

## Lewis P. Simpson: A Compassionate Chronicler

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Lewis P. Simpson passed away in the spring of 2005. That same year he was awarded the Louisiana Writer Award, recognition that followed a long list of honors, awards, and appointments. Simpson's career of teaching and research covered a period of over sixty years, most of which was spent at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Undoubtedly, he could have followed the path of other famous LSU critics and writers—Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks among them—and migrated to Yale or other prestigious northern universities. The fact that he did not tells something about Simpson's character, for he was a modest, self-effacing man who thrived on rootedness and continuity. From the beginning, he worked from a deep-seated belief in the almost sacred importance of literature and activities such as criticism, teaching, and editing associated with it. Through his long tenure as editor at the *Southern Review*, his work at Louisiana State University Press, and countless hours of correspondence, advising, and consulting on literary projects, he promoted the efforts of others in the field. Still, in spite of this demanding public career, he managed to produce five groundbreaking books and hundreds of articles, notes, and reviews.

My first meeting with Simpson was an unforgettable experience. It took place at a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar that I attended at Baton Rouge in 1979. I still have the notebook that I kept of Professor Simpson's lectures, and they *were* lectures: not the sort of user-friendly group discussions that now often pass for doctoral or postdoctoral seminars. On those magical summer mornings, as the thermometer outside rose above one hundred, and the humidity seemed to hover at ninety percent, Simpson sat calmly at the head of the table, holding forth, seemingly without preparation, as through his inspired imagination we entered the company of Thomas Jefferson, John Randolph, Edgar Allan Poe, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. We saw the world from the perspective of Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Warren, and Walker Percy. Through the medium of his magisterial intelligence, we were escorted on an unforgettable journey. It was inspiration enough for a lifetime, focused, as it was, on those weighty obsessions that loomed large in Simpson's writing over a period of forty years: the nature and evolution of Western civilization, the place of Western Europe and America within this larger civilization, and the place of the South within American history and culture. Stated in these sweeping terms, Simpson's object of study may sound impossibly diffuse or even grandiose, but given his mastery of detail and nuanced reading, it was anything but that. Simpson was one of those exceptional scholars who could clearly locate a literary text within the broader context of intellectual history while incisively dissecting the implication of language at the most particular level.

Simpson's voice, always calm and genteel, nonetheless seemed to emerge from some private well of fierce personal experience, a guarded region that one suspected contained more than its share of grief as well as an overflowing love and joy. Despite the extent to which his critical work and teaching focused on the South, a region in which his family had extensive roots, and in which he appeared to be much at home, Simpson undoubtedly identified himself with and participated in the mythic sense of exile that, as he often suggested, permeates Western civilization from its Hebraic and classical origins to the present. Like William Gilmore Simms in a letter to James Henry Hammond on May

20, 1845, that Simpson quotes in *The Dispossessed Garden* (1975), he was “an exile” from “birth” who “through painful necessities” came to “the acquisition of an Independent Mind” (53). Yet just as the writers of the Southern Renaissance would later transform Simms’s terrifying awareness of exile into great art, so Simpson employed his own painful meditations on southern history as the basis for groundbreaking critical work. His subtle analysis of the origins of historical consciousness, which he referred to simply as “Mind,” illuminated the basis of American civilization and modern culture as a whole.

Simpson’s lectures, his account of the South and its place in American culture and America’s place in the broad sweep of Western civilization, were not by any means the dry, restrained observations of an outmoded philology. Rather, they were pure poetry. In a passionate cry over civilization’s original wound, more elegy than anything else, Simpson was registering the damage that humanity had carried for hundreds of years and that was now festering in the most unchecked manner. Like his friend and colleague in the republic of letters, Walker Percy, Simpson opposed the dominance of historical consciousness over that mythic sense of community that had once offered humanity a secure home. Like Percy also, Simpson seemed always to be warily awaiting an inevitable apocalypse. One wonders, since even in declining health he lived long enough to witness the events of 9/11, what must have run through his mind as he watched the towers collapsing, carrying with them not only the lives of thousands of innocent victims but also the symbolic authority of American civilization itself. The fact that these great twin edifices, symbols of American initiative and empire, could be brought down by a handful of ragged but fanatical extremists must have struck him as the embodiment of a nightmare that he had glimpsed again and again in the work of so many Southerners: Randolph, Poe, Twain, Allen Tate, and, most recently, Percy himself, whose novels, including *Lancelot* (1977), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), are replete with images of apocalyptic destruction.

