

BOTH/AND



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Ever since Charles Simic came to America from Belgrade in 1954, at the age of sixteen, he has been transmitting—in a torrent of books of poetry and prose, images deriving from the traumatic no-man's land of his youth:

The Germans bombed Belgrade in April of 1941, when I was three years old. The building across the street was hit and destroyed. I don't remember anything about that bomb, although I was told later that I was thrown out of my bed and across the room when it hit. The next day we left the city on foot...

How many of us were there? I remember my mother but not my father. There were people I didn't know, too. I see their hunched backs, see them running with their bundles, but no faces. My film keeps breaking. (*Wonderful Words Silent Truth*, 1990)

Though by the usual systems of counting, Simic is now sixty-one, in his poems he is without chronological age. He has written that in its essence, "a lyric poem is about time stopped. Language moves in time, but the lyric impulse is vertical" (quoted by Charles Wright in "Charles Simic: Notes toward an Introduction", *American Poet*, Spring 1999). The poems are like self-developing Polaroids, in which a scene, gradually assembling itself out of unexplained images, suddenly clicks into a recognizable whole. Here, for instance, is a poem from Simic's newest book, *Jackstraws*:

HEAD OF A DOLL

Whose demon are you,
Whose god? I asked
Of the painted mouth
Half buried in the sand,

A brooding gull
Made a brief assessment,
And tiptoed away

Nodding to himself,
At dusk a firefly or two
Dowsed its eye pits,
And, later, toward midnight,
I even heard mice.

One could call this a miniaturist's rewriting of Shelley's "Ozymandias", with its colossal head half buried in the sand:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies...
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Ozymandias' severed head remains unmolested, and is merely observed by the traveller; but Simic's severed doll-head, "assessed" by the daytime gull flying over the sand, has its vacant eye-sockets investigated by the firefly at dusk; and surely, at midnight, the mice approach to use their teeth. A painted simulacrum—a "doll"—is what any statue, human or divine, appears to be to an observer not a member of the cult that has erected it. The toppled Ozymandias and Simic's half-buried doll have lost their personal and cultural significance; the blinded doll, half-buried already, is about to be resumed by the nibbling entropies. While Shelley's speaker invests himself in the ruins of the sublime, Simic questions a broken "demon" or "god" of the most ordinary sort—a child's doll—bringing his poem into the surreal of the everyday, Simic's defining atmosphere.

Simic's mind apparently came out of his wartime youth stocked not only with precise images of the terrifying, the incomprehensible, and the fragmented, but also with residual and untethered free-floating clouds of feeling which hover, ready to weep or brood, over any current experience that resonates with those earliest impressions. With the original stimuli for those inchoate feelings now forgotten or repressed, Simic seeks ceaselessly—in a constant hunger to give the clouds a reason to release their burden—for an image, a plot, a tone—anything to fasten down his troubling dreams:

The nights... they're as thick as the dreams from which one awakes troubled, yet unable to remember anything specific... Writing brings it back. There's the logic of chronology, which forces one to think about what comes next. There's also the logic

of imagination. One image provokes another without rhyme or reason—perhaps with plenty of hidden rhyme and reason! I have to believe that. (*Wonderful Words*)

Yet there is something at work in Simic besides recollection of tragic circumstance. It is a hunger for explanation, a hunger only children really feel. Any sentient adult knows (whether admitting it or not) that life has no explanation: that truth and justice do not reign on earth, and that there is no-one governing earthly events. In Simic, this adult knowledge—often explicit in the poems—keeps company with an intense inquiry that must have been persistent in him in childhood along with his terror: a wish that what was happening would eventually be made intelligible to him—that he could understand, as well as endure, his life:

It has always seemed obvious to me that we are alone in the universe. I love metaphysics and its speculations, but the suspicion at the core of my being is that we are whistling in the dark. Still, I have tears in my eyes every time I hear good church music... It makes absolutely no difference whether gods and devils exist or not. The secret ambition of every true poem is to ask about them even as it acknowledges their absence. (*Orphan Factory*, 1997)

And behind Simic's poetic minimalism, there lies the intellectual maximalism of the history of philosophy:

Philosophy is like a homecoming... Whoever reads philosophy reads himself as much as he reads the philosopher. I am in dialogue with certain decisive events in my life as much as I am with the ideas on the page... My effort to understand is a perpetual circling around a few obsessive images...

