

*Simic's Surrealist Metaphysics: A Review of Charles Simic,  
The Voice at 3:00 A.M.: Selected Late and New Poems*

For many readers the term ‘surrealism’ readily connects to Lautréamont’s description of Mervyn in “Canto Six” of *Les Chants de Maldoror*—that he is as fair “as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella” (trans. Alexis Lykiard 1970). The description has become something of a definition, by way of example, of surrealist procedure. But as Maurice Nadeau points out in his *The History of Surrealism*, this movement developed between the World Wars as much more than a literary or artistic school. Rather, its practitioners, with their interests in dream states, chance, madness, and the unconscious, sought to free themselves from stultifying bourgeois convention and to discover new ways of understanding and being in the world. As Nadeau also points out, this European, decidedly French, movement has tended to show up as something of a mongrel in the United States. Despite the work of a home-grown version, the Chicago Surrealist Movement (See *Surrealist Subversions*, ed. Ron Sakolsky, Autonomedia 2002), which developed in the sixties, surrealism has tended to have a rather haphazard existence in the artistic life of this country, even with the work of James Tate, the early Mark Strand, and certain strains of John Ashbery. But then the influence of surrealism has dispersed, as strong influences tend to do, spreading through many parts of the poetry writing world. This dispersal is well demonstrated by Strand and Simic’s well-known anthology *Another Republic: 17 European and South American Writers*, composed of writers whom the editors claim as influences, among them Julio Cortázar, Italo Calvino, and Vasko Popa, the latter of whom Simic has translated at length.

These considerations form a helpful backdrop in taking up the poetry of Charles Simic. While no poet should be considered solely as an exemplar of a given movement, it is illuminating to read Simic’s poems in light of surrealist protocols. For example, his interest in the shadow life of the unconscious forms a strong link to surrealism’s legacy. Much of the imagery of Simic’s poetry comes from his childhood in Yugoslavia during the Second World War.

In his memoir *A Fly in the Soup* (Michigan 2000), he describes his childhood in Belgrade, playing in the bombed-out building across the street from his family home: “Our wartime equivalent of jungle gyms, slides, tree houses, forts, and mazes were to be found in that ruin across the street. There was a part of the staircase left. We would climb up between the debris, and all of a sudden there would be the sky!” This is a passage at once eerily stark and rich with implications about certain of surrealism’s sources, the world’s brokenness and inexplicable violence. Simic also describes watching, as a little boy, the bombings of Belgrade from his grandfather’s house in the country. His grandfather would give him some cheese and a sip of wine, and they would listen for the explosions:

He didn’t say anything, but he had a smile on his face that I still remember. My father’s father had a dark view of the human species. As far as he was concerned, we were all inmates in a nuthouse. Events like this confirmed what he already suspected. In the meantime, there were the night scents of a country garden in full bloom, the stars in the sky, the silence of a small village.

The line about inmates in a nuthouse may work well as a summary of Simic’s sense of the world, as long as one bears in mind the congeniality of his attitude toward his fellow inmates and the surety with which he includes himself among them, whether the institution happens to be configured as an asylum (“Relaxing in a Madhouse”) or a prison (“Penal Architecture,” “Serving Time”). Further, the juxtaposition of the bombings in the distance with the almost Edenic moment in the village is one that, taken as a whole, Simic’s poetry sets forth. Eating, drinking, and conversation are rendered all but surreal by a violent world.

Simic’s concerns have him raising philosophical questions of a kind that have been asked for centuries. In his essay “Poetry is the Present” in *The Unemployed Fortune-Teller* (Michigan 1994), Simic reports Hayden Carruth saying to him that “poets of the second half of the twentieth century are really displaced metaphysicians of the nineteenth century.” In fact, it seems that the title of Simic’s volume, *The Voice at 3:00 A.M.* (Harcourt 2003), has its roots in exactly this idea of the poet as metaphysician. Alluding to his struggles with insomnia, Simic says, “I’ve lain in the dark for sixty years

sweating over everything from my own life to the world's vileness and stupidity. The metaphysician at 3 a.m., that's me" (*A Fly in the Soup*). Certainly, Simic faces some weighty questions in a mode whose jocularity registers the depth of his concerns. "St. Thomas Aquinas," a poem with a heavyweight title if ever there was one, begins by alluding to the fragmentation of the self: "I left parts of myself everywhere / The way absent-minded people leave / Gloves and umbrellas...." Whereas Aquinas was attempting to synthesize ideas about human nature and its relationship to the Divine, the speaker of this poem finds himself composed of the bric-a-brac of the everyday world through which he wanders in search of something further to call and make of himself. In this mode of quest, he ironically takes a cue from the poem's theologian:

Since "man naturally desires happiness,"  
According to St. Thomas Aquinas,  
Who gave irrefutable proof of God's existence and purpose,  
I loaded trucks in the Garment Center.  
A black man and I stole a woman's red dress.

