



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

51 | Autumn 2008

Theatricality in the Short Story in English

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Helen Simpson

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#### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/925>

ISSN: 1969-6108

#### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

#### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2008

ISSN: 0294-04442

#### Electronic reference

Helen Simpson, « “The Tipping Point” », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 51 | Autumn 2008, Online since 01 December 2011, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/925>

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# "The Tipping Point"

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- 1 Look at that sky. It's almost sitting on the windscreen. Whose idea was it to hold the Summer School up in the wilds this year? I know my sweet Americans would follow me to the ends of the earth for my thoughts on the Bard; and I know Stratford venues are stratospheric these days. But all this way to study the Scottish play *in situ* smacks of desperation. If ever a sky looked daggers, this is it.
- 2 I was quite looking forward to the drive, actually. Impossible to get lost, my esteemed colleague Malkie MacNeil told me, just follow the A82 all the way and enjoy the scenery, the mountains, best in the world blah blah. So I left Glasgow reasonably bright and hopeful this morning after a dish of porridge, up along Loch Lomond, and the light has drained steadily away through Tarbet, Ardlui, Tyndrum, until I realise that it's eleven in the morning on the fifth of August and I've got to turn on the headlights. Storm clouds over Glen Coe. "The cloud-capp'd Towers, the gorgeous Palaces." Not really. More like a celestial housing estate.
- 3 Alright, let's have something suitably gloomy in the way of music. Here we are. *Winterreise* with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and his manly baritone. No finer example of the pathetic fallacy than Schubert's *Winterreise*. "What's that when it's at home, Dr Beauman?" That is the reading of one's own emotion into external nature, child. I still cannot believe that I, confirmed commitmentphobe, have been cast as the rejected lover, ignominiously dumped like some soppy First Year.
- 4 Nun ist die Welt so trübe, der Weg gehüllt in Schnee. My German may not be fluent but it's become more than passable in the last year. You'd allow that, Angelika? Now the world is so bleak, the path shrouded in snow. Schnee.
- 5 It was immediate. As soon as we first clapped eyes on each other etcetera. But, joking apart, it was. I was over in Munich to give my paper on *Milton's Comus; the Masque Form as Debate and Celebration*, mainly because I wanted to check out the painted rococo Cuvilliestheater — crimson, ivory and gold — on Residenzstrasse. I needed it for my chapter on European Court Theatre, for the book which now bears your name as dedicatee.

- 6 You were in charge of that Conference, Head of Arts Admin for all the participating institutions that week. Once it was over we went back to your flat in Cologne. Jens was staying with his grandmother as luck would have it. Beautiful Angelika, with your fierce pale eagle eyes and beaming smile. I remember capering round your bed like a satyr after you'd given me the first of your ecological curtain lectures. I was quoting Comus at you to shut you up:
- Wherefore did nature pour her bounties forth  
With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,  
Covering the earth with odours, fruits and flocks,  
Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,  
But all to please and sate the curious taste?
- 7 I was proud and stout and gleeful in the presence of your angularity. It felt like a challenge. Heaping you with good things became part of that. I filled your austere kitchen with delicacies, though that wasn't easy as you are of course vegan.
- 8 "Enough is enough," you said, pushing me away.
- 9 "You can never have enough," I laughed. "Didn't you know that?"
- 10 "Not so. I have."
- 11 Ich will den Boden küssen,/ durchdringen Eis und Schnee / mit meinen heißen Tränen. Schnee again. I want to kiss the ground, to pierce the ice and snow with my hot tears. Yes, well. Romanticism was your besetting sin, Angelika; your quasi-mystical accusatory ecospeak about the planet. Whereas my line is, if it's going to happen, it's going to happen—I don't see how anything mankind does can impose change on overwhelming natural phenomena like hurricanes and tsunamis. We resemble those small frail figures in a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, dwarfed by the immensity of nature. You took me to see his great painting *Das Eismeer* in the Hamburger Kunsthalle, jagged ice floes in a seascape beyond hope; and you used it as a jumping-off point to harangue me about the collapse of the Larsen B ice shelf. My clever intense passionate Angelika, so quick to imagine the worst, and so capable of anguish; you wept like a red-eyed banshee when you gave me the push.
- 12 An ominous cloudscape, this, great weightless barricades of cumulonimbus blocking the light. I can't see another car or any sign of humanity. Once out of this miserable valley, I'll stop for petrol in Ballachulish. Then it's on up past Loch Linnhe, Loch Lochy, Loch Oich, Loch Ness, and I'll be there. Inverness. What's done is done. Half way through the week there's a day trip planned to Cawdor Castle, where Duncan doubtless shakes his gory locks on mugs and mousemats all over the gift shop.
- 13 So then I applied for a peripatetic fellowship at the University of Cologne, and got it. I brushed up my Schiller. I wrote a well-received paper on Gotthold Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* and gave a seminar on Odon von Horvath, the wandering playwright who all his life was terrified of being struck by lightning and then, during a Parisian thunderstorm, took shelter beneath a tree on the Champs Elysees and was killed by a falling branch. Let that be a warning to you, Angelika: you can worry too much.
- 14 We were very happy, you and me and Jens. He's unusually thoughtful and scrupulous, that boy; like his mother. They had their annual day of atonement at his school while I was over, when the children are instructed to consider the guilt of their militaristic forefathers in the last century. That was the night he had an asthma attack and we ended up in Casualty. Cue copious lectures from you on air quality, of course.