All my experiences make a kind of untaught ontology, which precedes all my readings. What I am trying to conceptualize with the help of the philosopher is that which I have already intuited.

These two motives—the search for explanation, knowing there is none; and the finding of plots or images to match the burden of feeling—have always driven Simic's poems. The results in *Jackstraws* are as brutal as they have ever been. Truth and Justice, for instance, are grimly named "the famous no-shows" in the poem of that name. This poem is a quick autobiography, taking Simic from a confined and bleak childhood where he longs for truth and justice, to the unease of displacement, to the birth of self-consciousness, to the ache of foreignness, to the vampirism of youth-

ful male desire. It ends in a hectic and destinationless adult taxi-ride where everything the philosophers and poets have had to say seems merely the fluttering and screeching of parrots. I quote the poem whole to show the nature of a Simic plot:

THE FAMOUS NO-SHOWS

In small, sunless rooms,
In gray-wall-and-ceiling revery,
I looked for them
Now and then.

Wherever I went
Trouble paid my way,
Like a roadside weed,
I could not be still for a day.

At every step,
A new worry overtook me.
If I locked the door,
There was a loud knock.

A small boy stood there
Watching me fidget.
He would not smile,
No matter what I did.

What a night to be out!
I told the tiger cat
Sleeping among the urns
In the window of a funeral home.

The famous no-shows,
Truth, Justice, and so forth—
All I saw was ghost-faced children
Swarming on every corner.

It must've been Halloween.
One bare-legged girl
Wore a long bridal veil.
Her beau was dressed as a vampire.

"Trick or treat", the turbaned taxi driver
Informed me. And it was true!
The avenue we were zipping along
With its wicked potholes,

Its lights changing red to green,
Made me think of an aviary, the splendor
Of parrots fluttering and screeching
Something I couldn't catch just then.

I have "spoiled" the poem by offering a reductive translation of its stages of plot before offering the poem itself. One of the seductive lures of a Simic poem is its edge of incomprehensibility: here, one encounters the weed, the knock, the funeral home, the bridal veil, the vampire-costume, the turbaned taxi-driver, the parrots. These are images drawn from a withheld emblem-book, its pages turned almost too rapidly for us to grasp the significance of each as it is succeeded by the next. ("I drew, did water colors, and even some oil paintings", says Simic of his high-school years in Chicago, adding, "I stopped painting when I was twenty-six years old, but some of the things I did show a fairly good knowledge of the abstract expressionist idiom." (*Wonderful Words*) "The Famous No Shows" is a painter's montage of images—images that are at first ordinary.

Yet in the middle of the poem, the emblem-level suddenly "rises" from the imaged quotidian to the invisible allegorical, as those famous personae of the Golden Age, classically promised to our better future, are invoked. Milton saw them in his "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity":

Yea, Truth and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Th'enameled arras of the rainbow wearing,
And Mercy set between,
Throned in celestial sheen,
With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering.

After its allegorical mention of "the famous no-shows", Simic's poem, via its ascent to allegory, becomes distinctly more "fancy", bringing in Halloween, a vampire, a Sikh taxi-driver, and the aviary of frantic parrots. The mere thought of Truth and Justice, even in their actual absence, brings a new imaginative heightening of the absurdity of ordinary life.

