

Liksom's Short Stories and the Ironies of Contemporary Existence

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"Liksom's Short Stories and the Ironies of Contemporary Existence"
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Edited by Urpo Kovala

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Abstract: In his paper, "Liksom's Short Stories and the Ironies of Contemporary Existence," Chris Pawling examines Rosa Liksom's short stories in her volume *One Night Stands*. Pawling proposes that Liksom's texts can be understood as postmodern *pastiches* (Jameson) of different literary voices which in turn are couched in an "affect-less" prose that attempt to inhabit the mental universe of the narrator/protagonist without necessarily endorsing any aesthetic or ethical point of view. Liksom's fictional universe is populated by individuals who are alienated from the life of predictable routines and are searching for "action" in scenes of low life in late-night city bars. If there is an overall point of view in these short stories, Pawling argues, it is that of an avant-garde angle which embraces the authenticity of the street and life-on-edge. In this, Liksom's writing exhibits parallels with the American Blank Generation writers such as Kathy Acker, Brett Easton Ellis, and Jay McInerney. Pawling argues that there are a number of contradictions in the aesthetic and ideological outlook of this avant-garde including their supposedly anti-bourgeois perspective that in reality evinces an elitist attitude towards the mass and popular culture with the effect of reinforcement of the distinction of art and an elective distance (Bourdieu) of the writer from the world of "ordinary" emotions and ethics.

Chris PAWLING

Liksom's Short Stories and the Ironies of Contemporary Existence

Housewife Acted Out Film Stabbing. A housewife who decided it would be a good idea to stab a man after watching the film *Basic Instinct* plunged a five-inch knife into a sailor's stomach after picking him up in a bar, a court was told yesterday. Vanessa Ballantyne, aged 41, put her two sons to bed before watching a video of the film, in which star Sharon Stone is suspected of stabbing a man to death with an ice pick. It opens with a sequence of the man being stabbed by a woman with whom he is having sex. Susan Holmes, prosecuting, told Portsmouth crown court that after watching the film Mrs Ballantyne took a serrated knife from her kitchen. "She got a taxi to Joanna's nightclub and about 1.30 a.m. she approached John Parr and engaged him in conversation. They left and got a taxi to the Pot Black snooker club, where they played snooker and had a coffee." Miss Holmes said Mrs Ballantyne told Mr Parr, who is in his 30s and an able seaman on the Ark Royal, that she would like to see her sister, which was the reason she was visiting Portsmouth. "She led him away from the club saying she knew where the nearest taxi rank was. She wanted to turn into a dark side road. Mr Parr hesitated as he thought it was very dark." Miss Holmes said Mrs Ballantyne then stopped and told Mr Parr: "I've got something for you." She lunged towards his abdomen with her right hand and he felt something hit his stomach. "He saw a knife sticking out of his abdomen. He managed to remove the knife and, clutching the wound, returned to the club to get help." Mr Parr was admitted to hospital where he received treatment for the wound. A week later Mrs Ballantyne contacted police and confessed. "She said the film had suggested to her that it would be a good idea to stab a man and left home that evening with that intent," said Miss Holmes. Geoffrey Still, defending, said: "For a woman of 41, married with two young children and of perfectly good character, to do something like Mrs Ballantyne did on that night is as inexplicable as it is grave." She had been suffering from psychotic depression at the time. Mrs Ballantyne, of Southsea, admitted causing grievous bodily harm. Judge Recorder Michael Meggeson committed her to hospital under the Mental Health Act. Afterwards, Mrs Ballantyne's husband, Russell, 54, said: "People have listened and realised what she did was not in character" ([*The Guardian* (18 August 1995): 5]).

Late that night I went downtown to look for Nick Cave but encountered someone quite different a ruddy, shiny-faced fisherman from the east coast. I undressed him, talked to him long and eloquently about love, the stars, and earth's gravity. He listened to me with his big ears, smiling an innocent, idiotic smile. He wanted a lot and wanted it fast. I gave of my best. In the morning, in the noisy double bed in the hotel, he babbled like a baby that has just been fed and wants more. I did what he wanted, smiled and whispered things into his ear, gave him the V.I.P. treatment. I let him get inside me and at that instant grabbed his neck and squeezed as hard as I was able. A groan, and life slid out of the fat body. I got up, put on my clothes, ordered breakfast and left. Rosa Liksom, *One Night Stands*. Trans. Anselm Hollo. London & New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993. 98.

