



1981

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Recommended Citation

Drury, John; and Irwin, Mark. "An Interview with Louis Simpson." *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies* 3 (1981): 96-107.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0743-2747.1038>

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AN INTERVIEW WITH LOUIS SIMPSON

John Drury & Mark Irwin

DRURY: In an essay you wrote for *The New Naked Poetry* you said that ideally the words of a poem should disappear from the page. How contradictory is that to Robert Graves's remark that poetry should "stand out in relief?"

SIMPSON: Absolute contradiction to what I'm talking about. As a matter of fact, I think in American poetry there is a big division now between the poets to whom language is a reality in itself—I would say that Ashbery is such a writer, and Wallace Stevens was such a writer—and the thing I'm talking about, which is a way of writing in which your attention is directed *through* the writing to the object you're talking about. You should be having the feeling, seeing the object, having the experience and not being immersed in the language itself. I'm not saying that's a bad way to write, the other way. I'm saying that I think a writer has to choose between these two extreme positions.

DRURY: Would it be fair to say that it's a difference between poems of surface and poems of content?

SIMPSON: Maybe so. I tend to think so. I think that Wallace Stevens is a poet of surface and that William Carlos Williams, for example, is a poet of content. Of course, none of these things are absolutes. Obviously Williams paid attention to his language too, but the attention is not directed toward the style, it's being directed *through* style. The purpose of style is to make you experience the thing, not to experience the language itself.

IRWIN: Would that also be like the narrative style of, say, a Russian novelist, someone like Gogol or Dostoevsky, in which the reader becomes the narrator, becomes the persona? Do you want an invisible sort of surrender to the story?

SIMPSON: The object of any story is to get the person listening into it, into the experience. And you can use any technique that will make the person hearing forget that he's listening to a story, and actually feel that he's living the story. That's why Conrad and Ford were so involved in trying to find a plausible narrator, like Marlow. The object of that was to prevent the reader from being jarred all the time by the author telling him to look at this and look at that. The object of creating a narrator such as Marlow in *Lord Jim*, for example, is to give you the illusion that you're in a conversation where things are more acceptable. The problem of all storytelling is to set up a relationship between you and the reader, so that he believes the story. Now for my money, a very highly colored personal style tends to destroy that illusion, whereas in a style that is more—you may call it classical if you wish, or whatever, but I call it transparent—the words

don't get in the way. There are levels, however, of possibility with language. I'm not arguing for simple, naive language. I'm arguing for language that is impersonal. *Impersonal*. And therefore you don't feel that this is Louis Simpson telling you one of his stories, you feel *gee, I can see the scene, I can get into it*. This is very opposed to the concept of the poet as a man who builds a peculiar style.

IRWIN: So it's almost the same notion as when Proust talked about his writing as if watching from behind a glass door. I mean, that's the sort of impersonal tone you're talking about.

SIMPSON: Yes. I want detachment of the personal element from the work of art. You can't avoid the personal—I don't mean that—but you have to work your way through your own personality to get to a level that other people can share. It's that simple. For example, I read the poem "Typhus" last night, that poem about the young girl. Now if that appeared in a magazine without my name on it, I defy anybody to say that I wrote it. There are no mannerisms of style. Now some people may think *well, but he's not much of a poet*. But that's a deliberate thing on my part. I want the story to be valid in terms of itself.

DRURY: Except that other poets aren't working toward the same thing. In that sense it *is* individual, and it does stand out as an individual style.

SIMPSON: The only way they could say it might be Louis Simpson is because other people aren't writing that kind of subject. But there is a problem, because what I'm calling an impersonal style can sometimes sound close to prose. So the problem in writing these stories I've been writing is to maintain a very tight structure.

IRWIN: It seems to me that in a pure notion of narrative poetry there is one inherent danger and that is if form begins to dictate the content then it could possibly rule out any sort of discovery or any lyricism that might happen in the poem itself. If one sets out to write a narrative poem and thinks always that this is a narrative poem, isn't that placing form before content?

