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Heidegger, and the Revision of Tragedy

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Heidegger, and the Revision of Tragedy

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“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.”

—Theodor Adorno

“We had nothing but words.”

—Charles Simic, “Promises of Leniency and Forgiveness”

In a 1984 interview with Sherod Santos, Charles Simic famously claimed that, like many of last century’s “witness poets” emerging from the Eastern Bloc, he was “the product of chance, the baby of ideologies, the orphan of history” (Santos 60).¹ While admitting the inevitable influence that Hitler and Stalin had over his formative years, Simic resists casting himself as a victim or tragic hero, suggesting instead that “there’s been too much tragedy all around for anyone to feel like a Hamlet. More likely my situation is comic” (Simic, *Uncertain Certainty* 19). Elsewhere in his own non-fiction he has further articulated his vision of a uniquely “Simician humor” that supplants or revises Aristotelian tragedy, a “humor [that] has become ontological...a permanent disruption, a world view, a philosophy of life. Everything is equally tragic and comic in the long run.”²

Not surprisingly, Simic’s poetry aesthetic agenda, heavily influenced by Heidegger’s theories of the origin of art, embodies this theoretical conflation or miscegenation of tragedy and humor, resulting in a polyphonic aesthetic combining high and low culture, often juxtaposing references to classical and philosophical sources and ironic evocations of contemporary America trivia and scenery. His work implicitly compares cherished values and contemporary nihilism, the old,

noblesse oblige world of Europe with the frenzied technoscape and consumerism of millennial America. This stylistic approach dovetails with Simic's views on history and tragedy to effect a *new way* of contemplating or representing tragedy, or, what I'll argue should be understood equivalently, "Simician humor," where meaning is invested not in the universal or historic, revered battle sites or admired fallen leaders, but rather in the banal, the quotidian—as he writes, "I prefe[r] the fleeting."³ Simician humor consists of a Heideggerian substitution of ephemeral, local "tragedies" for noble "Tragedy," where Simic's revision consists of conjoining contemporary American experience with the well-documented totalitarian images of twentieth-century Europe.

In "Towards Nightfall," Simic comments that "tragedy/ In the proper Greek sense/ Was thought impossible/ To compose in our day" (3-6). The poem is rife with images both ominous and suggestive of menace: scaffolds on makeshift stages, "small indistinct animals/Caught in the headlights/Crossing the road way ahead (10-12)," "gray twilight (13)," "troubling shapes" made by bare trees about to shriek (23-25). Throughout the poem the reader deciphers "the fear of approaching death" (39), which finally settles upon a random factory girl, who, unaware, of death's presence, "lie[s] with eyes open,/Trembling despite the covers//It's just a bad chill,/She keeps telling herself" (56-59) .

Simic returns here to again question the relevance or applicability of the "proper Greek sense" to a contemporary America filled with factory girls, billboard entertainments, and illiterate landlords. In the last (and longest) stanza of the poem, he writes of the landlord who rented the room to the dying girl:

The old man never learned
To read well, and so
Reads on in that half-whisper,
And in that half-light
Verging on the dark,
About that day's tragedies
Which supposedly are not
Tragedies in the Absence of
Figures endowed with
Classic nobility of soul. (62-70)

The “supposedly” here functions as a final indictment of the Aristotelian concept that tragedy may only concern “great men.”

In the same way, “The City” compares religious heroism in the form of The Passion of the Christ with a dispersal of “Crucifieds” across a modern dystopic urban environment which no longer harbors believers, or even the atmosphere of belief. “At least one crucified at every corner,” he writes, before shifting to a murmuring mumble of m’s and a percussive distribution of d’s and t’s:

The eyes of a mystic, madman, murderer.

They know it’s *truly for nothing*.

The eyes do. All the martyr’s suffering

On parade. Exalted mother of us all

Tending her bundles on the sidewalk,

Speaking to each as if it were a holy child.