At first glance, it might seem as if the characters in Rosa Liksom's short stories, "Late that Night" and "We Got Married" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>, the latter of which is the shared target of the articles in this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, occupy the same mental universe as the woman depicted in *The Guardian* report. In "Late That Night" the narrator despatches her seaman lover in a manner which would suggest the psychotic reaction of someone who has "flipped". This is simply not what people do in their right minds. Similarly, the narrator/protagonist in "We Got Married" stabs her husband to death, even though he has not threatened her physically in any way. Thus one might want to argue that there is little to distinguish the pathology of Liksom's heroines in these two stories from that of Mrs Ballantyne, in that we are dealing with individuals whose behaviour is, to quote Mrs Ballantyne's defence counsel, Geoffrey Still, "as inexplicable as it is grave."

Of course, more detailed analysis of the report in *The Guardian* would lead to the conclusion that Mrs Ballantyne's case is not seen to be as "inexplicable" as her defence counsel's rhetoric might suggest and that the purpose of both legal and journalistic discourse is to render it under-

standable to the society at large. So, the subtext of the report implicitly places Mrs Ballantyne's actions in a context of media-triggered violence, with a woman who is already suffering from depression imitating "messages" which she has received from the video. This "ordinary" woman (she is referred to initially as a "housewife") decides that it would be "a good idea" to stab a man that she doesn't know "after watching the film *Basic Instinct*" (irruption of disorder into previously "normal" state). She then turns from a law-abiding housewife (her husband's "authoritative" statement, winding up the report, makes it clear that this behaviour is "not in character") into a psychotic, "*plunging*" a five-inch knife into a sailor's stomach. Hence, this is a narrative with which the reader can feel comfortable, intellectually if not emotionally, since it invokes explanations which are already current within the culture and which have established a certain discursive "logic": vivid representations of violence on film or video trigger off seemingly "inexplicable" reactions in individuals who would not normally be viewed as potentially violent, such as housewives or young children (e.g., the James Bulger case in Britain).

By contrast, in the diegetic universe of Liksom's short stories medical and legal testimony does not intervene to account for the protagonist's actions. The reader might wish to explain the murders in "Late that Night" and "We Got Married" as the actions of a psychotic, but there are no narratorial signals to justify such a conclusion. Nor is there a "media-influence" explanation of the kind invoked in Mrs Ballantyne's case. Instead, we are invited to witness actions which do not require general explanations, since they are not motivated by the logic of normative discourses. This is a *contingent* universe in which individuals respond as they see fit, seemingly without recourse to ethical/philosophical explanatory frameworks. One might want to go further and argue that Liksom's stories go against the grain of normative consensual values, as they refuse to motivate the character's actions in terms of the interiorised narrative discourse of a "disturbed" personality. In other words, what would seem to be "over the top" reactions on the part of the narrator/heroine are not contextualised by setting them in a *chain* of developing emotional/psychological responses governed by laws of cause and effect. This is a world in which violent behaviour is an "appropriate" reaction at *any point* and is presented in a "matter of fact" way. Thus, in "We Got Married" the narrator returns to the life she had lived before she met her ill-fated lover and her workmates convince her that she can continue with a clear conscience ("the girls at work said I had done the right thing, it was the little shit's own fault, he'd asked for it by clinging to me and whining like that"). Similarly, the final sentence of "Late that Night" leaves the reader in the presence of a murderer who can get dressed, order breakfast and leave the scene of her crime without a hint of reflection or remorse.

One way of responding to such narratives is to locate them within the context of a "postmodern" culture in which, to quote Fredric Jameson, the characteristic feature is a "waning of affect" (10). Jameson develops this point by comparing the aesthetic "depthlessness" of postmodernist art with that of a "high modernist" icon, such as Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream." In Munch's emblem of the "age of anxiety," "the thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation and isolation" are rendered formally through an "*aesthetic of expression*" which has disappeared from postmodernism. Munch's painting "presupposes ... some separation within the subject ... of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that "emotion" is then projected out and externalised, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of feeling" (Jameson 11-12). By contrast, in postmodernist art this "aesthetic of expression" seems to have "vanished away" and we are faced with "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (Jameson 9).

In Liksom's narratives of action and reaction there seems to be very little attempt to flesh out the characters in terms of realist psychological motivation or expressionistic emotional response. The narrative movement within a personal encounter, from initial meeting to climax and denouement, is charted as a remorseless sequence of *actions* which are communicated through a flat, pared-down descriptive prose. There *is* a certain shock-effect in the use of "offensive" language (epithets such as "shit-face," etc.), but the dominant tone of the narrative is one which refuses extremes of affective response. "Life's like that" and you just get one with it. There are no hidden layers of motivation and rationale, no dichotomies between "what you see and what you get."