SIMPSON: No, I don't think so. When you write a song you don't stop half way through and start a meditative poem. Any poem you write has a kind of form that you accept and work within. Everything that you undertake to do has its own general outlines and you work within those outlines. Sometimes you can break the form quite plausibly in the middle of a poem. There's nothing to prevent you in the middle of a narrative poem from having a kind of chorus or some other sort of element come into the poem if you can manage it. No, there's great freedom of movement. Again, the point is what kind of effect you are trying to make, and every artist is conscious generally of the kind of effect he's trying to make. I'm arguing against subjective poetry that does not relate to the outer world and outer actions. I'm arguing against poetry which is—

DRURY: Self indulgent?

SIMPSON: Well, you can give it all sorts of names, but the kind of poem that Anne Sexton wrote is the kind of thing that I think is a dead end.

DRURY: That would be a particular danger in using the materials of autobiography.

SIMPSON: Yes, it is very dangerous.

DRURY: Maybe that's the strongest reason to move toward the impersonal you're talking about.

SIMPSON: That's why I mentioned two of those people yesterday—Plath and Lowell—but you see I think that in their cases, as I said, the character in the poem is being used dramatically and being moved around. It's not a naked self-revelation.

DRURY: Of course, if one isn't writing narrative poetry there would be the danger of going back to writing impersonal poems about impersonal subjects, like a lot of the poetry that came out of the New Criticism.

SIMPSON: Oh yes, there is the danger of writing a poem which is just a construction, but I always put the emphasis on the fact that the poem must convey some feeling and contact which they did not put an emphasis on. I don't by any means think that form alone can produce a poem.

IRWIN: It seems that today there is a kind of poetry which wants to start not with anything concrete but with what might be notes toward a poem or something elliptical. How much do you think a poem can start to find its subject matter as it goes? Stevens does that to a certain extent in some of his poems: he'll start with an elliptical point and then move towards its center.

SIMPSON: You see, the main problem for writers of poetry is that there is no longer a common language of feeling. So the writers have become terribly self-conscious about speaking out on any subject and also about buttonholing the reader and saying *I'm going to tell you a story, I'm going to give you this kind of poem*. So what writers try to do is slide into the subject in an informal, casual manner, or a manner that will be acceptable to the listener, who would not accept a story told straight out, and involve the reader in the difficulty of writing—that's what you're talking about. They involve the reader in the difficulty of having a voice, of beginning at any point in time, of making a plausible statement. They involve the reader in the actual writing of the story, so that at a certain point they can sort of cooperate with the reader, the reader cooperates with them, saying *I understand that it's only a story, it's only fiction, but let's see what kind of a game this is and how we work it out*. Donald Barthelme carries that to an extreme. It's a sign of the lack of a language of feeling. We don't trust the reader, we don't know what he feels and what he cannot feel. So we try to say we're all

72 writing this together, beginning with notes, beginning with random observations. Kind of a cooperative effort. And the excuse for it is that this is the way the world is, therefore the writer must do likewise. A question was raised to me the other day: a man said there were so many voices, how can you possibly choose one? There may be any number of voices but you as a writer can do anything you like—you can choose one. I'm a little turned off by the fragmentation and the note beginnings and the elliptical thing you're talking about—because I want to get a charge of feeling or scene going in a story and I don't want to waste my time with that. At the same time I do want the reader to accept what I'm saying, so the main problem for me has been to develop a writing voice that I can apply, a plausible style in which I can tell a story, a style that moves straight forward but still sounds like the way people might think. It's very difficult because the tendency is to fall into prose. So again I come back to the happening, the actual structure of the story itself, because that prevents its being prose. As long as people are listening intently it's a poem, I think.

DRURY: How conscious are you of where a poem is going and where it will end? Is there still a lot of the process of discovery involved in it?

SIMPSON: Oh, yes. I have a lot of trouble with poems. I don't usually have trouble starting them, or even working through the middle parts, but the endings are always the devil. Because I know there is something important happening, but exactly what direction to go in is the problem. I spend a lot of time rewriting and leaving things to sit and gel and come back and ask myself over and over again what direction. I've often changed a story. I thought it was going to go one way and then had it move in another direction, and often as a result of reading it to someone or having them read it. An acute reader is the best friend a narrative poet can have. In fact, a narrative poet *needs* a couple of people that he can trust who will say *well, that just doesn't work*.

