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# Charles Simic: Trends Toward an International Poetry

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CHARLES SIMIC: TRENDS TOWARD

AN INTERNATIONAL POETRY

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BY

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CHARLES SIMIC: TRENDS TOWARD  
AN INTERNATIONAL POETRY

## ABSTRACT

### CHARLES SIMIC: TRENDS TOWARD AN INTERNATIONAL POETRY

Denise Clark

In his article "Wrong Turning in American Poetry," Robert Bly believes that American poetry has been lead astray by the likes of Eliot, Pound, Moore, and Williams. He feels that the main failing of American poetry is its lack of inward, spiritual life. It is the Spanish speaking poets that Bly looks to as the true path-finders of spiritual poetry. If Bly believes that poets like Eliot and Williams were responsible for steering American poetry down the wrong path, it is a foreigner, Charles Simic, who will give American poetry the right turn it needs.

What Simic has been able to see, that other poets have failed to recognize, is poetry's ability to travel: its ability to pass national boundaries and survive on its images not on its geographical origins. His poetry forces its readers to look at the things around them in a way they never have before. His poems are filled with objects like shoes, forks, and axes that transcend national boundaries and take on new meanings to the reader.

In order to change our preconceived ideas of these things, Simic shakes up our expectations by bringing his poems alive through myth and ritual. (He feels "The aim is to present the known in terms of the unknown and recover its mythical potential.") And in keeping with this aim, stones have secret, ancient lives stirring deep inside them, brooms know the future and the past, and shoes reflect our inner lives.

Simic takes such objects as these and traces them back to a primitive time, a time of myth and ritual. By going back and searching for those primitive origins, he fuses myth and reality together, thus bringing the object closer to the self, closer to each of us. With a common object like the fork, the poet is able to show the object slowly evolve into an extended metaphor for man himself. In the poems we see the object change from a mere thing into an extension, a part of man. Man and object become one, and by forcing us to view the object in new and different ways, he forces us to see ourselves, to explore our beginnings.

The poet has given us a new poetry by stripping away, through the use of myth, our preconceived ideas about the object. This is a poetry that survives on the strength of its images. It is a poetry that claims no country or nationality; rather it lives inside each of us, everywhere.

Robert Bly, in his article "Wrong Turning in American Poetry," believes that American poetry has been led down the wrong path by the 1917 generation of Eliot, Pound, Moore and Williams. Bly sees the main failing of American poetry to be its lack of spiritual life.<sup>1</sup> It is the Spanish-speaking poets that Bly looks to as the true path-finders of spiritual poetry. Spanish poetry, according to Bly, looks inward, while American poetry is constantly expanding outward and ultimately destroying itself.<sup>2</sup> Instead of looking inward for its true direction, American poetry is expanding, losing its center, and in turn losing its meaning.

Bly feels the 1917 generation dangerously disconnected itself from the inward life, turning instead to objects. From Eliot's "objective correlative" to Williams' "no ideas but in things," Bly shows how each lacks spiritual, inward life. He says of Williams' poems, "there is in them a drive toward the extinction of personality."<sup>3</sup> It is this lack of personality, lack of self, that troubles Bly. He notes that the poems of Neruda, Vallejo, and Jiminez are extensions of the poet, extensions of the man, while American poetry is a poetry that considers the poem to be a construction independent of the poet.<sup>4</sup> Without this human extension no poem can have an inward life; the poem becomes a mere object.

If Bly believes that the likes of Eliot and Williams are responsible for having set the wheels of poetry churning in the wrong direction, it is a foreigner, a translator, Charles Simic, who will give American poetry the right turn it needs.

Even though Simic was already published when Bly's article appeared in 1971, it is clear that his poetry is an incarnation of the very style of poetry Bly found so refreshing in the third-world poets. In fact, Simic's poetry is more closely tied to the third-world poets than to any American tradition. (By leaving Yugoslavia and coming to America,<sup>5</sup> Simic has been able to see what most American poets have failed to recognize--poetry's ability to travel: its ability to pass national boundaries and survive on its images, not on its geographical origins.) (Simic is not a writer of American poetry but of a new international poetry. With his poetry he forces his readers to look at the things around them in a way they never have before. Simic chooses objects like shoes, forks, and shirts that transcend any national origins.) The poet fills his work with these objects; in fact, very few people can be found in his poems.)

Simic's poems are alive with myth. He says of myth, "The comic and the mythic strategies are similar, if not identical. The trick is to be liberal-minded in the world of multiple metaphor, and fabulous in the face of the literal. The aim is to present the known in terms of the unknown and recover its mythical potential."<sup>6</sup> And he does exactly that in his work. A stone or a broom is presented in a way that is unfamiliar to the reader and suddenly these objects become



mythical; they become riddles. It is his fascination with objects and his mythical treatment of these objects that both aligns him with and sets him apart from the 1917 generation.

William Carlos Williams, whom Bly labels as "perhaps the center of American Poetry"<sup>7</sup> is a poet who deals with things. With the exact eye of a painter, he gives his readers beautifully precise still lifes. In Williams' "The Great Figure" the poet paints a one dimensional picture of an object:

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in the cold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheel rumblings  
through the dark city.<sup>8</sup>

Williams tries to inject some movement and sound into his poem, but the result is only an external portrait of a fire engine. Williams' poetry falls short of Simic's poems which are filled with his extended view of objects--a view that is internal. While Williams is a poet of objects, Simic is a poet of vision. All of Simic's poems force us to see, to explore, to look deeper than we ever have before. Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" flashes an image before our eyes; Simic's "Stone" takes us on a journey deep inside a riddle. One poem simply shows while the other asks us to explore and to see. What Bly admired in the Spanish

poets was a poetry shaped not by technique but by vision.<sup>9</sup> And it is vision that distinguishes Charles Simic from the majority of American poets.