There is no "inside" and "outside." However, whilst this is one plausible reading of Liksom's stories, it is not necessarily all-encompassing, since the reduction of Liksom's prose to blanked-out, emotionless description omits one crucial feature of her writing, which is the use of *irony*. So, for example, returning to the story "Late that Night" we find that the "ruddy, shiny-faced fisherman," with his "big ears" and "innocent, idiotic smile," turns from male hunter ("he wanted a lot and wanted it fast") into vulnerable, helpless child ("he babbled like a baby that has just been fed and wants more"). From that point on, he is like putty in the hands of the heroine/narrator who is able to reverse the normal power relations and squeeze the life out of his "fat body" at the moment of sexual climax. The justification for this act can be located in the previous section of the narrative: she has bestowed the gift of her "eloquence" on an "idiot" and he, the archetypal man/baby, deserves to die for the insult to her intelligence. One might conclude that the narrative of "Late that Night" revolves around an ironic reversal of the Nietzschean dictum, "whenever you go to your woman take your whip with you," for here the male as slave to sexual desire is ripe for punishment.

Much the same logic is at work in "We Got Married" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>> where the male "velcroes" himself to the heroine and "glues" himself to her bed. However, here the narrative stages are slightly attenuated, as she is prepared to marry him, even after she has discovered that he is lazy. ("I put up with him because I sort of liked him, at least in bed, when he happened to be awake.") Moreover, he attempts to account for his growing dependency on her by recalling his supposed "miserable childhood" and by "blubbering about the death of some grandma, twenty years ago." Thus, by the time she knifes him he is behaving like a psychological cripple who is completely immobilised. ("I tried to drag him to the stairwell, but the guy was so sick that I couldn't get him to move.") However, whereas there might seem to be more justification for the behaviour of the male slob in "We Got Married," in that his actions are motivated in psychological terms rather than being the product of simple "idiocy," the logic of the narrative is finally as remorseless as that of "Late that Night" male dependency is seen to be manipulative in both cases and equally deserving of female retribution. Moreover, here there is the ironic twist of the narrator's final statement, in which the husband/lover is seen to have been "justifiably" despatched, because he has been found wanting in relationship to the dominant, normative patriarchal code: "Shit, I need a real guy who takes care of things, helps pay off the mortgage, puts stuff in the refrigerator. Hell, if a guy wants to live with you he's got to take on some responsibilities" (Liksom <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>).

Hence it might be wrong to jump to the conclusion that all Liksom's stories are exemplifications of a "cool" postmodernist stance which eschews any hierarchy of values. To a certain extent narratives such as "We Got Married" derive their shock value from a macabre irony which presupposes an ethical framework, even if it is one which is based primarily on the reversal of normative values. Thus, one might claim that these stories share the premises of a modernist poetics and a "grounded" theory of human action, rather than a "neutral" postmodernist position. In *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson argues that the distinguishing feature of postmodernist narrative is the impulse towards *pastiche*, rather than the *satirical, parodic* mode of modernism (17). For Jameson, pastiche is "a neutral practice ... of mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives" and hence it is "amputated of the satiric impulse" (17). In "We Got Married" the ending is underpinned by "ulterior motives" and the "moral" is made clear to the reader through the very recognisable ironic twist. Thus, whilst we might claim that one of the features which ties in Liksom's work with postmodernism is "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness," some of her narratives tend to stand on the cusp of an oblique postmodernism and a more "committed" political standpoint.

Elizabeth Young has argued that the same tendency can be discerned in the work of some of the American writers of the so-called "Blank Generation" whose narratives may, at first sight, seem to be dominated by an absence of affect but who are actually searching for moral and political alternatives to consumer capitalism. So, for example, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* "represents all that we mean by Post-Punk or Blank Generation writing in that it is written from deep within consumer culture? At the same time it has its own agenda which is anything but blank. De-

spite his unease with moral absolutes the author is determined not to flinch from representing that which he undoubtedly condemns. Although Ellis is skilled at representing contemporary society it would seem that, unlike many postmodern theorists, he maintains a belief in a "reality" or morality somewhere beyond the spectacular blandishments of the hyperreal consumer circus" (Young and Caveney 12).