DRURY: I would imagine it would be much easier in a discursive, associative poem to get away with all sorts of things.

SIMPSON: Well yeah, that's the point. There's a kind of poem that is written all the time: descriptive poetry or poetry that is discursive and just doesn't go anywhere. It doesn't make anything happen. A lot of ideas we have can be written out as verse, but that doesn't make something real happen, and a lot of poetry is just a man's thoughts, or a woman's thinking. And for me that's not even the beginning of art. We're walking around all day long with a lot of thoughts. Until a man starts to make something happen in a kind of structure that is a poem, for me he hasn't begun to be a poet. I see long poems, descriptions of—I don't know—one thing or another. They aren't even the beginning of a poem. They're lifeless, they have no movement, they have no action, they have no vitality of themselves. In a funny sense what I'm looking for is a kind of folk art for American intellectuals. Really. I want a folk art. People who go to universi-

ties do have a background which is a kind of common, shared, “folk” background—we’ve all read the same books, and so on. And I’m asking for a kind of poem that is a happening, not a poem which is just a discussion.

DRURY: So it wouldn’t be enough for a poem to be simply a “graph of the mind.”

SIMPSON: It has to be a drama of some kind.

IRWIN: You have a way of making what is anti-tragic sort of tragic. I think of your poem “The True Weather for Women.” What I want to ask is how impersonal you think the voice becomes. If I were to compare some of your endings, they all seem strong, but they’re flat, in the way a Rousseau painting is flat. If there were a great folk voice it could never impede itself, it would always be an open voice, or maybe a loud echo.

SIMPSON: I try to leave my poems at the end with a kind of openness about them. I never try to finish them.

DRURY: They do seem to dissolve into a kind of resonance.

SIMPSON: Yes. That’s what I want.

DRURY: I was wondering if the use of meditation in reconstructing scenes would have something to do with that, if the act of meditating doesn’t inhabit the poem when it’s written, too, and give it that resonance.

SIMPSON: I think so. I think that such meditation as I have done has made me think about a thing more and more deeply. But it’s a *real* thing, it’s a situation, and you can imagine it and meditate upon it until something moves, and you write your action. You can make up things, but they have to become realities, psychological realities, for you, and then you can work with them. An imaginary scene can be just as real as a scene in your own life, because it involves your own feelings and ideas.

IRWIN: Would you agree that if true narrative poetry could be viewed as a horizontal movement—in other words, a movement from A to B—that lyrical poetry, on the other hand, would be a constant vertical movement, as in a poem by Dylan Thomas where the first line is heavy with both the overture and the sequel?

SIMPSON: Well, it may be true of Dylan Thomas.

IRWIN: If the poem ever falls any place in the movement, it seems as though it could not be written.

SIMPSON: Well no, it couldn’t afford to fall. A lyrical movement can’t falter. But lyrical movements can be just sheer repetition, they can be waves of the same thing over and over again, like a Burns lyric, a restatement of the same thing. And some of Thomas: “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” is a poem which simply repeats the same idea four or five times. The difference between a lyrical poem and a

narrative poem would simply be that the narrative poem is telling you a story and that the prime object of a lyrical poem is to release a kind of feeling. The narrative poem is trying to tell you something about the experience, the way people live or think. It can be very subtle. I don't want it to sound as though I'm now arguing for simple stories. They can be very subtle indeed.

IRWIN: How about someone like Seamus Heaney? Does he seem like a good example of lyric and narrative, equally balanced?

SIMPSON: Yes, he does. Some of his narratives become meditations. That seems to be one of the hardest—to join the two, to get an equal balance between the two. There just aren't many poets that fall into that. What bothers me is a few kinds of American poetry being written. One is a little teeny bitty anecdote that doesn't matter much. That's not really what I call a narrative poem. And another is a kind of travelogue. Actually, last night while I was reading to the audience, I was thinking *well now, here is a group of poems about Australia, here I've read them a couple of poems about this imaginary Russia*. Am I just a dilettante in travel? No, there has to be behind all those poems a cohesive voice, a cohesive point of view which would make a book. The new book I've made is held together by a point of view that's behind all those poems. Every one of the poems is looking for an emotional effect; there must be a resemblance between those emotional effects, and that's what's really holding the book together, what I'm calling the voice.