- 15 And here's the rain, driving against the windscreen with a violence fit to crack it. It's almost comic, this journey, the menace of those massed clouds, the grey-green gloom.
- 16 Nor do I have a residual belief that rain is in any way cleansing or purgative. No, no. As you so painstakingly taught me, Angelika, our sins of pollution lock into the clouds and come down as acid rain. Hence Waldsterben, or forest death; and from Waldsterben you would effortlessly segue into flash floods, storm surge, wildfire, drought, and on to carbon sequestration. You were not the only one. You and your friends discussed these things for hours, organising petitions, marching here and there. Your activism made my English students look like solipsistic children, their political concerns stretching with some effort to top-up fees and back down again to the price of hair straighteners.
- 17 You were in a constant state of alarm. I wanted you to talk about me, about you and me, but the apocalyptic zeitgeist intruded.
- 18 Darling, shall we go for a swim? No, my love, for the oceans have warmed up and turned acidic. All plankton is doomed and, by association, all fish and other swimmers. Sweetheart, what can I do to melt your heart? Nothing, for you are indifferent to the ice albedo feedback; you are unconcerned that the planet's shield of snow, which reflects heat back into space, is defrosting. That our world grows dangerously green and brown, absorbing more heat than ever before, leaves you cold.
- 19 My own dear heart, let's make a happy future for ourselves, for you and me and Jens. How can that be when the world is melting and you don't care? How can we be gemütlich together in the knowledge that the twin poles of the world are dissolving, that permafrost is no longer permanent and will unloose vast clouds of methane gas to extinguish us all?
- 20 You did love me. You told me so. Ich liebe dich.
- 21 Then came your ultimatum. We couldn't go on seeing each other like this. Yes, you loved my flying visits, you loved being with me. But no, you could not bear it that our love was sustained at the expense of the future. By making it dependent on cutprice flights we were doing the single worst possible thing in our power as private individuals to harm the planet.
- 22 "Love Miles," I countered, morally righteous, fighting fire with fire.
- 23 "Selfish miles," you retorted; "We are destroying other people's lives when we do this." Very truthful and severe you are, Angelika; very hard on yourself as well as others.
- 24 Time for a change of CD. More Schubert lieder, I think, but let's drop Fischer-Dieskau. He's a tad heavy-hearted for Scotland, a bit of a dampener where it's already damp enough. Ah, Gerard Souzay, he's my man. Rather an eccentric choice, but my father used to listen to him and I cottoned on to what he admired. A great voice, fresh, rich, essentially baritone but keener on beauty than usual. Let's skip *Der Jungling und der Tod*, though. OK, here comes the Erlking. There's a boy here, too, riding on horseback through the night with his father, holding close to his father. Oh, it's a brilliant micro-opera, this song, one voice singing four parts—narrator, father, boy, and the lethal wheedling Erlking. I'd forgotten how boldly elliptical it is, and how infectious the boy's terror—"Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörst du nicht,/ Was Erbkönig mir leise verspricht?" My father, my father, and don't you hear/ the Erlking whispering promises to me? But his father can't hear anything, can't see anything, only the wind and the trees.

- 25 I used to start laughing uncontrollably at this point, which annoyed my father, who was trying to listen; but it appealed to my puerile sense of humour—vater as farter.  
     Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt fasst er mich an!  
     Erlkönig hat mir ein Lieds getan!
- 26 My father, my father, now he is taking hold of me! The Erlking has hurt me! And by the time the father has reached home the boy lies dead in his arms. Tot.
- 27 Listen, Angelika. You make my blood boil. What possible difference can it make whether I get on a plane or not? The plane will take off regardless. Why don't you concentrate your energies on all those herds of farting cattle, eh? All those cows and sheep farting and belching. Then after that you could get the rainforests under control! The blazing forests! You don't want me.
- 28 It's stopped raining at last. I can see ahead again, the air is clearer now. A truly theatrical spectacle, this sky, with its constant changes of scene. I couldn't do it in the end. I wanted tenure, sure, but I was being asked to give up too much. The world. The world well lost? No. No, no, not even for you, Angelika.
- 29 In September I'm attending a weekend conference on Performance Art at the University of Uppsala in Sweden. I'm not going by coach. There's a seminar on Storm und Drang in Tokyo this autumn, as well as my Cardiff-based sister's wedding party in Seville. After that there's an invitation to the Sydney Festival to promote my new book, and the usual theatre conference at Berkeley in spring. All paid for, of course, except the return ticket to Seville, which cost me precisely £11--just about manageable even on an academic's meagre stipend.
- 30 You used to have to join the Foreign Office if you wanted to travel on anything like this scale. Now everybody's at it. The budget airlines arrived and life changed overnight.
- 31 Sorry, but it's true. The world's our sweetshop. We've got used to it, we want it; there's no going back.
- 32 The downside is, I lost my love. She followed through. And how. She caused us both enormous pain. Ah, come on! For all I know she's got back together with that little dramaturg from Bremen, the one with the tiny hands and feet. So?
- 33 Look at those schmaltzy sunbeams backlighting the big grey cloud. Perfect scenery for the arrival of a deus ex machina. "What's that when it's at home, Dr Beauman?" A far-fetched plot device to make everything alright again, my dear. There's Ballachulish in the distance. A painted god in a cardboard chariot. An unlikely happy ending, in other words.

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## AUTHOR

### HELEN SIMPSON

Helen Simpson is the author of *Four Bare Legs in a Bed* (1990), *Dear George* (1995), *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life* (2000) and *Constitutional* (2005), all short story collections. In 1991 she was chosen as the

*Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year and won the Somerset Maugham Award. In 1993 she was chosen as one of Granta's twenty Best of Young British Novelists. For *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life* she was awarded the Hawthornden Prize and the E.M. Forster Award. She lives in London.