"The Famous No-Shows" is a representative Simic poem in its dead-pan tone, its resignation to the absurd, and its jerky plot (in which the

stages succeed each other as stopped frames rather than as items in continuous motion). The poet, unable to change the contingencies of life's plot, can get revenge only by sardonic description of the invisible objects of his desire as "the famous no-shows." When have truth and justice ever appeared to anyone longing for them, he asks? The conundrum that interests Simic is the persistence of our faith in truth and justice long after any reasonable person would have jettisoned the very idea of them. The stylistic form Simic has found for this conundrum is a terse, plain, but riddling "story": most of the poems exhibit a comparable narrative-of-the-absurd, implied if not enacted.

Simic did not always write like this. He recalls that in college-night classes at the University of Chicago—"one month I was a disciple of Hart Crane, the next month only Walt Whitman existed for me. When I fell in love with Pound I wrote an eighty page long poem on the Spanish Inquisition" (*Wonderful Words*). Admiring though the young Simic was of the poets of his adopted country, it was from the South American poets that he found in a New Directions anthology that he took the license to be himself. "The folk surrealism, the mysticism, the eroticism, and the wild flights of romance and rhetoric in these poets were much more appealing to me than what I found among the French and German modernists (*Orphan Factory*). The freedom of their imagery matched the anarchy and chaos he and his family had seen: "After what we had been through, the wildest lies seemed plausible. The poems that I was going to write had to take that into account."

It was a (frequently risky) turn to comedy that enabled Simic's poetry to represent the way chance jests grossly with human lives. His early poetry often had a grim bareness, as in his famous early renditions of a fork, a spoon, a knife, an ax. Here is the 1971 fork, under the poet's surreal and, close-focus gaze:

This strange thing must have crept
Right out of hell.
It resembles a bird's foot
Worn around the cannibal's neck.

As you hold it in your hand,
As you stab with it into a piece of meat,
It is possible to imagine the rest of the bird:
Its head which like your fist
Is large, bald, beakless and blind. (*Selected Poems*, 1990)

Though this poem (and the others like it) were, and are, faithful to Simic's

forceful projection of the predatory onto “innocent” things and landscapes, he began to feel that such poems left out the ridiculous in both life and art. After all, to make art is to do something preposterous, even “rude”: “To be a poet”, says Simic, “is to feel something like a unicyclist in a desert, a pornographic magician performing in the corner of the church during Mass, a drag queen attending night classes and blowing kisses at the teacher!” (*Orphan Factory*). To do a circus act with no-one watching; to subvert the intended show; to intrude sex on instruction: these are Simic’s ways of insisting on the rights of idiosyncrasy against majority rule.

There is nothing like growing up in a totalitarian state, with its humorless impositions, to make one see individuality and humor as two major forces of intelligence. (“It is impossible to imagine a Christian or a fascist theory of humor” [*Orphan Factory*].) Simic has written often about the dreadful attractions of the collective and the communitarian, to which intellectuals are peculiarly drawn. “‘The future will be post-individualist,’ the critic Fredric Jameson tells us. Whether it’ll be Stalin’s, Hitler’s, or Mao’s model, he doesn’t say” (*Orphan Factory*). There is nothing like seeing the barbaric recrudescence of ethnicity in Yugoslavia to make Simic rail against all group—think:

The marching music of the next century will undoubtedly be religion and nationalism. The choir practice has already started. All that became obvious to me watching the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, the way opportunists of every stripe over there instantly fell behind some vile nationalist program... The concept of the free and unique individual ceased to exist. Someone intermarried and ethnically mixed was an impediment to cultural theory...

The supreme folly of every nationalism is that it believes itself unique, while in truth it’s nothing more than a bad xerox copy of every other nationalism. Unknown to them, their self-delusions and paranoias are identical... What is astonishing to me is how many in the West find that practice of selective morality and machismo attractive.