Unlike Williams' things, Simic's have lives and worlds all their own. Stones have secret universes deep inside; forks have crawled to us from hell, and brooms have their own secret powers. While Williams was content to give us things, Simic gives us objects that are really extended metaphors which control and shape the poems, giving them life and dimension. These objects become totems, symbols enlarged by Simic. These objects are not American or Russian or Yugoslavian; they can convey meaning in any language. When the poet pries these objects open, we see their origins. He mythologizes them.

The best way to understand these various treatments of the object is to see them come to life in the poems. The poem "Stone" is a key to unravelling Simic's use of the object as an extended metaphor. Stones, which appear quite often in Simic's poems, are a perfect example of the poet's treatment of symbol:

Go inside a stone  
That would be my way.  
Let somebody else become a dove  
Or gnash with a tiger's tooth.  
I am happy to be a stone.

From the outside the stone is a riddle:  
No one knows how to answer it.  
Yet within, it must be cool and quiet  
Even though a cow steps on it full weight,  
Even though a child throws it in a river;  
The stone sinks, slow, unperturbed  
To the river bottom  
Where the fishes come to knock on it  
And listen.

I have seen sparks fly out  
 When two stones are rubbed,  
 So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;  
 Perhaps there is a moon shining  
 From somewhere, as though behind a hill--  
 Just enough life to make out  
 The strange writings, the star-charts  
 On the inner walls.<sup>10</sup>

The reader immediately finds himself in an internal world. By the command, "go inside a stone," the barricades set by Williams have been broken down. It is not the outside of the stone that is important; it is the inner world and inner life that Simic asks us to explore.

He chooses the stone because it is indeed a riddle. Riddles fascinate him because he believes it is in riddle that myth is discovered. He states, "For the riddle is not only a mental puzzle, its language is thoroughly idiomatic. In it one hears. In it one hears the purest native lyrical and imaginative strain. In the riddle the world truly becomes mythos, becomes the place of origins."<sup>11</sup> It is in these origins that Simic wants us to start. It is as if he wants us to discard our previous notions about an object and look at it as if we were seeing this "riddle" for the first time.

In lines 3-5 of "Stone" the poet speaks of the dove and the tiger. He sees these two as conventional poetic subjects. We picture the meek dove or perhaps even Blake's tiger "burning bright". But he doesn't want these conventional subjects; he chooses a new subject and a new approach. He takes a stone and makes it a riddle; he chooses to go inside it. He would rather be the cool, quiet stone which does not float above, but rather sinks unperturbed to a dark, inner world, a world

never before explored. It is not the surface view, or the conventional view that intrigues Simic; it is the life that lingers below the surface, the meaning that lingers below that matters. Man's being is as much of a riddle as that of the inside of a stone. Simic is constantly trying to understand man by exploring those objects that are almost second nature to him: hands, bones, knives.

In "Stone" the poet takes a totally fictitious premise--"go inside a stone," and somehow we believe him and follow him and the stone from land to flight, to water. And as David Walker remarks, "through all this shifting focus runs the thread of the second line, the musing inventive self-consciousness that keeps reminding us in complex ways that the stone both is and is not a metaphor for the self."<sup>12</sup> The perpetual riddle remains intact. To answer it is to discover all its mysteries, and to uncover its mysteries is to return it to the familiar, and to Simic that is to return to no myth, no existence, and no poetry.

In "Stone," as in most of his works, we start with the object and move vertically toward the mystery, to the riddle of that object. Here lies the basic difference between object poetry and visionary poetry. Object poetry moves in a horizontal direction, analogous to skimming the surface of a pond, while the visionary poem moves vertically, below the surface. It would seem that Simic's stone is the ideal symbol for his visionary poetry. He has found a totem that represents the myth and riddle he finds so imperative in poetry.

In his poems parts become wholes, externals become internals. Our view of the outside is forced inside until it becomes a part of each of

us. Simic's objects are extended metaphors of the self. Objects seem to start as mere things, but they slowly evolve, taking on greater shape, greater mysteries. The vision takes over and soon an object becomes a part of the self, a part of the reader. By looking at our things, the poet can look into us. It is as if he is saying no object exists outside of the self; every thing is a product of the imaginative nature of man. Every stone, every shoe exists because of man's imagination. As noted earlier, there are very few people in Simic's poems. The reason becomes clear once we see that the object is an extension of man himself. A perfect example of how the object evolves into the person is found in the poem "Fork".

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.<sup>13</sup>

The implement in our hands is no longer a fork, but a thing from hell. The fork becomes a barbaric totem, a bird's foot around a cannibal's neck. With its myth and ritual, Simic hands us the stabbing fork, so we can imagine the whole. Just as in "Stone" he states a premise that shakes our expectations. In his introduction to Vaska Popa's book, Simic noted how Popa begins an early poem "Horse", in the following manner:

Usually  
He has eight legs--<sup>14</sup>

Simic explains that since the answer to the riddle is already contained in the title (Horse), the riddle-like strategy is there to displace our expectation.<sup>15</sup> Simic does the same thing in his poems; he immediately displaces our expectations. Never in our wildest dreams would we think of a fork crawling out of hell! And yet, once we set aside our traditional conceptions, we can, through the poems, see things as we have never been able to.

