

The poetry of charles simic: simplicity sings

Profession, Poet



Charles Simic's poetry specializes in illustrating the profound within the mundane. Simic was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1938 (Ford). He is of Serbian descent. Naturally, his early life was dominated by the Nazi period. While of much Simic's work derives from this time (Ford), he often explores the legacies of such a totalizing war on Western society and culture. Simic's father fled Yugoslavia in 1944, and did not reunite with his family until a decade later in 1954 in the United States (Ford). In the U. S., Simic worked a series of odd jobs until joining the Army in 1961, returning to Europe as a military policeman in Germany and France (Ford). After some time in New York, he accepted a professorship in 1973 from the University of New Hampshire, where he has since remained (Ford).

Simic's poetry is an exegesis of his time. His work encompasses both the tragedy of war and the monotony of modern life. There are underlying currents of conflict in Simic's work. Tension arises between Europe and America, the profound and the mundane, and the deep, but perhaps fleeting, legacy of wartime Europe on Western life. Simic's work is best understood as balancing these apparent contradictions in a candid and illuminating manner. Simic's poems are not long, and are not lost to verbosity. For Simic, thoughts on everyday interactions and objects evoke the important motifs and conflicts that have colored his life. Simic juxtaposes these tensions and interpolates his poems with a rewarding touch of simplicity. His work is best understood as an ode to the postwar mentality of relief and malaise, and perhaps a slight loss of words in modern life following the horrors and atrocities of the Nazi regime.

Simic discusses the importance of brevity to his work in his interview with Michael Milburn. While Simic's poems could be criticized as highly uniform in their structure and perhaps too short, he refuses to equate excellence with length. He describes to Milburn that, "' When I was 21, I wrote an 80 page poem about the cruelties of the Spanish Inquisition very much in the manner of Pound's Cantos. For a few months, I thought it was a work of true greatness, then one day my eyes were opened'" (Milburn 157). Simic, throughout his life, has been a voracious reader and consumer of historical and philosophical knowledge. However, he rarely ingrains specific references, or even proper nouns, in his brief poems. While Simic has the ability to go into a detailed account of the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition, he sees the feeling of such pain as best described rather than related. He goes on to state that, "' I can fit all my notions of heaven and earth now on the cover of a match. By temperament, I'm a miniaturist. I paint angels on the head of a pin. I make towers out of breadcrumbs'" (157). Simic's minimalism reflects a tendency in postwar literature to avoid explicit statements and focus on evoking emotion.

Simic is devoid of the stereotypical pretensions of the modern poet. Like his poetry, which depicts everyday life, Simic has an appreciation for less-educated and inexperienced readers and values their engagements with his work. In his interview with Milburn, Simic explains that, "' Years ago in New York while teaching poetry in the schools, I realized that even a semi-literate juvenile delinquent can be savvy about poetry. My poems invited the readers to use their imagination, and they had no difficulties in that departments'" (156). Simic's appreciation for the imagination and the younger reader

demonstrates his almost humanistic faith in the value of a wide array of people engaging with his work. This illustrates Simic's conscious approachability and recognition of mass culture and the worth of the individual in modern life. Simic's appreciation for the poor and working class is explored in an interview with J. M. Spalding. Simic exclaims to Spalding that "' Our cities are full of homeless and mad people going around talking to themselves. Not many people seem to notice them. I watch them and eavesdrop on them'" (Spalding). While this admission may seem out of place, it helps characterize Simic's creative process. He states that, "' I would rather live in Harlem than in Westchester County'" (Spalding). Simic strives to be a poet whose work draws from, and can speak to, almost anyone.

Simic's experiment in brevity is fundamentally rooted in his concept of the postwar world. For Simic, in contemporary Western life, there is no unifying national narrative that grants credence to the epic. In a post-Holocaust world that has rejected many forms of extreme patriotism, Simic is skeptical toward purportedly common cultures. In his interview with Milburn, Simic states that, "' Our poets have plenty to say, but for that kind of long poem you need a common culture, a religion you believe in, a mythology and a history- and, as everybody knows, that ain't available to us anymore'" (Milburn 158). Simic has an appreciation for humanists such as Whitman who explore common cultures through connections to both nature and everyday life. However, Simic seems less convinced by Ginsberg's sometimes mechanic and referential depictions of postwar American life (158). Simic sees his own work as more simplistic beauty emerging from the maelstrom

identified by Ginsberg. Simic writes that, ““ My poems are a species of found poetry. I discover the little you see on the page in longer stretches of writing”” (158). Simic’s poems are both explanatory and applicable. His work is not rooted in one particular cultural narrative, but nevertheless explores everyday Western postwar life.