There’s no better entertainment than a good bombing, Richard Burt and Richard Pearl, sounding like the disciples of General Mladic, told us a while back on the op-ed page of the New York Times. “Air strikes, especially televised ones, would be dramatic, even exhilarating”, the two distinguished civil servants claimed. What worries me is the case with which people even in our democratic society recommend violence to accomplish certain ends. (*Orphan Factory*)

It is no wonder, then, that Simic's poetry now commands the most grotesque paradoxes of the tragicomic grimace. The first poem in *Jackstraws*, "The Voice at 3 A. M.", reads, in its entirety,

Who put canned laughter
Into my crucifixion scene?

Jackstraws is populated by bugs, dummies, devils, martyrs, pallbearers, roadkill, maggots, dead TV sets and dead moths, upended ants, a caterpillar, a spider, a couple of black cats, the doll-head with which I began—and, for relief, the occasional glimpse of beauty (a dragonfly, a Muse). The promptings of the Muse—offering an anecdote or an image to be caught on the poet's hook—have not left off, and the poet is alternately seduced by imagination and the jeering mocker of his own credulity:

It takes a tiny nibble
From time to time.

Don't you believe it.

It sends a shiver down our spines
In response.

Like hell it does.

There's a door you've never noticed before
Left ajar in your room.

Don't kid yourself.

This lyric is one of seven in the sequence, "Mystic Life", that closes *Jackstraws*. Though the sequence itself ends on a more triumphant note than this, such a "dialogue of the mind with itself" (Matthew Arnold) shows the standstill to which Simic's contemplations can bring him. He is not true to himself unless he includes both the hope and the jeer. He thereby suggests that the twentieth century has made the rest of us, too, cynical fideists or believing skeptics. It is the old Yeatsian dilemma of Chance and Choice, Determinism versus Free Will. Past poets (including Yeats) might have believed that these antagonisms can find some ultimate reconciliation (Yeats: "Chance being one with Choice at last" ["Solomon and Sheba"]). Simic suggests we all necessarily live in the world of "Both/And" rather than the Kierkegaardian "Either/Or." "I believe in

images as vehicles of transcendence”, Simic has said, “but I don’t believe in God.” (Wright, op. cit.)

All the paradoxes of the Yugoslavian killings laced with protestations of Christian belief come to life in Simic’s daring lyric, “Obscurely Occupied.” In this intricately twisted poem, Christ is at once the object of worship, the cultural justification for killing, and the tortured victim.

You are the Lord of the maimed,
The one bled and crucified
In a cellar of some prison
Over which the day is breaking.

You inspect the latest refinements
Of cruelty. You may even kneel
Down in wonder. They know
Their business, these grim fellows

Whose wives and mothers rise
For the early Mass. You, yourself,
Must hurry back through the snow
Before they find your rightful

Place on the cross vacated,
The few candles burning higher
In your terrifying absence
Under the darkly magnified dome.

This crucifixion scene has no “canned laughter”, but it does have the knife-twist of irony, as those who worship the crucified Christ acquiesce in the repetition of the crucifixion in their dungeons, by their torturers. The “grim fellows” have, after all, learned their hatreds at their pious mothers’ knees.

The weaker moments in Simic’s poetry come when there is no room left for free will, when we are simply the minuscule insects of the universe, dependent on random lack, watched by the imperturbable gods. One must grant that this image is an accurate one for the helpless plight of many people (as it was once true for Simic and his family as escapees, prisoners, refugees). Then why does this poem not seem successful to me?

With the wind gusting so wildly,
So unpredictably,
I’m willing to bet one or two ants

May have tumbled on their backs
As we sit here on the porch.

Their feet are pedaling
Imaginary bicycles.
It's a battle of wits against
Various physical laws,
Plus Fate, plus—
So-what-else-is-new?

Wondering if anyone's coming to their aid
Bringing cake crumbs,
Miniature editions of the Bible,
A lost thread or two
Cleverly tied end to end.

What leaves me dissatisfied here? Is it the ironically jaunty tone with which Simic treats those who are desperately “wondering if anyone’s coming to their aid?” Is it the fact that he can’t maintain the jaunty tone once he enters the minds of the hapless in the last stanza? Is it Simic’s unease with his own ease on the porch that produces this change in tone? The anticipated rescues—from starvation by cake crumbs, from damnation by the miniaturized Bible, from imprisonment by the improvised rope: can they really be thus miniaturized and still seem miraculous?