DRURY: Do you see the new book as a kind of companion piece to *Searching for the Ox*, or as very different?

SIMPSON: Not very different, but it's not a companion piece—it moves on from that. All books are transitional, I suppose, but there was a weakness in the *Searching for the Ox* book. Not the title poem, I'm very pleased with the title poem. But with quite a few of the other poems, I feel in looking back on it, while I had a story and I was trying to tell it, the structure was not quite charged enough at all points, or came too close to prose. Which was not true of the book before, *Adventures of the Letter I*, which was more highly colored and more poetic in the traditional sense. Some of the flatnesses of the book *Searching for the Ox* have been worked out by me in this present book. I think the poems in this book are not poetic in language the way that some of the poems in *Adventures of the Letter I* were, but in this book the structure of the poems is more sure, and the tension is maintained more strongly. And also I've done more daring things in the narratives in this book, in terms of conversations and simply taking a room with people in it and seeing if you can make a poem out of people in a room. A very hard thing to do. Just a domestic scene, and so on. I think it works in this book better. I think maybe the voice is surer than it was. I think the last poem in the book, the most recent poem I've written, is really very successful in terms of making a bunch of people sit around and talk, and then,

from that, moving out through the mind of one of the characters into a jungle scene, and then back into the room. That kind of risk I did not take in the *Searching for the Ox* book. And I think it works wonderfully, and within my definition of realism it's perfectly legitimate because I'm moving through the mind of one of the characters.

IRWIN: You have a wonderful talent for a tragic-comic vision—in the way you've taken the line from the Chekhov story for the new title . . .

SIMPSON: *Caviare at the Funeral*.

IRWIN: Would it be true that you share a tragic-comic vision in the way that Joyce would see that in anything tragic there's really a comic notion in it?

SIMPSON: I think so. The kind of writing I like most is that kind of mixture. I think that some of the greatest humorous writing is like that. Chaucer is like that, Shakespeare is like that. I think the Henry IV plays are terribly tragic if you think about them, really, from one point of view, but they *are* funny as hell too. Falstaff *is* the great comic character, right? I think he's a tragic character too. After all, this is very deeply embedded in literature, this tradition of the mixture. In Greek literature, in Hebrew literature, surely, you find this mixture. I don't think it's true, however, of Dante. Except in maybe a couple of spots where he *looks* at it—like the Paolo and Francesca episode. But in general his view of life is that it is divine *comedy*, in the sense that you're supposed to go out laughing. You're supposed to go laughing through hell, really, because this is an example of God's beautiful justice. But I want a mixture of pathos—real pathos, not the violin strings trembling—but I love the sense of something being very enjoyable and yet rather sad too. Of course, there are certain things that cannot be treated this way, certain episodes that are just too ghastly for words. You see that little poem I read about the man who came back from prison? The first version was two pages long, and I had it in a cell in prison, and I had a description in the poem of a man who had been beaten to death, coming back into the cell and dying in front of him—which had actually happened. But the poem couldn't sustain it. It would either have had to be a hell of a lot longer, and circumstantial, and much more detailed, or else you had to leave that out. So my main point in the poem—and after all I had to decide what *was* my main point—was that he had been in prison, he was back in ordinary life, and we're all like that, we're all very ordinary, even the people who've been to prison and been through terrible experiences. "He glances at the magazine, / looking through the table of contents." And that was the real, subtle point of the original poem. And the other stuff about the man being beaten to death in the cell and so on was something that other people had written, or could write better. It could be imagined; we don't have to go through all that. These are points that you come to by your own meditation, and by thinking—about art, you

