds his fantasies come true in the crunch. He outmanoeuvers, disarms, and defeats the "raiding party" of "savages," killing two of them. In consequence, Polson's fantasies remain unrecognized; he is blind to realities made ironically obvious to the reader by Simpson's narrator. The teen-agers were simply acting out fantasies of escape and prowess equivalent to Polson's. The gun was rusty and unusable; the knife was nothing but a clumsy prop for adolescent ego; and the rape, while brutal and violent in theory, was gentle in fact, at least as loving a sexual encounter for Polson's wife as she had experienced with her machine-like husband. The comic moment passes without learning or change: two children are literally dead, and Polson continues to exist in the living-dead of dehumanization.

The stories, of course, are rich in potential thematic interpretation, but I merely wish to stress method. Both illustrate that "comic moment" in the temporal sense is basically a device of plot which focuses and orders the larger structural forces of momentum. The locus of momentum is the central consciousness, the protagonist, which begins, and in one case ends, as a synecdoche of partial, unexamined, therefore clichéd or stereotyped self-definition. Secondary characters inform oxymoronic opposites of fantasy and reality, good and evil, humanity and inhumanity. The tension between them creates a dynamic, a conflict of choice within the central consciousness worked out in the pattern of incidents and dialogue that, in fact, constitutes plot. In turn, this tension and dynamic are reflected by the irony-producing strategies of narration that provide for a reader the same double perspective as that generated from the extreme juxtaposition of literary and dramatic conventions in "The Ivy-Covered Manner" and "Where Does The Giant Gorilla Sleep?" Again, as in those stories, the double perspective directs the momentum of "The Lady and the Travelling Salesman" and "The Savages" beyond the limitations of a particular synecdoche to the general world of the reader's experience. Simpson's strategies of "comic moment," therefore, are the source of both internal structural cohesion and external thematic implications. At a common point of temporal and structural moment, character, pattern of incidents, narrative perspective, and theme find their common focus.

Simpson's remarkably consistent adherence to these tight principles of decorum in no way decreases his flexibility. As we have seen, with changes in the type of cliché at its centre, and adjustments in the relative stress on oxymoron and hyperbole, the basic rhetorical pattern can accommodate models that range from satirical extremities of the surreal and the farcical to the less eccentric comedy of common experience. Other stories I have no space to consider extend the range into the gentlest of ironies. In

"Visiting The Future," for instance, a Canadian immigrant returns to his native Ireland after many years absence for a bittersweet encounter with his origins. In another, "Night and Morning Wounds," a boy comes face to face with the aged poet whose work has inspired his dreams and made his existence tolerable. In this poignant encounter, the young man gains a measure of maturity, like Patricia, when he learns to distinguish fantasy from reality in both poetry and poet. As I said at the outset, the short story may be sad, funny, poignant or horrifying; it may record minor adjustments in the rhythm of existence or cataclysmic change; it may monitor individual or cultural crises. Simpson rings all these changes and others as well.

I should conclude with some mention of one aspect of Simpson's rhetorical method that really defies substantial analysis. His stories burst with an energetic, often uproarious wit. They may be the most effective oxymoron in Simpson's method of comic moment: the violent juxtaposition of hilarious medium with profoundly ethical message. It is also potentially the most dangerous, making the work vulnerable, ironically, to clichéd response. "I don't appreciate his sense of humour," or "but that's funny, not serious," asserts the doubtful reader, thereby violating, uncompelled by professional demands, his private relationship with the author. Each of us would have our own answer to such gratuitous impropriety; Simpson's is implicit in the thrust of his art. Laughter is a human response, but it is a symptom, not a system. Unexamined, the spasm of laughter, whether expressed or withheld, is simply a clichéd reaction, and I can hear Simpson respond in his Irish brogue: "Push through the cliché to the cause, man, and find the source of your humanity."

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