With his unique command of historical issues and contexts, Simpson must have grasped that something entirely unprecedented had occurred. The attacks of September 11 roused Americans out of a

half-century of self-absorption that Simpson himself had termed the “subjectification of history” (*Fable* 206). As he writes of Percy’s fiction,

In its knowledge of the Kierkegaardian duality—of, on the one hand, its freedom and, on the other, its historical finitude—the modern secular self knows the difficult encumbrance of history. The self also knows—intuits, at any rate—that it has the will to transcend this encumbrance, even if it must abrogate history and become God. (206)

If in the early hours of September 11 Americans still resided within a subjective cocoon, their freedom from history was soon brought to an abrupt end. Simpson must have immediately realized the significance of those events: that the attacks were not merely political nor military in their intent but a challenge to the core principles of an increasingly secularized, liberal civilization that had come to believe in the almost unlimited power and authority of the individual. The attacks not only brought this fantasy into question, unleashing what would be years and perhaps decades of conflict, but they also turned it on its head.

As this conjecture suggests, Simpson’s conception of literature was tied inextricably to the field of ethics and crucially informed by a lifetime of scholarship on the relationship of mythic and historical consciousness. Even in an age in which the influence of the classical-Christian tradition appears to have declined, Simpson found evidence that all human beings sought some analogous structure of order and meaning. This quest was the central preoccupation of Faulkner, the South’s preeminent writer, in whose fiction Simpson stresses “the story of the self as literary artist attempting to confront and to order a desacralized world” (102). In Faulkner’s great novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Simpson discerned the peculiar burden of southern history. Employing the trope of incest, Faulkner, according to Simpson, signals his region’s “introverted illusion of itself as a representation of the old, familial, corporate, sacramental community,” yet this illusion merely conceals “the ruthless drive of the modern historical ego . . . unleashed from all societal bonds,” an alienated ego that “in its isolation must

seek to emulate not the substance but the appearance of the old community" (109). This old-fashioned conception of mankind's search for the "substance" of moral community rooted in mythic belief was at the very center of Simpson's approach to literature. However contemporary his readings were in other respects, Simpson believed quite passionately that literature was an endeavor closely related to theology, and as such its purpose was not to explicate technical devices nor unravel pointless structural patterns, much less to engage in the mischievous subversions of cultural criticism, but to teach readers to lead better and more selfless lives. Simpson believed that during that difficult period of transition from the classical-Christian to the modern age, especially during those decades roughly corresponding to Modernism, literature played an even more important role than it had in an earlier, more stable era of theocracy.

In the post-Christian age, literature is, in a sense, all one has, although at the same time there seems to exist the paradoxical fact that with the breakdown of earlier forms of belief, one may now have become less capable of responding to the effort on the part of writers to create out of their own mental resources some new form of order. Once traditional temples of faith have crumbled, only a nice, empty plot of earth remains but with no sense of what to put there nor how to erect it. Nietzsche's prophecy of the bright new age that would follow the death of God clearly has not come to pass. The dark age of destruction that Nietzsche thought necessary as a bridge to human freedom now seems less like a temporary disruption of civilization than a permanent state of ruin. As the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski writes, describing the intrinsically violent nature of those secular eschatologies that arose in the post-Enlightenment period, "apocalyptic action can . . . rely only on total destruction" (222).

Although Simpson recognized the extent to which traditional religious practice had declined in the Western democracies (if not in the developing world, where, paradoxically, Catholic and Protestant denominations that originated in Europe have seen explosive growth in the numbers of their believers during the past half-century), his focus in reality was never on the future course of this post-Christian society.