know. While you're working, you're really going through a very intense intellectual discipline, when you write a poem. I don't know of any discipline so exhausting, really, as that kind of questioning of yourself: What do I want to do? Why am I doing this? Why is this dead? What is missing? Is there another way entirely of approaching this? A poet is involved in this thought all the time—that is, if he's a working poet. A lot of poets stop working. What is tragic about American poets, one after another, is that they learn how to write a certain level style. And it's like a man who learns to skate: they simply glide on that level forever and ever. What was good about the work was the *sense* of struggle and creation when they were younger, and then it stops, and you get a kind of performance that doesn't matter very much. I've always changed, and it's been a problem for me in terms of reputation. But it doesn't matter to me about that. The fact is that people don't know where to have me, they don't know what to do with me. What am I up to, or don't I know? What I'm up to is actual involvement with the process itself all the time. Which makes for some failures, real failures. There are always a handful of poems I've published in my books that are just failures: four or five or six. But I think the kind of narrative I'm learning to write comes out of taking a lot of real risks. For example, *The New Yorker* stopped accepting my poetry a few years ago. They have *one* of my poems. But the fact is that they simply couldn't see what I was doing. The kind of narrative that I'm writing now is just too unadorned and too—I'm not flattering myself—just too un-phony for them to handle. It's just a completely different view of how the thing works.

IRWIN: In other words, life isn't always ornate and baroque.

SIMPSON: There's a way of saying things directly, you know. There is a way of saying the right thing. And also being poetic about it.

IRWIN: Truthful.

SIMPSON: Yeah. The poetry resides, as Wilfred Owen said, in the truth. The poetry's in the pity, he said. That's a great statement. It doesn't mean that you're not going to have problems with language or structure. God knows, from what I've said you must understand how hard I think about this whole thing. But it does mean that you can't bamboozle the reader with just sheer erudition.

IRWIN: It seems that this truth you're talking about, this simple and candid truth—there's a poem by Donald Hall called "The Ox Cart Man."

SIMPSON: I think that's a remarkable poem.

IRWIN: How he builds the cart, takes his produce, sells the thing and starts over.

SIMPSON: You know something? It's a very interesting idea, but he *did* it very well, he carried it off very well.

IRWIN: It's a very ambitious poem, but he makes the occasion seem small,

which almost doubles its reach.

SIMPSON: I think it's the best thing he's ever written. If I were doing an anthology of contemporary poetry I would put that in without question. You know, Williams's remark was that as long as you're involved with the technique of writing you're OK. And I believe that more and more as I get older. I said that to someone and they thought I meant something very trivial. Technique for me involves feeling, it involves everything.

DRURY: How do you feel about your early poems, when you were writing in traditional forms?

SIMPSON: I don't read them any more. I don't deny them. There are one or two I still read. The poem "Carentan O Carentan"—the war poems I still read. For one reason, I think that the traditional form was very well suited to some of that material.

DRURY: What about "The Runner?"

SIMPSON: No, I don't read that.

DRURY: Well, it's much longer.

SIMPSON: And it's blank verse. I think that it was the wrong form.

DRURY: Would it work outside of its blank verse?

SIMPSON: Yes. I think if I were writing that story now I could write it in free verse very well. The kind of stuff that I was reading by Patrick Kavanaugh, that kind of moving, free line. There's nothing to prevent you writing in free verse and then going into rhyme at certain points if you feel like clinching something. Lowell does it in *Life Studies* very well—he uses rhyme now and then in a kind of playful manner and a kind of echo.

DRURY: Well, Kavanaugh was rhymed, the part you were reading.

SIMPSON: Parts of it. There's nothing to prevent you doing anything you like. No, the early poems I don't deal with now because I am not interested in the kind of thing I was trying to say—or mainly the kind of mood I was trying to create, a kind of dancing meter in many places—whereas now I'm much closer to my own voice when I write. I'm listening to my own voice speaking, really. But much more concentrated. I love it when I can get out of my own voice into the voices of other people. I know this is not a poetry reading, but can I read you part of that poem I was talking about? It's called "The Man She Loved" and it begins, you see, in an impersonal narrative:

In the dusk

men with sidelocks, wearing hats
and long black coats walked side by side,
hands clasped behind their backs,
talking Yiddish. It was like being in a foreign country.