We see the fork crawl out of hell and evolve into a bird's foot. From the cannibal's neck we hold the damned thing in our hands, and we become the cannibal stabbing the meat. From the part of the bird we envision the whole which evolves into a part of us, our hand, large, bald, beakless and blind.

In the final two lines the poet has ventured once again to answer the riddle of man. We are that savage bird, and we are forged of the same myth, the same hellish existence that forged the fork. The part has become the whole. The ritualistic has become the modern. Myth and reality become one. This is what Simic wants us to see.

In the poem "Ax," Simic shows us a future which is merely a repetition of the past. The present becomes entwined with man's past, with man's myth.

Whoever swings an ax  
 Knows the body of man  
 Will again be covered with fur.  
 The stench of blood and swamp water  
 Will return to its old resting place.  
 They'll spend their winters  
 Sleeping like the bears.  
 The skin on the breasts of their women

Will grow coarse. He who cannot  
 Grow teeth, will not survive.  
 He who cannot howl  
 Will not find his pack . . .

These dark prophecies were gathered,  
 Unknown to myself, by my body  
 Which understands historical probabilities,  
 Lacking itself, in its essence, a future.<sup>16</sup>

Lines 1-3 tell us that whoever swings an ax knows man's future. The ax is the perfect implement in that it is an ancient tool that man still clings to; it fuses man with his past. And by holding that ax man can know his past and his future.

This forging of past and present is not a new idea in American poetry. Walt Whitman, in his "Song of the Broad-Axe," employs the same method of bringing together time as Simic does in his poem, "Ax." Whitman chooses an object, the ax, and uses it as an emblem to trace man's development as both builder and destroyer. The ax comes to symbolize the creative strength of men.<sup>17</sup>

In Section 8 of his poem, Whitman unfolds man's history as traced through the ax:

I see the European headsman,  
 He stands mask'd, clothed in red, with huge legs and  
     strong naked arms,  
 And leans on a ponderous axe.

(Whom have you slaughter'd lately European headsman?  
 Whose is that blood upon you so wet and sticky?)

I see the clear sunset of the martyrs,  
 I see from the scaffolds the descending ghosts,

Ghosts of dead lords, uncrown'd ladies, impeach'd  
     ministers, rejected kings,  
 Rivals, traitors, poisoners, disgraced chieftains  
     and the rest.

I see those who in any land have died for the good  
 cause,  
 The seed is spare, nevertheless the crop shall never  
 run out,  
 (Mind you O foreign kings, O priests, the crop shall  
 never run out.)

I see the blood wash'd entirely away from the axe,  
 Both blade and helve are clean,  
 They spirit no more the blood of European nobles,  
 they clasp no more the necks of queens.

I see the headsman withdraw and become useless,  
 I see the scaffold untrodden and mouldy, I see no  
 longer any axe upon it,  
 I see the mighty and friendly emblem of the power  
 of my own race, the newest, largest race.<sup>18</sup>

By looking at the ax's history, we can see man's history much the  
 same way as we saw man evolve in "Fork."

Simic's "Ax" differs from Whitman's poem in that it is not a  
 celebration of man's achievements but rather a "dark prophecy" of  
 man's future. Yet, it is important to realize that Whitman saw the  
 object's ability to transcend its boundaries and become a symbol for  
 man. In lines 4-10 of Simic's poem, man has regressed to an animal,  
 who like the bear, hibernates. Only those who can fight, can survive.  
 Life, like the women's breasts, has once again become coarse.

In the final stanza we understand that the body has gathered  
 these prophecies unknown to the self. It is the body that knows its  
 rituals, knows the future is merely the past. This poem is an excellent  
 example of Simic's ability to fuse myth and reality. By looking at the  
 origins, we see the beginning of myth, and the beginning of man.

Lawrence Raab said in review of Dismantling The Silence, "Simic  
 takes as his reference the poetry of the primitive, tribal man-poetry



that had to work, that asked for a change of weather or the healing of a wound, poetry that, properly spoken, might protect him from his enemy and save him."<sup>19</sup> This sense of the primitive is clearly seen in the three previous poems. From the strange star-charts on the inner walls of the stone, to the bird's foot around the cannibal's neck, to the prehistoric man clutching an ax, we feel echoes of impulses that have been buried deep within us.<sup>20</sup> By striking these chords, we see the object is indeed an extension of ourselves. The poet has been able to transcend time; man's history has become contained in object.

Hand in hand with this primitive factor, Simic uses myth as still another way of bringing objects closer to the self. In the poem "Brooms" he mythologizes the broom as he moves through the centuries:

## 1

Only brooms  
Know the devil  
Still exists,

That the snow grows whiter  
After a crow has flown over it,  
That a dark dusty corner  
Is the place of dreamers and children,

That a broom is also a tree  
In the orchard of the poor,  
That a hanging roach there  
Is a mute dove.

## 2

Brooms appear in dreambooks  
As omens of approaching death.  
This public, they act like flat-chested old maids  
Preaching temperance.

They are sworn enemies of lyric poetry.  
 In prison they accompany the jailer,  
 Enter cells to hear confessions.  
 Their short-end comes down  
 When you least expect it.

Left alone behind a door  
 Of a condemned tenement,  
 They mutter to no one in particular,  
 Words like virgin wind moon-eclipse,  
 And that most sacred of all names:  
 Hieronymous Bosch.

## 3

In this and in no other manner  
 Was the first ancestral broom made:  
 Namely, they plucked all the arrows  
 From the bent back of Saint Sebastian.  
 They tied them with a rope  
 On which Judas hung himself.  
 Stuck in the stilt  
 On which Copernicus  
 Touched the morning star . . .