A comparable problem, but this time one of vision rather than one of tone, arises for me in “Filthy Landscape”, a poem presenting high summer as a sex-obsessed preacher might describe it: to the impure, one might say, all things are impure. The preacher’s description rises to a crescendo of imputed lust, until even the sun is conscripted into the “filthy” activities:

The season of lurid wallflowers
Strewn on the meadows
Drunk with kissing
The red-hot summer breezes.

A ditch opens its legs
In the half-undressed orchard
Teeming with foulmouthed birds
And smutty shadows.

Scandalous view of a hilltop
In pink clouds of debauchery.

The sun pecking between them
Now and then like a whoremaster.

Such a poem is imagined exclusively satirically, exclusively “from the outside”; unlike the best satire, it doesn’t inculcate us too. Yet Simic is always provocative, even if one resists one or the other of his comic strategies.

In the *ars poetica* of *Jackstraws*, Simic shows himself to be well aware of his current straining at having his tragic cake and eating it comically too. Along with the famous no-shows, Truth and Justice, we are introduced to the “Arriving Celebrities”, to wit, Tragedy and Comedy:

Tragedy and Comedy
Stepping out of a limousine
In ritzy furs,
Diminutive skirts,
Blowing kisses
Left and right.

Bedlam of adoring fans,
Pushing and squeezing,
Hollering for a glimpse,
When—all of a sudden!
A hush.
An all-inclusive clam-up.

The Simic plotlet has been wound up, and the film has reached the moment of surprise: the human race, addicted to both the Tragic Muse and the Comic Muse, fond of them both and ready to applaud the appearance of either, suddenly falls silent. Why? It appears the real thing—not art but life—is happening again:

Is someone, I inquired
Of my neighbors,
Already lying knifed
On the dance floor
Mouthing the name
We are all straining to overhear?

“The name” would at least assign a cause to the killing: “X murdered me.” But ultimate causes are always denied us by the bullying gods, who turn aside and ignore the pleas of the poet:

The towering bodyguards
With shaved heads
And mirror-tinted shades,
Don't hear me right,
Or will not deign
To grant my presence.

"The gaiety of language" (Stevens) is represented here by the giddy erotic appeal of the Muses of both Tragedy and Comedy; but within the circle of art there lies the tacit knifed corpse, while the indifferent gods turn away, and the crowd, cheering only a moment ago, stands baffled.

It is not only the allegory of the simultaneous and incompatible presence of art and life—the elation of genre and the stab of evil—that is at work in this brilliant little poem. It is the already-familiar quality of the social glimpses—the starlets from the limousine; the knifed corpse; the Farrakhan-like bodyguards—that makes the stanzas seem like shots from *People* magazine. The old device of the "naïve speaker"—"Is someone, I inquired / Of my neighbors, / Already lying knifed?"—lets Simic avoid the clichés of "witness poetry", wherein the (alive and well) writer adopts the victim as surrogate.

Simic's brutal and irremediable poems are not easily forgotten. The insolubility of war underlies them, and gives them the air of riddles to which there is no answer. Simic has acknowledged his stylistic debt to the Yugoslavian poet Vasko Popa, whose bleak allegories introduced a new stance in Serbo-Croatian modernism. But in English Simic's terse stanzas and idiosyncratic vocabulary—defined by Seamus Heaney as "a synthesis of... blue-collar demotic and immigrant visionary" (Wright, op. cit.) belong to no one else. As I write this, Belgrade is burning while Serb TV runs "Wag the Dog." For such events, Simic's tragic rictus, or comic despair, seems the fitting expression. One cannot read Simic without superimposing his infant experience—being thrown across the room when a bomb hit—on the families now under fire. Will one of their children escape to become the poet of this disaster, or is that child already dead?

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