The members of the family
arrived one by one . . .
his aunts, his uncle, and his mother
talking about her business
in Venezuela. She had moved to a new building
with enough space and an excellent location.

Now here you're running very close to prose. You have to be very careful. But if it's tight enough, and the language has a certain . . . The words "She had moved to a new building / with enough space and an excellent location"—the "I" sounds are working here, you know.

IRWIN: Right. But it seems also that the reason you couldn't be reading fiction is that there's always a subtle rhetorical tone. Would you say that's part of it?

SIMPSON: Yes. Let me go on:

To their simple, affectionate questions
he returned simple answers.
For how could he explain what it meant to be a writer . . .
a world that was entirely different,
and yet it would include the sofa
and the smell of chicken cooking.

I'm having *fun* with these poems! And it's myself in the poem, but I've got a distance between me and that guy, which is quite large. And then—

Little did they know as they spoke
that one day they would be immortal
in a novel that commanded the sweep
of Tolstoy—

I don't know if you remember in a poem called "Sway"—at the end of the poem when he says he's going to be a novelist. And this guy is *me*, but he's a failed novelist, you see. The guy writing these narrative poems is a failed novelist. It's kind of a joke in the book:

in a novel that commanded the sweep
of Tolstoy, a magnificent creation
that would bring within its compass
offices in Manhattan and jungles
of the Amazon. A grasp of—

He's reviewing his own novel!

A grasp of psychology
and sense of the passing of time
that one can only compare to,
without exaggerating, Proust.

I had a *lovely* time writing that sentence. You see? I'm not sure that people will get it. And then he goes right into this daydream—and he's sitting in the room with these other people, right?

The path wound through undergrowth.
Palms rose at an angle from the humid plain.
He passed a hut with chickens and goats . . .
and old man who sat with his back to a wall,
not seeing. A woman came out of a door
and stared after him.

In the distance
the purple mountains shone, fading
as the heat increased.

Clear out of that room—into a Conradian *Nostromo*. It's triggered, however, by the Venezuelan reference that came eighteen lines before. I think you can play, you can have a lot of fun with it. Then suddenly:

"Let me take a look at it,"
said Joey. He took the watch
from Beth, pried open the back,
and laid it on the table before him.
Then from the pocket of his vest
he produced a jeweler's loupe.
He screwed this into his eye
and examined the works.
"I can fix it. It only needs an adjustment."

You see the shift in the poem, from that dream world back . . . Now, that's what I mean by the kind of problems and the kind of stuff you can do. And I'm enjoying it.

IRWIN: Maybe some of the public's difficulty with reading poetry like this would be the subtlety and the shift of tonalities. It seems that the contemporary notion is to shock the reader with the unexpected and get all the orgiastic things out of the way.

SIMPSON: As a writer you must assume one thing which is very hard to assume: that people are listening . . . with great attention. Now today this is almost a madman's idea—I mean, to think that people are listening to

poetry with *real* attention, and hearing that kind of shift, is almost—you have to be crazy to believe it. Because they can't even hear—I mean my students (I'm sure that's true here too), a lot of them can't hear the most *blunt* voices, much less these shifts. However, whenever you start to feel a little desperate about that, imagine when Conrad was writing: who was hearing the shifts in *his* narratives, or who was discovering the things that graduate students now are studying and discovering? Who was *aware* of that in his own time? When he was publishing serial stories in *Blackwood's*, how many of those readers were aware of the subtlety . . .

IRWIN: Or Proust, who was taking twice the distance . . .

SIMPSON: Yes. But every artist—this is the secret of a real artist—assumes that absolute attention is out there somewhere. Now this is what makes you work. It's out there somewhere. Someday, someone will read this poem and really get it. That's what your audience is, that belief. Somewhere out there is an audience. Listening. And will pay attention to *why* you didn't use this word or chose that word instead. And the curious thing is that the people that have that belief, that faith, find the audience. Proust said they create it. And you do, in a way. You create the audience that can read you.