Then the broom was ready  
 To leave the monastery.  
 The dust welcomed it--  
 That great pornographer  
 Immediately wanted to  
 Look under its skirt.

## 4

The secret teaching of brooms  
 Excludes optimism, the consolation  
 Of laziness, the astonishing wonders  
 Of a glass of aged moonshine.

It says: the bones end up under the table.  
 Bread-crumbs have a mind of their own.  
 The milk is you-know-who's semen.  
 The mice have the last squeal.

As for the famous business  
 Of levitation, I suggest remembering:  
 There is only one God  
 And his prophet is Mohammed.

5

And then finally there's your grandmother  
Sweeping the dust of the nineteenth century  
Into the twentieth, and your grandfather plucking  
A straw out of the broom to pick his teeth.

Long winter nights.  
Dawns a thousand years deep.  
Kitchen windows like heads  
Bandaged for toothache.

The broom beyond them sweeping,  
Tucking the lucent grains of dust  
Into neat pyramids,  
That have tombs in them,

Already sacked by robbers,  
Once, long ago.<sup>21</sup>

Once again we start out by being forced to relate to the broom in a way we never have before; we learn only brooms know the devil still exists. An object that most of us never gave a second thought to has the ability to know both good and evil. By overlaying the broom with myth, Simic guides us through the centuries, to the present which in turn points to the past.

In lines 4-7 we get the flavor of folk wisdom and wives tales, as if an old man is revealing age old wisdoms to us. In the third stanza of section 1, the poetic image of the dove is turned aside and has become a roach hanging in the orchard of the poor. Our concepts and expectations have been tampered with, and we accept the wisdom given us.

Section 2 tells of the secret life of brooms. They are not what they appear, in public old maids preaching temperance, or in

dreambooks, omens of approaching death. Lines 6-10 expand on the true nature of brooms. They become enemies to lyric poetry, and priests to the condemned. They are unpredictable; they are indeed a riddle.

In section 3, Simic envisions how the first broom was made from man's mythological past. Saint Sebastian's arrows are neatly tied by Judas' hanging rope, and Copernicus' stilt binds them all together. The broom, like man, is made up of both religious myth and science.

Section 4 tells of the secret teachings of brooms. The dark pessimism of things not being what they seem, and the eerie feeling of being out of control is balanced by the third stanza in which we remember there is but one God.

The dust from one century is being swept into our century in section 5, and our grandfather picks his teeth with a straw from the broom. In this first stanza, Simic seems to be giving us our conventional idea of the broom, but somehow the scene isn't comforting. That straw between grandfather's teeth is now startling after you have seen the secret life of a broom.

The second stanza stretches all time out before us, and in those long winter nights, so still, the broom alone is sweeping dust into pyramids that house tombs. It is in the final six lines that Simic brings the ritual and the modern together. Those pyramids of dust have tombs that are already sacked, once long ago. It is the dust from thousands of years that brooms sweep us, making forms from the past, which have already been robbed of their mystery, robbed of their myth. All the future holds is what is left to us of the past. It is impossible

to read this poem and not feel the pull of something ancient that lies inside of us. Once again, the past and the present are forged into one. Through an object like the broom, the poet has shown that man's past and present have no territories, no boundaries.

Another poem that combines ritual and myth with the present is "The Ballad Of The Wheel." In this poem an ancient implement, the wheel, much like the ax, is used to pull closer to the self. By the final stanza of the poem man and the wheel have become a whole.

so that's what it's like to be a wheel  
 so that's what it's like to be tied to one of its spokes  
 while the rim screeches while the hub grinds  
 so that's what it's like to have the earth and heaven  
 confused

to speak of the stars on the road  
 of stones churning in the icy sky  
 to suffer as the wheel suffers  
 to bear its unimaginable weight

if only it were a honing wheel  
 I would have its sparks to see by  
 if only it were a mill stone  
 I would have bread to keep my mouth busy  
 if only it were a roulette wheel  
 my left eye would watch its right dance in it

so that's what it's like  
 to be chained to the wounded rib of a wheel  
 to move as the hearse moves  
 to move as the lumber truck moves  
 down the mountains at night

what do you think my love  
 while the wheel turns

I think of the horse out in front  
 how the snowflakes are caught in his mane  
 how he shakes his beautiful blindfolded head  
 I think how in the springtime  
 two birds are pulling us along as they fly

how one bird is a crow  
 and the other a swallow  
 I think how in the summertime  
 there's no one out there

except the clouds in the blue sky  
 except the dusk in the blue sky  
 I think how in autumn  
 there's a man harnessed out there  
 a bearded man with the bit stuck in his mouth  
 a hunchback with a blanket over his shoulders  
 hauling the wheel  
 heavy as the earth

don't you hear I say don't you hear  
 the wheel talk as it turns

I have the impression that it's hugging me closer  
 that it has maternal instincts  
 that it's telling me a bedtime story  
 that it knows the way home  
 that I grit my teeth just like my father

I have the impression  
 that it whispers to me  
 how all I have to do  
 to stop its turning  
 is to hold my breath<sup>22</sup>

In the first stanza we again start with the premise that the "I" has experienced what it is like to be a wheel. By becoming a wheel, we bear its weight; we feel what it is like to have our conceptions turned upside down. Stars are on the road and stones churn in the sky. On the wheel our perspective is always changing. It is the perfect device to force us to view things in the way Simic has been asking us to.