To sum up the argument so far, it is being claimed that one of the most intriguing aspects of Liksom's fiction is the way in which her narratives walk the tightrope between an ironic modernism and a more "blank" postmodernism, between an "up front" committed feminism and a more "neutral" postfeminism. Thus, a story like "We Got Married," could be seen to fit within a "feminist" project whose object is the destruction of patriarchy. Socialist and other "humanist" feminists might object to this, arguing that revenge fantasies, of the kind projected in "We Got Married" or a text like Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* (1991), simply enact imagined retribution by demonising the male as a dehumanised monster. ("I asked myself, what am I going to do with this creep who just keeps on oozing on like liquid snot?") Moreover, they fail to demonstrate how women's experience of subordination can be "transformed by self-knowledge, collectivity and social alliance" (Munt 205). These are merely narratives of *individual* retribution which simply *reverse* the polarities of gender politics, rather than *deconstructing* them. Nevertheless, despite these reservations, it is possible to argue that there is a "feminist" point of view in "We Got Married" (albeit, perhaps, a "post-punk" feminism), in that we are presented with an ironic reversal of a world in which male desires and fantasies dominate women's lives. One might claim that the woman's point of view, as autonomous being, is now pre-eminent.

Should we, then, conclude that this is a *consistent* stance, throughout Liksom's fiction, and that her work, as a whole, offers a trenchant critique of patriarchal discourse? That, I feel, would be a harder position to sustain than the foregoing defence of "We Got Married." For example, if one examines the other stories in *One Night Stands*, it becomes obvious that the same "feminist" perspective is not always present and that Liksom is attempting to inhabit a number of different, even potentially conflicting, positions through an ethically neutral *pastiche* of contemporary "voices". So, the account of a woman's encounter with a male prostitute ("I took the early flight to Helsinki"), which is very much in the vein of "Late that Night" without the violent climax, is followed by "I picked her up at the Fennia bar" which is seen from a male point of view and is rather more ambiguous in tone: "I picked her up at the Fennia Bar. She wore a shabby skirt and a cheap t-shirt that left nothing to the imagination. She took me home and treated me like I was the gold medalist at the national dog show. I enjoyed that. An old urban cowboy like me really deserves that kind of care. Let me tell you, I've been through more than the rest of the inhabitants of the Hanko peninsula put together. I've slept in dumps no one else would even consider, I've spent years in smoky greasy spoons, I've downed beers by the case. Summers I've slept with my boots on in Sinebrychoff Park, feeding on hot dogs in abandoned railroad stations. I've been reduced to raping little girls in Kaisaniemi Park during the worst freeze the south has known. So I had really earned that woman's tender loving care. Sixteen weeks is a good time. Enough to put a man back on his feet, no matter what shape he's in. I left her with money in my pocket and my backpack full of provisions. She and her three children smiled and waved goodbye from their nice Finnish fifth-floor balcony" (Liksom 113).

Here we have a story of an "old urban cowboy" which is reminiscent of novels by Jack Kerouac and Ken Kesey. The narrative "voice" is that of Beat masculinity par excellence ("I've spent years in smoky greasy spoons, I've downed beers by the case."), articulating the thoughts of the man who has seen "tough times" and needs a woman's care to put him back on his feet. This time what might be seen as a cynical, manipulative attitude to women is not rewarded with a violent comeuppance and the hero goes on his way with renewed energy, ready to face the "hard road" of life once more. Of course, one could argue that the whole piece is not just a pastiche of the genre, but a parody of the values which underpin it. In this case, the sentence "I've been reduced to raping little girls in Kaisaniemi Park during the worst freeze the south has ever known" would seem to put the narrator beyond the pale and could be taken to indicate the dark misogynistic attitude which lies behind a romanticised Beat version of masculinity. But what is the "preferred meaning" of the

final sentence? Are we not left with a *neutral* statement which refuses judgement, and is it not even possible to identify with the viewpoint of the archetypal rebel/outsider who is willing to give up the comforts which he has enjoyed for the adventures of the open road? In a sense, then, we are complicit in his rejection of the conformist life and we share his rather ironic, distanced attitude to her "nice Finnish fifth-floor balcony."