In the classical tradition of which Aquinas is a part, the ideal situation for the achievement of beatitude—or 'eudemonia' in the language of Aristotle—is one that is not taken up merely with a struggle for survival, but which includes plenty of room for pursuits worth carrying out for their own sake (See Joseph Pieper's *Leisure as the Basis of Culture*). The garment center job that the speaker takes on lies some distance from such pursuits. In the context of this rather numbing work, the act of stealing the dress, each person "holding one sleeve," is the sort of prank that the old-school surrealists might favor as an act of rebellion against the drudgery of the work-a-day world. This prank works especially poignantly in the way it incorporates an item from the work-a-day world into a gesture at once rebellious and in a sense artistic, a kind of two-partner dance with a red dress.

But this gesture hardly suffices, and the speaker goes in pursuit of such leisure activities as conversation and poetry. He eventually takes on the identity suggested by his reading, announcing himself as "a medieval philosopher in exile," an identity he can assume only in partial terms. After all, the demands of chronology aside, he does

not spend his time working up theological treatises, but rather stays “in the movies all day long.” Nevertheless, his reading affords him another persona:

Everyone I met  
Wore part of my destiny like a carnival mask.  
“I’m Bartleby the Scrivener,” I told the Italian waiter.  
“Me, too,” he replied.  
And I could see nothing but overflowing ashtrays  
The human-faced flies were busy examining.

Like a fly living off carrion, the speaker lives off the leavings of the world and its history, especially its history of letters. There is a long history of association between death and letters on a page, the latter requiring the living breath of readers to remain alive. In this piecing together of an identity, there is a further relation to Aquinas, who synthesized his writings from the riches of the Biblical, classical, patristic, and medieval worlds. In a similar way, the poem’s speaker weaves himself from the texts and encounters of his world.

Woven into Simic’s texts are encounters with a world by turns marvelous and cruel. On the one hand, the poems abound with images of war: “Night of distant guns” (“For the Sake of Amelia”); “We played war during the war, / Margaret” (“The Big War”); “The president / Spoke of war as of a magic love potion” (“Paradise Motel”); “I had a small, nonspeaking part / In a bloody epic. I was one of the / Bombed and fleeing humanity” (“Cameo Appearance”); “The butchery of the innocent / Never stops” (“Sunday Papers”). Nevertheless, however imminent the threat of this butchery may be, there may exist in the midst of the chaos world enough and time for something like celebration:

We don’t even take time  
To come up for air.  
We keep our mouths full and busy  
Eating bread and cheese  
And smooching in between.  
 (“Crazy About Her Shrimp”)

But such moments of ease remain tenuous in a world whose injustice and bizarre cruelty show up in the most commonplace of moments. In “The City” the reader encounters “at least one crucified at every corner.” As the poem proceeds, it illustrates Auden’s dictum, in “Musée des Beaux Arts,” that suffering “takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along”:

There were many who saw none of this.  
A couple lingered on kissing lustily  
Right where someone lay under a newspaper.  
His bloody feet, swollen twice their size,  
Jutted out into the cold of the day,  
Grim proofs of a new doctrine.

I tell you, I was afraid. A man screamed  
And continued walking as if nothing had happened.  
Everyone whose eyes I sought avoided mine.  
Was I beginning to resemble him a little?

To no avail the speaker tries to come up with an adequate response, but all his responses remain confused. The only response that the poem seems to offer is that of those swollen feet, “Grim proofs of a new doctrine” of suffering and abuse.

There are times when the searches of these poems find Simic delving into realms of mystical experience. “First Frost,” for example, begins “The time of the year for the mystics. / October sky and the Cloud of Unknowing.” The second line alludes to the medieval treatise on the contemplative life, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a famous example of negative theology, which emphasizes humans’ inability to know the Divine, before whom human language and categories remain utterly inadequate. The poem goes on to feature famous mystics of Western tradition, such as Jakob Boehme, the German Renaissance cobbler who wrote *The Way of Christ*. Simic has Boehme sipping tea and discoursing on the need for silence. But the poem refuses this counsel:

The young woman paid no attention.  
Hair fallen over her eyes,

Breasts loose and damp in her robe,  
Stubbornly scrubbing a difficult stain.

Then the dog's bark brought us all outdoors,  
And that wasn't just geese honking,  
But Dame Julian of Norwich herself discoursing  
On the marvelous courtesy and homeliness of the Maker.

Julian of Norwich, a medieval English mystic who emphasized God as our Mother, along with the courtesy (meaning the courtliness) of God, gets the final word. The need to understand God in some human term or another is reasserted in the poem, which is not allegory exactly, but rather a world of intersecting times and interwoven texts, a world in which the honking geese turn out to be a mystic of the Middle Ages talking about the miraculous in the commonplace terms of courtesy and the homeliness of domesticity. Everything in the world of the poem remains in constant flux. It is the way that Simic addresses and moves in this flux that is the marvel and delight of his poems. At once skeptical and mystical, as well as both poignant and humorous in the midst of tragedy, his poems constitute a surrealism that ranges through history and thereby illuminates the struggles and pressures of the present moment.