Lines 9-19 give the functions of various types of wheels, from a honing wheel that gives us sparks to see by to a hearse, to a lumber

truck moving in the night. With the wheel turning, Simic asks us what we think, and lines 22-38 are dream-like images reflected in the wheel. The first image is a beautiful scene of tranquillity containing a horse flecked with snow. We then progress to a spring time filled with the traditional concepts associated with the season, and the summer cycle reinforces the tranquil picture of blue skies. But in autumn, we feel death, just as the man feels the bite of the bit. Man has become a distorted animal, shouldering the weight of the wheel. In this stanza the cycle of time moves from one extreme to the other. Here, as in "Brooms," and "Ax," the future is simply a move to the past.

The final section of the poem, lines 39-50 slowly bind the reader to the wheel. The poet asks if we don't hear the wheel talking as it turns. Suddenly, the wheel has maternal instincts; it knows all about us. The final stanza is a marvelous example of how Simic makes the object and the self one. In lines 46-50, it is revealed that the wheel and time stop. By the final stanza we have become the wheel; we control the wheel as surely as we control our breathing. Its movement is our movement; our death is its death.

By using objects like the broom, the wheel, and the ax, Simic has found international symbols, totems, that convey meaning through their myths and origins. The reader can see his beginnings, beginnings that have no nationality, no boundaries. It is in these objects and their ability to transcend any national origin, any boundary, that lies the right path for American poetry. In a sense Americans must stop writing American poetry and turn instead to the type of visionary

poetry that Simic and the Spanish poets have mapped out.

In gathering up bits and pieces of man's myths and ritual, the poet has been able to make his readers see themselves and their origins, but this by no means means that he has solved the riddle. No matter how much he digs and gathers, he still shows he has barely begun to solve the puzzle. The poems "Soup," "My Shoes," "Butcher Shop," and "The Inner Man" are testimonials to man's search for his origins and eventually himself.

In "Soup," Simic digs deep into his bag of myths, superstitions and folklore to make a soup that is every bit man, yet still a riddle to him.

Take a little backache  
Melt some snow from the year of your birth  
Add the lump in your throat  
And the fear of the dark

Instead of oil a pinch of chill  
But let it be northern  
Instead of parsley  
Swear loudly into it

Then stir it with the night  
Until its fins and penny-nails  
Are blended.

On what shall we cook it?

On something like a cough  
On the morning star about to fade  
On the whisker of a black cat  
On an oval locket with a picture of Jesus  
On the nipple of a sleeping woman

Let's cook it until we raise  
That heavy autumnal cloud  
From its bowels  
Even if it takes a hundred years.



What do you think it will taste like?

Like barbed wire, like burglar's tools  
 Like a word you'd rather forget  
 The way the book tastes to the goat  
 Who is chewing and spitting its pages  
 Also like the ear of a girl you are about to undress  
 Also like the rim of a smile

In the twentieth century  
 We arouse the sun's curiosity  
 By whistling for the soup  
 To be served.

What in the world shall we eat it with?

With a shoe that left last night  
 To baptize itself in the rain  
 With two eyes that quarrel in the same head  
 With a finger which is the divining-rod  
 Searching for its clearest streak  
 With a hat in which the thoughts  
 Grind each other into black pepper

We'll dive into the soup  
 With a grain of salt between our teeth  
 And won't come up  
 Until we learn its song.

And this is what we'll have on the side:

Lust on halfshells with lemon wedges  
 Mushrooms stuffed with death and almonds  
 The bread of memory, a black bread  
 Blood sausages of yes and no

A hiccup in aspic with paprika  
 Cold wind fried in onions  
 A roast of darkest thoughts  
 Young burp with fish ears  
 Green apples glazed with envy

We'll wash it all down  
 With the ale brewed from the foam  
 Gathered at the mouths  
 Of our old pursuers:  
 The mad, god-sent, bloodhounds.<sup>23</sup>

The first eleven lines of the poem are filled with the ingredients for the soup. Our fears and our aches and a touch of cold winds, fins and nails make up the dismal broth. It is a soup of man, cooked on our superstitions and icons as lines 17 through 21 suggest.

The third section leaves the bitter taste of our creation in our mouths. From the harsh burglar tools, to a word we would rather forget, we come to the sweet ear of a girl and the rim of a smile. In this soup the sweet and the bitter become one.

The first eight lines of the fourth section again show the jumbling and confusing that is a main ingredient in this soup. A shoe that leaves to be baptized, eyes that quarrel in the same head, and thoughts that merely grind together. This whole stanza is one of search, of finding that clearest streak. Man has become a muddled broth. It is in the final stanza of the fourth section that Simic's genius comes through--he tells us that we'll dive into the soup, and we won't come up until we have learned its song. He is telling us to jump in, to break the surface and stay within until we learn all the inner mysteries there are to find. He asks us to be as the stone, happy to drift to the bottom, to see deeper.

The poet rounds out our feast with various side dishes of human nature such as lust, envy and dark thoughts. These little side dishes reflect man's darkest side. After surfacing with the secret of the soup, we are faced with a black bread of memory and blood sausages of indecision. The likes of a cold wind reeking of onions and a roast of dark thoughts are the only things left for us to consume. These are the things man

has to swallow, to bear. And to wash it all down we have the foam from our old, godsent pursuers, the bloodhounds. In this final stanza one feels the past nipping at his heels. The hounds are upon the fox; the pursuit is drawing to a close. Simic gives us a frightening preview of a kind of ancient judgment day, a day of reckoning where we will pay for each half shell of lust we have devoured. Man's past and future come together once again. There is no escaping the bloodhounds.