Simic’s minimalism extends to a humored criticism of modern-day malaise and the contemporary human condition. At the conclusion of his book *The World Doesn’t End*, Simic writes, ““ My secret identity is / The room is empty, / And the window is open”” (159). Here, Simic’s minimalism reaches a concrete connection with modern life. While his character yearns to acknowledge his “ secret identity,” he cannot help but be overcome by the loneliness of his surroundings in the empty room and the innumerable possibilities alluded to with the open window. This reflects a position that is, at its core, particularly postmodern. Of his poetry, Simic states that, ““ I’ve always subscribed to the old symbolist idea that the poet performs only one part of the creative act, the reader does the rest”” (159). Simic sees the reader as an active engager with the poem, playing perhaps a larger role than the poet himself. Like the character susceptible to such lonely opportunity trying to articulate his secret identity, the reader is able to ascribe a multitude of meanings to Simic’s work in the solitary act of reading the poem. On this passage, Simic explains that, ““ The poem must have come out of an inspired and drastic act of butchery”” (159). For Simic, there is no takeaway message at the conclusion of his Pulitzer Prize-winning book. It is up to the reader to ascribe meaning for himself.

Simic's poetry also reflects the fleeting nature of wartime legacy and human tragedy in general. He states that, "' Even history, which I take far more seriously than the story of my loves and heartbreaks, is not finally a subject'" (161). Simic does not consider history to be comprehensive or exhaustive enough to qualify as its own subject in his work. A poem about a wartime experience can be extrapolated to make another point. He explains that, "' I often begin about some great horror and injustice, but the words on the page take me to a completely unrelated topic'" (161). In much of his wartime work, Simic moves from an observation of the Nazis or their crimes to a more universal interaction or object that could be interpreted by the reader from a number of angles. In " Two Dogs," Simic recalls " The earth trembling, death going by / A little white dog ran into the street / And got entangled with the soldiers' feet. A kick made him fly as if he had wings. That's what I keep seeing! / Night coming down. A dog with wings." (Ford). In his episode, Simic begins the passage equating the Nazi procession with " death going by." However, he moves away from the image of the Nazi soldiers to the dog flying against the night sky. His simple but evocative imagery points the reader in a few different directions and allows him or her to make their own conclusions about the passage.

Simic's interview with Mark Ford for The Paris Review touches on the tension and juxtaposition of Europe and the United States in Simic's life and poetry. Arriving in the United States for the first time, Simic felt quite a world away from Europe. He relates that, "' It was an astonishing sight in 1954. Europe was so gray and New York was so bright. European cities are like operatic stage sets. New York looked like painted sets in a sideshow at a carnival

where the bearded lady, sword-swallowers, snake charmers, and magicians made their appearances” (Ford). For Simic, New York represented a land of opportunity and merriment, whereas Europe was still reeling from the deep wounds of the catastrophic Nazi regime. However, the contrast between Nazi-era Europe and contemporary times is not so stark for Simic. He feels that, “‘ The same type of lunatics who made the world what it is was when I was a kid are still around. They want more wars, more prisons, more killing. It’s all horribly familiar, very tiresome and frightening, of course” (Ford). Simic contends the world is this way despite the fact that his mother felt his family’s lives had been made meaningless by history (Ford). Despite the glamour of modern American culture, the threats of wartime Europe persist in the modern era for Simic.

Simic explores the legacy of postwar Europe in the United States and in his own personal life in “ Butcher Shop.” In the poem, Simic revels in the butcher shops of his Manhattan neighborhood that remind him of staples back home in Belgrade. However, Simic cannot shed the darker connotations of these shops from the tragedy and destruction of World War II. Simic acknowledges that, “‘ In those days there were still Polish and Italian butcher shops in that part of town. Of course, it reminded me of Europe, of my childhood.” This familiar sight must have brought Simic from comfort so far away from the land he was raised in. But far from a consoling homage to his home, in the poem he writes, “ There is a wooden block where bones are broken, / Scraped clean- a river dried to its bed / Where I am fed, / Where deep in the night I hear a voice” (Ford). Simic uses the imagery of the “ bones” being “ broken” and “ scraped clean” to conjure all-too-familiar sights of carnage

during the war. The voice in the night harkens to his compatriots that did not survive this bloody time. In the Ford interview, he states that, ““ It took me many years and meetings with some of my childhood friends from Belgrade to realize that I grew up in a slaughterhouse”” (Ford). In a tragic way, the butcher shop he illustrates in the poem reminds him of Belgrade in more ways than one.

Simic’s poetry mirrors his life. He strives to bring meaning to the mundane and to explore the beauty inherent in tensions and contradictions in culture and society. But much of Simic’s simplicity may lie in his own personal preference. In an interview with Rachael Allen, he states that, “ In the kitchen, I like simple dishes cooked to perfection rather than elaborate culinary creations. In music too, the fewer the instruments there are, the better” (Allen). While it is difficult to determine what exactly inspires Simic for a particular passage or poem, he will continue to be respected and remembered as a poet who said more with less.

Bibliography

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