Thus, the representation of gender politics in Liksom's work is not a simple affair. Whilst the "moral" of a story like "We Got Married" might be endorsed by certain tendencies within radical feminism, "I picked her up at the Fennia Bar" is a different matter, unless one claims that it is a wicked parody of the Beat genre which is intended to undercut the inflated masculinist pretensions of the code from start to finish. Here, though, there is a problem with the open ending, as I have already indicated, which does not allow for the same straightforward conclusion as that of "We Got Married." Perhaps stories like "I picked her up at the Fennia Bar" can be seen as postmodernist pastiches of different literary voices which attempt to inhabit the mental set of the archetypal generic narrator/protagonist, without endorsing any aesthetic or ethical standpoint. However one defines the ironic mode of Liksom's narratives whether as modernist or postmodernist, feminist or postfeminist there is a distinctive "anti-bourgeois" component in her work. Many of the stories centre on pick-ups or encounters in late-night bars, where the street culture of drink and drugs offers an alternative existence to that of the respectable "solid citizen," a point made clear in an interview with Liksom in *The Guardian*: "The lives of middle-class people are uninteresting. They don't smell, they don't have colours. They don't taste. But the lower class and the rich they smell, they taste" (Montgomery).

Liksom's fictional universe is populated by individuals who are alienated from the life of predictable routines and are searching for "action" in the "low life" of the city bars or late-night "joints" in the country. If there is an overall point of view it is that of the avant-garde which embraces the "authenticity" of the street and life "on the edge". In this, as said, Liksom's writing shows a number of parallels with that of the American "Blank Generation" of the late 1970s and 1980s figures such as Kathy Acker, Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney, Brett Easton Ellis, Patrick McGrath, Douglas Coupland, and Mark Leyner. Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney have argued that the distinctiveness of this group lay in its ability to combine the traditional, anti-bourgeois concerns of the American art-underground with the more confrontational "edge" of punk. "Dazed consumers, urban deviants, middle-class bohemians, sexual outcasts and other disconsolate riff-raff drift through these metropolitan jungles" (Young and Caveney xiii). What might be termed a new "sensibility" emerged in the mid-1970s in the punk poetry of Patti Smith and Richard Hell, developed through the early 1980s in the "flat, affectless prose" of the New York "Downtown" writers, such as Tama Janowitz, and then spread to the rest of America, including the West Coast. The dominant themes of this writing were "crime, drugs, sexual excess, media overload, consumer madness, inner-city decay and fashion-crazed nightlife" (Young and Caveney vi.).

Young and Caveney argue that, unlike the more academic, "high post-modernists," such as Umberto Eco, Donald Barthelme, and Robert Coover, whose work becomes "mired" in "post-modern paralysis," the "Post-punk" or "Blank Generation" authors "have a very different engagement with postmodernism:" "Their fiction arises directly out of their own observations and experiences of postmodern culture, from out of the streets with no name; they are reporting from within a lived reality, not dissecting its constituents from the academic parameters. In addition, their writing tends to close the gap between 'high' and 'low' art forms far more successfully than is ever possible in more theoretical metafiction, mainly because many of the younger urban writers genuinely cannot see such a gap. Their entire lives have been lived out within a milieu wherein art and pop music, advertising, films and fiction have always been inextricably entwined, inseparable one from the other" (13). One might want to express certain reservations about Young and Caveney's somewhat romanticised portrayal of the "Blank Generation" and its supposed ability to access the "lived reality" of postmodernism in such an "immediate" manner. Nevertheless, this description of a certain "impulse" within contemporary "western" fiction does direct us to some of the central concerns in Liksom's work and her own self-image. So, the interview in *The Guardian* (interestingly entitled "Blood on the Bar") reveals that "the last time she came to England it was on her Harley

Davidson for a Hell's Angels convention in Kent." Much of the subject matter for her fiction seems to come from her life as a bartender, a job which she refuses to relinquish, even though she has won the Finnish State Literary award. "She does not give interviews in Finland and keeps her other identity a secret from the punters. Not for her a life of middle class respectability:" "It's great working in a bar. People come and go. It's like a one night stand, a one evening stand, a one hour stand, or even a one second stand" (Montgomery 5).