The poem "My Shoes" also shows how an object or part can become a whole, an emblem for the self.

Shoes, secret face of my inner life:  
Two gaping toothless mouths,  
Two partly decomposed animal skins  
Smelling of mice-nests.

My brother and sister who died at birth  
Continuing their existence in you,  
Guiding my life  
Toward their incomprehensible innocence.

What use are books to me  
When in you it is possible to read  
The Gospel of my life on earth  
And still beyond, of things to come?

I want to proclaim the religion  
I have devised for your perfect humility  
And the strange church I am building  
With you as the altar.

Ascetic and maternal, you endure:  
Kin to oxen, to Saints, to condemned men,  
With your mute patience, forming  
The only true likeness of myself.<sup>24</sup>

In the first stanza the shoes reflect the poet's inner life. This inner life is represented by things from the past, by decomposed animal skins, smells of mice nests. These shoes carry the dead's existence with

them, always keeping the past one with the future. In stanzas three and four, the shoes take on religious properties, and actually become an altar. This notion of religion is a recurring theme in Simic's works. It is not a religion of churches and psalms--but rather a religion of the earth, a religion like all religions built on myths, the myths of man.

In the final stanza the shoes have become ascetic and maternal; they endure; they are kin to the beasts of earth, the saints in heaven and yet they are kin to the condemned. They are all things, and with their silent patience they are the only likeness of the self. The poet, by taking an object like the shoe, guides and shapes his symbol to be a mirror of the self.

In the poem "Butcher Shop" we again feel that strange pull of something ancient and mysterious inside of us. "Butcher Shop" is a perfect example of a visionary poem. Starting with a thing like a butcher shop, the poem proceeds as though in a dream to not just show us a portrait of a butcher shop, but to go down into the thing and envision where it leads, what it stands for.

Sometimes walking late at night  
I stop before a closed butcher shop  
There is a single light in the store  
Like the light in which the convict digs his tunnel.

An apron hangs on the hook:  
The blood on it smeared into a map  
Of the great continents of blood,  
The great rivers and oceans of blood.

There are knives that glitter like altars  
 In a dark church  
 Where they bring the cripple and the imbecile  
 To be healed.

There is a wooden slab 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.<sup>25</sup>

The convict's tunnel image, in lines three and four, suggests the feeling of being trapped, of trying to escape. The second stanza sets up an eerie world of great continents and rivers and oceans of blood. Here again, we are reminded of our origins, of our savage pasts. Religion emerges in the fourth stanza, but it isn't a religion of light and hope, but rather a dark church where cripples and imbeciles proceed to the altar to be healed. This is a dark ritualistic religion, a religion of man's past, of blood. It is as if one could close his eyes and see the lines of lames being wheeled to the altar.

In the final stanza, Simic again brings the present and the past together, but this time he does it on the wooden slab, the chopping block littered with its sacrifices and with a river of blood dried to its bed. It is here that the speaker is fed, and it is here that we can hear a voice from deep in the night. It is from this eerie world of blood that the poet hears a voice calling. The final line serves, at the same time, to root us in that mysterious world, and also call us back to the night at the beginning of the poem.

More than anything else, Simic in this poem is trying to map out his past, trying to answer the riddle. The poet is literally trying

to map out time. By using the physical Simic tries to locate and trace his past. In this poem, perhaps more than any of the others, Simic has come to the place where he is fed, to the threshold of his origins, yet something deeper, further in the night, still exists.

The continual search for origins and the self strongly resurfaces in the poem "The Inner Man":

It isn't the body  
That's a stranger  
It's someone else.

We poke the same  
Ugly mug  
At the world.  
When I scratch,  
He scratches too.

There are women  
Who claim to have held him.  
A dog follows me about.  
It might be his.

If I'm quiet, he's quieter.  
So I forget him.  
Yet, as I bend down  
To tie my shoelaces,  
He's standing up.

We cast a single shadow.  
Whose shadow?

I'd like to say:  
"He was in the beginning  
And he'll be in the end,"  
But one can't be sure.

At night  
As I sit  
Shuffling the cards of our silence,  
I say to him:

"Though you utter  
Every one of my words,  
You are a stranger.  
It's time you spoke."<sup>26</sup>

In this work it is clear that the search must go farther than place; it must extend deep inside each of us. As the first stanza notes, it is not the body that is a stranger, but rather it is someone else, a someone deep inside. The surface, the body, doesn't matter. The search must go inside; it must break the surface and plunge into the darkness that exists in each of us.

Stanzas 2 and 3 show how this "inner man" is deceptively like the outer man, doing what he does, but in stanza 4 as the outer man bends, this inner man dominantly stands. The reader becomes unsure in Stanza 5 just whose shadow we see. Stanza 6 shows how the speaker is doubtful of the inner man's stay within him.

In the final stanza the speaker confronts the inner man, demanding that he speak. In this stanza the reader can feel the desperate need to come to terms with the inner self. Simic, through all his mapping and searching, has come to the last riddle--himself. Man, like the stone, is a riddle; his outside holds no clues to his internal nature.

"Soup," "My Shoes," "Butcher Shop," and "Inner Man" are works searching for origins, for man himself. Through objects Simic is trying to find place, a beginning, in hopes to find the self. In the poem "Return To A Place Lit By A Glass Of Milk" we once again come close to the place of origin much as we did in "Butcher Shop."

Late at night our hands stop working.  
 They lie open with tracks of animals  
 Journeying across the fresh snow.  
 They need no one. Solitude surrounds them.