His scholarship was, in a particular sense, antiquarian in that, during an era of mad social experiment and bewilderment, one's only resource is the past. In an age of nearly universal skepticism, it is to the past that one looks for solace, for strength, and for direction. One should not overlook the fact that, alongside the incisive critique of civilization's slide toward gnosticism and secularism, Simpson's published work probed every possible avenue of escape from what he viewed as a degraded condition. As he writes in *The Man of Letters in New England and the South* (1973), "The Southern writer has tended to be a kind of priest and prophet of a metaphysical nation, compelled in his literary construction of human existence in the South . . . toward representing it as a quest for a revelation of man's moral community in history" (202). This "priest[ly]" vocation, thrust upon the writer in the wake of the demise of Christendom, was nonetheless confirmation of a deep-seated impetus for order and belief.

Simpson's great achievement lies in his acute diagnosis of the present condition based on his arduous contemplation and analysis of the past, a contemplation that centered on an effort to understand the transition of Western civilization from the state of Christendom to that of modernity, and this study inevitably resulted in an elegiac evocation of what had been lost. His reading of American literature and history revealed a nation founded as an intricate part of this rebellion against a mythic order of belief. He saw this inclination mirrored in the works of major authors from Emerson and Poe to Herman Melville and Faulkner. In the case of Faulkner's Quentin Compson—as in Huck Finn—he observes that with Quentin one discovers "a connection with history so absolute that it is the very source of his being" (*Fable* 83). American democracy was, by definition, engaged in questioning and challenging a traditional worldview and dedicated to the creation of a new order of liberty based on individualistic, entrepreneurial, and secular principles in conflict with inherited conceptions of a static, hierarchical, and religious nature. Nobody understood better than Simpson just how risky this endeavor was because of how much had been lost, but by the same token no critic was more "American" in his background or attitudes. By definition, the American experiment, in which Simpson's ancestors had

been fully complicit, if this is the right word for it—perhaps “devoted” would be more accurate—involved mistakes on a grand scale, and in the southern experience in particular Simpson recognized that these mistakes were magnified within the South’s uniquely tragic history.

Possibly, Simpson thus seems something of a desperate survivalist, hopelessly waiting around with his circle of southern reactionaries for the end of the world that never quite showed up. Percy, Simpson’s friend and literary associate, certainly cultivated this persona and employed it to great effect in his fiction and essays, but the fact is that Simpson, both as an individual and as a literary critic, was very far from being a despondent or disheartened figure. On a personal level, he was full of humor, wit, gentleness, and deep concern of the sort that can only be described in terms not much used today: he was, in every fiber of his being, a cultivated gentleman. Dressed in a neat seersucker suit and natty bowtie, as he was the first time I encountered him in 1979, he was exactly what he appeared to be: a highly knowledgeable, conscientious, painstakingly exact scholar and editor, though he was also more than that. Beneath this trim persona were a haunting awareness of terror and an enduring grief for a lost past—not by any means that of the Lost Cause but of a greater one.

It is painful knowing that Lewis P. Simpson is no longer with us. It is also painful knowing that, while he lived, Simpson carried the burden of a peculiar insight into the role of America and the South in the decline of that ordering of life to which he so often and so lovingly referred simply as “Christendom.” For many years, his presence at a seminar or conference or his contribution of a sympathetic letter, journal article, or review was enough to keep the barbarians at bay or at least to put them on notice. Now, a firm and wise voice for humanity has been silenced, and it seems that American culture has slipped one step further down toward a mechanical and thoughtful mode of criticism in which, as everywhere in American academe, technical, jargon-laden chatter and intimidating, thesis-driven manifestoes too often pass for scholarship.

At least now, one can appreciate how great Simpson’s contribution was, since with each year that passes the scholarly world is in greater

need of it. My advice to Simpson's admirers, those who miss him and recognize his importance, as well as to his detractors, those who question the lasting value of his work or who may simply be unfamiliar with it, is the same: go back and read his books. Begin where he did, and follow his long and arduous intellectual journey from Christendom to modernity and beyond. There, in the intricate but clear and unequivocal progress of his mind, one will discover more than enough to inspire and comfort, even in an era of widespread shallowness and banality. Even then, even with the noble example of Simpson's intellectual tenacity and courage, it is not likely that "the world's great age [will] begin . . . anew" (Shelley 438), as Shelley had it. Shelley, of course, was a good deal of the problem, as Simpson saw it. But at least the world, as Simpson understood it, the world of thought and imagination, of civility and respect, will for a time continue unabated.

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