If there are intertextual references in her work they are not to the *literary* canon, even that of postmodernism, but to figures of the *rock* avant-garde, such as Nick Cave, Joy Division, and Nina Hagen, whose work evokes a doom-laden, nihilistic, even neo-Gothic response to contemporary existence. Thus, when postmodernism is actually named in a story, it is in a satire on the aridity of intellectualised academic rhetoric and its unacknowledged complicity with the alienation of consumer capitalism: "The monk put his mitre on the table next to the couch, hung his robe in the closet and put on a pair of Zic-Zac sweatpants and a t-shirt with a number on the front and the words Public Enemy on the back. Then he strolled back to the kitchen, turned on the Philips De Luxe microwave and got busy with the appliances manufactured by Moulinex, Krups, Miele, and Zanussi. A tape rapped out of the Cool Key boombox on top of the Rosenlew refrigerator, the sound blending pleasantly with the jungle noises of the video. He laid the kitchen table with black plates and went down to the cellar to return with two bottles of Aloxe Corton '78. The woman approached the table lazily. The monk held a chair for her. The video kept on running but the Cool Key was turned off. "That kind of naively theistic concept of the deity provides no answers to the existential questions of postmodern woman," said the woman and took a bite of sirloin steak. "I have tried to find an answer in contemplation," said the monk, trying to catch her eye, but she stared down at the rare steak. "If it works for you. "After the meal, the monk put the dishes in the Zanussi dishwasher and washed and polished the Krupps mixer, the Moulinex food processor, the Miele eggbeater, and the espresso machine. When he was done straightening up the kitchen, he stuck an unopened bottle of Puttony Tokay '56 under his arm and proceeded to the living room where the woman lay sleeping on the couch under her fur coat. He switched off the hissing video player, sank into an armchair, and sat there until five a.m. with a glumly contemplative expression" (Liksom 97).

Like the work of the American "Blank Generation," Liksom's fiction seems to be deliberately opposed to what are seen as the pretensions of a "contemplative", academicist post-modernism. In what might almost be described as a re-run of the Beat philosophy of the fifties, her narratives reject the world of "ivory tower intellectualism" for the "smell" and "taste" of the bars and the subcultures of the cities: "The tavern is shaped like a long narrow box. The small light fixtures on the walls are wreathed in dense smoke. Drunken fishermen, sailors speaking foreign tongues, and big-breasted Grade B whores sit at the bar, talking a lot, all of them as incomprehensible to each other as can be. The rest of the room is almost dark and populated by shrieking teenage car thieves, hashish peddlers, and shit-faced retired folk" (Liksom 90). But, just as the Beats have been criticised for their romanticisation of an "outsider" culture and their rather elitist attitude to "mass society", so one might argue that tableaux such as the above inevitably raise questions about the viewpoint of Liksom's narrator as "outsider" and her relationship to the rest of "solid society". For example, how does one respond to the phrase "shit-faced retired folk?" Is this a simple evocation of their physical appearance in the the bar -- the pallor of old, grey skin in the pale light -- or is there an implied value judgement about those who are there as voyeurs and are, therefore, parasitical on the experience of the young? One is tempted to make references across to other examples of "one-dimensionality," such as the fisherman with the "idiotic" smile in "Late that Night." Is his smile "idiotic" because he is emblematic of a stupid, predatory masculinity, or is he naive, per se, as a representative of "the masses"? Are we, then, being asked to identify with a quasi-Marcusean version of libertarian vanguardism, in which the *Randgruppen* of society students, blacks, punks, etc., are, by virtue of their very marginality, privy to political insights from which the integrated "mass" of the population are debarred?

It would seem that there are at least two ways of responding to Liksom's fictional representations of the "postmodern condition." On the one hand, one can argue that they are "open" texts

which explore the fragmentary, contingent nature of contemporary existence without resorting to the "false" hopes and resolutions of humanist thought. Whilst there is a radical refusal of the banalities of late capitalist society, there are no "grand narratives," such as Marxism or socialist feminism, to offer an "easy" alternative to the dilemmas of the alienated individual. This is a vision of life in which history proceeds very much through its "bad side." "I am interested in the bad side of life, not in the happy side. I try to show how people think when they are desperate or very bad" (Montgomery 6). For Liksom it seems that there can be no appeal to the reassurance of those collectives which once formed the bridge between political intellectuals, the artistic avant-garde and "the people." Instead, her characters inhabit a universe where *individuals* "do it for themselves" and the protagonists "blast" their *own* way through Walter Benjamin's (264) "continuum of history." (So, the heroine in "We Got Married" does not go bleating for help to other women after the police have failed to evict her slob of a husband, but simply grabs a knife and "sticks" him). Thus, it could be argued that Liksom's bleak, ironic narrative of contemporary life has affinities with the more radical wing of the Blank Generation and what Robert Siegle calls the "fiction of insurgency" in America, in that it "shakes up reified relations roles, genders, social structures," whilst refusing the consoling teleologies of traditional "committed" writing (2-3).