As they come closer, as they touch,  
 It is like two small streams  
 Which upon entering a wide river  
 Feel the pull of the distant sea.

The sea is a room far back in time  
 Lit by the headlights of a passing car.  
 A glass of milk glows on the table.  
 Only you can reach it for me now.<sup>27</sup>

In this work, just as in "Fork," the first stanza starts with a part, the hands. Our hands stop working, as if they were not a part of the whole. As they lie open at night they are a world unto themselves. And in much the same dreamlike, surrealistic atmosphere that is found in "Butcher Shop," our hands are transformed into vast plains with herds of animals tracking the fresh snow. Our hands need no one. They have become the whole; they, like a secret part of us, come alive at night, and hold a key to man etched on them.

Once we are firmly established in these surroundings, the vision takes over. We leave the part and journey towards the whole, towards the place. In the second stanza the hands are small streams, which when joined together, feel the pull of a distant sea. It is impossible to overlook the strong religious implications of this stanza. The touching hands form praying hands and man in his prayers feels the pull of something distant, of something that is a part of him, a part of his origins. This particular stanza is reminiscent of the voice calling in the deep night in "Butcher Shop."

In the third stanza the streams have entered the river and the river has been pulled to the sea. From the sea we are drawn into a room far back in time. All the action in the poem, as in most of Simic's works,



takes place in the present, and yet we are oddly rooted to the past. The poet has succeeded in forging both the past and the present together through the development of the object in a visionary poem.

As the lights of a passing car go by, we can see a glass of milk glowing on the table. Here the poet chooses the perfect symbol to represent our past--milk. With milk we see our childhood, milk from our mother's breast. From the nursing milk we envision the womb, our origin. From one dark room, far back in time, we arrive at the dark womb, the original room. In the helpless dark state, only we, with hands, can reach these beginnings for the poet. The poet's hands, hands that hold axes, hands that tie shoes, hands that pray, have evolved to bring us to that dark beginning. It is we, the readers, who have to reach for the milk, the life, now.

A voice calling in the night, an ax working in a savage hand, a glass of milk beckoning on the table, all of these have pulled us back, rejoined us with our past. By these objects alone, Simic has overthrown all of our nationalities, all of our rigid boundaries and brought us all to one beginning, a beginning before nationality, before country.

Throughout his work Simic has asked that we look deep, that we go beyond the familiar, into the realm of the mysterious, into the myth. Just as the poem "Stone" is the key to understanding the poet's use of objects, the work "Dismantling The Silence" literally shows how to pry open the symbols:

Take down its ears first  
 Carefully so they don't spill over.  
 With a sharp whistle slit its belly open.  
 If there are ashes in it, close your eyes  
 And blow them whichever way the wind is pointing.  
 If there's water, sleeping water,  
 Bring the root of a plant that hasn't drunk for a month.

When you reach the bones,  
 And you haven't got a pack of dogs with you,  
 And you haven't got a pine coffin  
 And a wagon pulled by oxen to make them rattle,  
 Slip them quickly under your skin,  
 Next time you pick up your sack,  
 You'll hear them setting your teeth on edge . . .

It is completely dark.  
 Slowly and with patience  
 Feel its heart. You will need to haul  
 A heavy chest of drawers  
 Into its emptiness  
 To make it creak  
 On its wheel.<sup>28</sup>

As in the other works, this poem starts with a premise that shakes up the reader's perceptions. The poet asks us to dissect silence, a thing we can neither see, nor by its nature, truly hear. Or can we?

The first three lines of the first stanza tell how to "skin and dress" silence. The ears are the first thing to be dismantled and if we believe the beginning premise, this step seems to be the most logical because without ears and hearing there would be no silence. Inside the belly we may find ashes perhaps from some ancient fires; if so, we should blow them into the wind. If we find water, a kind of holy, sleeping water, we should let a dying plant drink of it. This first stanza with its sacrifice, ashes, and water, recalls that ancient religion and ritual in "Butcher Shop." By dismantling silence, we

come face to face with the remains of our myths, of our rituals.

In the second stanza the poet makes the silence become a part of each of us. When we reach the bones and can find no proper way to dispose of them, we should slip them quickly under our skin so that when we move their rattle will be a grim reminder of the silence, of the inner man, inside of us. Once again the part has become the whole; the external has been internalized.

The third stanza immerses us in dark, but then all of the poems lead us to a dark room, place, or thought. If is in the dark that our search for the truth, for the mystery of the self, must begin. It is in the dark that the poet tells us to feel for silence's heart, but in order to find the heart we need to cause it to make a sound, to reveal its hiding place. A heavy chest of drawers inside the emptiness will make it creak on its wheels. Simic has brought us back to the wheel, the measurer of time, the measurer of life. The wheel and the heart have become one.

In order to find origins, to find that inner man, we must dismantle, we must search inside for the heart, for the core, for the mystery and myth that makes us man.

Simic's visionary poems are quite similar in style to the Spanish poets that Bly praised so highly, but the biggest influence on his poetry appears not to be a Spaniard, but rather a fellow Yugoslavian, Vasko Popa. Simic translated Popa's Selected Poems 1956-75 Homage To The Lame Wolf, which was published in 1979.