Against this positive assessment, it might be claimed that the "insurgent" elements in Liksom's fiction are compromised by a mode of narration which leads ultimately to what Franco Moretti has termed "political indifference." In a seminal essay on "The Spell of Indecision" in twentieth-century fiction, Moretti argues that there is "a complicity between modernist irony and indifference to history" (343). Insofar as the "key word" of modernism is "ambiguity," it centres on "a frame of mind that sees in any event no more than an "occasion" for free intellectual and emotional play, for a mental and subjective deconstruction of the world as it is" (341). Since the aesthetic-ironic attitude of modernism is, according to Moretti, more concerned with the "ambiguities" of existence than engaging with the demands of "praxis," "history," and political decision," it is unable to challenge the "hegemonic world-view" (340). Increasingly, the "ironising mode" manifests itself in an elitist narrative consciousness whose "unbelievable range of political choices can be explained only by its basic political indifference" (343). Moreover, insofar as it focuses almost exclusively on "consumption and private life" (343) modernism becomes a substitute for any critical engagement with the culture of late capitalist/patriarchal society, beyond ritualised attacks on commodity fetishism and nihilistic repudiations of "banality."

So, one might argue that Liksom's story about the ineffectual monk and his postmodernist partner allows an avant-garde, who reject the radical chic dimension of contemporary culture, to feel a comfortable superiority and to revel in the discrepancy between the commodified lifestyle of the characters in the story and the sterility of their personal lives. Or the radical feminist can empathise with the violent actions of the heroine in "We got married..." because they allow her to recover her personal space and are justifiable as an ironic reversal of patriarchal domestic relations. In neither case, though, do we encounter a consciousness which enables us to make *connexions* between the subjective realm of experience and the broader public dimension of civil society. Instead, the narrative mode and content tend to discourage a transformative, engaged attitude to the world, leaving the reader in ironic isolation. "Ambiguity" and textual "openness" become ends in themselves or, at best, are allied with a voluntaristic politics of "revenge" which reproduces estrangement and alienation.

One way of expanding on this criticism of Liksom's narratives and bringing the discussion back to the question of *reading/consumption*, would be to augment Moretti's remarks on modernism by drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1986), Bourdieu argues that the hegemonic aesthetic in contemporary capitalist society performs the function of reproducing social distinctions by cultural means. The appreciation of works of art is based on a "cultural competence" or "capital" which is acquired at home and through education and which is, therefore, not equally distributed throughout society. People *learn* how to interpret works of art and differences in taste are most pronounced in "*extra-curricular and avant-garde culture*," where "the influence of social origin on the consumption of culture" is "most pronounced" (Bourdieu 1). Since modernist texts and the ideas of the avant-garde would not normally be en-

countered in school, it is much harder for those who are not from a "cultured" background to appreciate them, because a work of art "has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded" (Bourdieu 5). Ironically, it is the "aristocracy of culture" who can appreciate the complexities and ambiguities of the artistic avant-garde, because they have been exposed to an artistic education at home, in contrast to those from a less leisured and more "practical" background.

Moreover, insofar as the avant-garde subscribe to an aesthetics of "distinction" of the "pure gaze" which asserts the primacy of form over content and the difference between art and life they separate themselves from a "popular aesthetic," which affirms the "continuity between art and life" and which expects artistic form to be subordinate to human functions: "The pure gaze implies a break with the ordinary attitude to the world, which, given the conditions in which it is performed, is also a social separation. Ortega y Gasset can be believed when he attributes to modern art a systematic refusal of all that is 'human', i.e., generic, common as opposed to distinctive, or distinguished namely, the passions, emotions and feelings which 'ordinary' people invest in their 'ordinary' lives. It is as if the 'popular aesthetic'... were based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function. This is seen clearly in the case of the novel and especially the theatre, where the working-class audience refuses any sort of formal experimentation and all the effects which, by introducing a distance from the accepted conventions (as regards scenery, plot, etc.), tend to distance the spectator, preventing him [sic] from getting involved and fully identifying with the characters (I am thinking of Brechtian 'alienation' or the disruption of plot in the *nouveau roman*). In contrast to the detachment and disinterestedness which aesthetic theory regards as the only way of recognizing the work of art for what it is, i.e., autonomous, *selbständig*, the 'popular aesthetic' ignores or refuses the refusal of 'facile' involvement and vulgar 'enjoyment, a refusal which is the basis of the taste for formal experimentation. And popular judgements of paintings or photographs spring from an 'aesthetic' (in fact it is an ethos) which is the exact opposite of the Kantian aesthetic. Whereas, in order to grasp the specificity of the aesthetic judgement, Kant strove to distinguish that which pleases from that which gratifies and, more generally, to distinguish disinterestedness, the sole guarantor of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation, from the interest of Reason which defines the Good, working-class people expect every image to explicitly perform a function, if only that of a sign, and their judgements make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeable ethical basis" (Bourdieu 4-5).