In his introduction to the Yugoslavian's book, Simic describes the poet as a great mythographer. It is from Popa that Simic learned the art of myth making. He discusses Popa's work and in essence, he describes his own poetry at the same time. When Simic talks of Surrealism in Popa, the terms and definitions he uses can be directly applied to his own works:

Still there's Surrealism. In Popa's first book, Bark (1952), one encounters that kind of metaphorical invention and free juxtaposition of images in the service of heightened lyricism one is already familiar with from the work of Breton, Eluard and Peret.<sup>29</sup>

He goes on to say how Popa frames and explores images. Poems with titles such as "Chair," "Paper," and "Plate" all start as descriptions and then they proceed to withhold the usual attributes that we expect of the things being described. Concerning these types of poems Simic adds, "They defamiliarize perception. They could be thought of as still lifes, except that the inanimate has been thoroughly anthropomorphized."<sup>30</sup>

One could simply substitute the titles "Ax" and "Fork" for "Chair" and "Plate" and be reading a description of Simic's poems. In his poems, as in Popa's, we see the image lingered on, we see it framed and explored. And they are indeed objects, still lifes, except that these objects have been given life.

Popa's "St. Sava The Shepherd" is a good example of this influence:

He guards a herd of stones  
On a green meadow

Inside the ancestral red cave  
 He helps each stone  
 To give birth

Wherever he roams  
 The herd trails him  
 The hills echo with stone-steps

He halts in a clearing  
 Yellow and secluded  
 Stone after stone he milks

Then he gives his wolves to drink  
 This thick stone-milk that reflects  
 The seven colors of the rainbow

Strong teeth and secret wings  
 Grow when you drink stone-milk<sup>31</sup>

In this poem we can see Popa's making of myth and the anthropomorphizing of the stone. The stone has become human, and inside each is a secret, wonderful milk, a secret, wonderful origin. Simic utilizes this same art of making myth to bring man closer to himself.

Charles Simic best sums up his analysis of Popa's work when he revises his initial proposal that the poet was meditating on myth:

What we have here instead is myth meditating on myth. By uncovering its laws, Popa has made his myths reflexive. They think aloud and we overhear them. The poems that result are unlike any others we have read. They are both strange and familiar. Strange in that we have forgotten them, familiar in that we have always known them. That of course is what myth is all about.<sup>32</sup>

And that of course is what Simic has been trying to show us all along. The stone, the wheel, the ax, are all familiar to us, but the

poet's treatment of them seems strange to us simply because we have forgotten their functions, forgotten their meanings. Deep inside, we have carried the secret of the stone. Simic, through his objects, is trying to show us the myth, the strange and familiar. By understanding the strange and coming to terms with it, we can discover the secrets of that "inner man" inside each of us, that inner man that lives in no certain country, but instead lives everywhere inside each man.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Though a noted authority on American Poetry, Robert Bly's views on the course American Poetry has taken are not comments which everyone would agree with. Robert Bly, "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," Choice #3 (1971), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Bly, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>Bly, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup>Bly, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Simic was born in Yugoslavia in 1938 and was educated at New York University. He currently teaches at the University of New Hampshire; he is married and the father of two children. Four volumes of verse have appeared in the Braziller Series of Poetry: Dismantling the Silence (1971), Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk (1974), Charon's Cosmology (1977), and Classic Ballroom Dances (1980). Two collections of his poetry have been published by Kayak Press: What the Grass Says (1967) and Somewhere Among Us A Stone is Taking Notes (1969). White, a long narrative poem has appeared separately (New Rivers Press, 1972). Simic has also published numerous translations of French, Russian and Yugoslav poetry, and co-edited with Mark Strand Another Republic (The Echo Press, 1976), an anthology of seventeen European and South American writers.

<sup>6</sup>Charles Simic, trans., Vasko Popa--Selected Poems 1956-75 Homage To The Lame Wolf, Field Translation Series 2, by Vasko Popa (Oberlin College, 1979), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Bly, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup>William Carlos Williams, The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1938 p. 277.

<sup>9</sup>Bly, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup>Charles Simic, Dismantling the Silence (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1971), p. 59.

<sup>11</sup>Simic, trans., Homage, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup>David Walker, "Stone Soup: Contemporary Poetry and the Obsessive Image," In A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics, Stuart Friebert, and David Young, eds., (New York: Longman Inc., 1980), p. 153.

<sup>13</sup>Simic, Dismantling, p. 55.

<sup>14</sup>Simic, trans., Homage, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup>Simic, trans., Homage, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup>Simic, Dismantling, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup>Harold W. Blodgett and Scully Bradley, as footnoted in Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, Harold W. Blodgett and Scully Bradley, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc.: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 184-85.

<sup>18</sup>Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, Harold W. Blodgett and Scully Bradley, eds., (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc.: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 191-192.

<sup>19</sup>Lawrence Raab, rev. of Dismantling the Silence, by Charles Simic, American Scholar, V. 40, Summer 1971, p. 538.

<sup>20</sup>David Ignatow, rev. of Charon's Cosmology, by Charles Simic, The New York Times Book Review, March 5, 1978, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup>Charles Simic, Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1974), pp. 21-24.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Simic, Charon's Cosmology (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1977), pp. 25-26.

<sup>23</sup>Simic, Return, pp. 62-64.

<sup>24</sup>Simic, Dismantling, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup>Simic, Dismantling, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup>Simic, Dismantling, pp. 28-29.

<sup>27</sup>Simic, Return, p. 61.

<sup>28</sup>Simic, Dismantling, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup>Simic, trans., Homage, p. 8.



<sup>30</sup>Simic, trans., Homage, pp. 8-9.

<sup>31</sup>Vasko Popa, Vasko Popa--Selected Poems 1956-75 Homage To The  
Lame Wolf, Field Translation Series 2, trans. by Charles Simic (Oberlin  
College, 1979), p. 73.

<sup>32</sup>Simic, trans., Homage, pp. 11-12.

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