Whereas the popular aesthetic tends to have an "ethical basis" and demands that art reflect the "passions, emotions and feelings which "ordinary" people invest in their "ordinary" lives" (Bourdieu 4) the "pure aesthetic" eschews such "humanism" in favour of an "ethic ... of elective distance from the necessities of the natural or social world" (Bourdieu 5). This may take the form of aestheticism or what Bourdieu describes as a "moral agnosticism" which becomes particularly visible when "ethical transgression becomes an artistic *parti pris*" (Witness the cumulative effect of moral ambiguity in Liksom's stories which might almost be described as an artistic "article of faith"). Paradoxically, then, the effect of aesthetic estrangement and ethical ambiguity in avant-garde art may be to reproduce rather than challenge the "pure" bourgeois aesthetic, by preserving the "elective distance" and "distinction" of art from the world of "ordinary" emotions and ethics.

Of course, there is the issue of whether Bourdieu's work can still be applied to contemporary cultural consumption, given that his findings in *Distinction* are based on research conducted in the 1960s. Perhaps the advent of "postmodern" society has produced a different kind of "popular aesthetic," which is less antipathetic to "moral agnosticism" and hence more in tune with the ethical and aesthetic assumptions of a writer like Liksom. Perhaps, too, the borders between a "pure" and "popular" aesthetics have been blurred and the taste of "distinction" no longer dominates in exactly the same way. Clearly these are issues which require further investigation but, whatever the exact nature of existing aesthetic dispositions and their field of play, Bourdieu's research acts as a warning against *assuming* that the ethical ambiguities and aesthetic complexities of avant-gardist texts are necessarily equally "meaningful" for all readers. Even though Liksom's stories seem to deal with recognisable scenarios, it may be the case that their reliance on a "bleak," "amoral" irony

and pastiche tends to exclude those of a more "humanistic" aesthetic disposition from engaging with the diegetic universe of the text. In other words, the cultural conditions and competences which govern all the possible appropriations of the text are not equally distributed and even the more discerning "lay" reader may not be able to decode the social and political implications of Liksom's ironic, "morally agnostic" reflections on contemporary life.

For example, Kornelia Merdjanska (i.e., Kornelia Slavova today) points out that, in the case of the Bulgarian readership, "the huge number of negative responses" shows that the text is "alien to the respondents" horizons of expectations and to their general understanding of fiction and life" (80). Similarly, the Estonian researchers comment that "for many Estonian readers the world of the story was strange and repulsive; it did not touch them personally, and that is why they distanced themselves from it quite sharply. ... The general observation is that the old ideas of Enlightenment are still viable. ... In many respects, the findings reflect resistance rather than support to the kinds of changes pointed out by postmodernist theories" (Järve, Kamdron, and Papp 134). Of course, one might want to argue that these negative responses are fairly predictable in former Communist countries where, until recently, a socialist realist aesthetic predominated, but it is also noticeable that the Finnish sample is not that dissimilar. Here, too, "the interpretations were dominated by a realistic orientation" (Koskimaa and Jokinen 146), and, as in socialist realism, there is a demand for literature which emphasizes "the importance of an optimistic attitude towards life and a positive portrayal of the world" (Koskimaa and Jokinen 147). Hence, Liksom's "unmotivated" characters, whose actions do not seem to be explicable in terms of a realist psychology of character, and her reliance on a "morally agnostic," ironic approach to violence, are not generally appreciated by the Finnish readership (Koskimaa and Jokinen 145-46.)

Thus, we may need to exercise caution in assuming that the combination of "bleached out naturalism" and pastiche/irony in Liksom's stories automatically offers a literary representation of the world of "postmodernity" which is *universally* accessible and which simply needs "decoding" by the alert, "sensitive" reader. Of course, this is only a problem if we wish to claim that Liksom's stories are representative of an inexorable movement towards cultural integration in a "postmodern" Europe, which cuts across all social differences and power relations. By contrast, if we approach the task of interpreting the results of the research in terms of a theoretical starting-point which acknowledges the continuing constitution and reconstitution of aesthetic and cultural "*distinction*," in a variety of historical and geographical contexts, then we may gain real insights into the meanings generated by Liksom's text. And it may be the case that ultimately the responses to "We Got Married" tell us more about the continuing *distance* between avant-garde and "popular" expectations of literature, at both a national and international level, than any presumed movement towards overall cultural *integration* in Europe. If "life's like that" in a Rosa Liksom story, it may not be quite the same in either the real or the imaginative universe of her "ordinary" European readers.

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