There were many who saw none of this. (emphasis added; 2-8)

However, the “martyr’s suffering” is ignored by the city’s citizens, who “kiss lustily/ Right where someone lay under a newspaper” (8-9). There are so many crucifieds now, Simic implies, that their appearance has ceased to provide, as perhaps it once did, “Grim proofs of a new doctrine” (13). The speaker of the poem searches, like Heidegger in the “Origin of the Work of Art,” for the extraordinary in the ordinary, but “everyone whose eyes I sought avoided mine/...I had no answer to any of these questions” (15-17).⁴

Like “Towards Nightfall,” in “The City” Simic breaks with the Hegelian conception of a self-perfecting *Weltgeist*, or with the biblical B.C.E and A.D. division, replacing them both with, so to speak, a “Before Twentieth-Century” and “After Twentieth-Century” model. Before the twentieth century, one could speak of “noble tragedy” or “new doctrine”; after it, one can only speak of anonymous factory girls dying alone, or homeless lying disregarded under a newspaper on a city corner. The opening stanza of “Ambiguity’s Wedding” evokes this experience beautifully:

Bride of Awe, all that’s left for us

Are vestiges of a feast table,

Levitating champagne glasses

In the hands of the erased millions. (1-4)

As Simic conveniently divides history into “Before Twentieth-Century” and “After Twentieth-Century,” he also divides the experience of suffering, or tragedy, into two spatial domains: Europe’s monochromatic world of tanks, marches, work camps, and ominous trains with America’s brilliant, rainbow-colored pageant of consumer goods, TVs, and “paradise motels.”⁵ Two poems in particular represent this approach: “Two Dogs” and “Views from a Train.”

As is often the case with Simic, a poem derives meaning from its stanzic construction: “Two Dogs” exemplifies this stylistic maneuver well. Consisting of two ten-line stanzas, the poem juxtaposes a banal image of small-town America told by a “woman going blind” in the first stanza with the speaker’s memory of the German occupation of Hungary in the second (3). The two stanzas, which are linked by the titular “two dogs,” are disjunctive in both space and time. The first involves the rustic and rather static tableau of “some Southern town” (2) with a dog “afraid of his own shadow” (1). The tone is remote and distant; the reader receives no specific details, merely “a worried dog/And a couple of dusty chickens/And all the sun beating down/In that nameless Southern town” (6-9).

The second stanza, conversely, lucidly recalls the speaker’s memories of “the Germans marching/past our house in 1944” (11-12). Vivid details of people standing on sidewalks while “the earth trembl[ed], death going by” create an ominous atmosphere that threatens despite its location in the past. Both stanzas are in present tense, expressing how real the events of 1944 remain to the traumatized speaker, who cannot stop thinking of a dog that ran into the street when “the Germans [were] marching/Past our house in 1944”:

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. (15-20)

Like “Two Dogs,” “Views From a Train” links to disparate scenes via an evocative image, in this case a tunnel through which the train travels. The first scene recalls the Southern town in “Two Dogs”: “there was the sight of squatter’s shacks,/Naked children and lean dogs running/On what looked like a town dump” (5-8). While similar to the Southern American town, the bleak, colorless atmosphere suggests post-World War II Eastern Europe, a “town dump” leaves behind, and

All of a sudden we were in a tunnel.
The wheels ground our thoughts
Back and forth as if they were gravel.
Before long we found ourselves on a beach.
The water blue, the sky cloudless. (9-14)

The new scene is quintessentially American, with “water blue,” “white sand,” and a “red bikini.” By explicitly alluding to the American flag, Simic draws a sharp contrast with the achromatic, Eastern Europeans scene described earlier in the poem. Additionally, instead of shacks and town dumps, the second scene features a beach and a bikini’d woman “wav[ing] to us/As if she knew each one of us” (15-16). The tunnel moves the speaker from east to west, from past to present, from the tragedies of the past to the opportunities of the future.

These two poems demonstrate the second valence, so to speak, of Simic’s work. In the temporal valence, the poem moves downward along the y-coordinate, Tragedy reducing to tragedy as we enter the twentieth-century, that ultimate rupture-point: Oedipus and Lear climb in bed with the anonymous factory girl who dies ignorant and impoverished in “Towards Nightfall”; there are crucifieds at every corner now, ignored by night-time lovers. We are all worth the same; no one’s death or experience of suffering is endowed with unique “heroic” qualities. The transverse valence occupies the x-coordinate and moves spatially, from east to west, from the History of old Europe to the tabloids and cable news channels of America, often via the linking or pairing of certain images, like the dog in “Two Dogs” or the tunnel “View From a Train.” This comparative method, which equates things which seem dissimilar or out-of-scale, is an essential part of Simic’s aesthetic philosophy, and this is what allows him to suggest, in these poems, the kind of numinous shared harmony that exists between a nameless Southern American town and a Hungarian street occupied by the Germans, or the bleak brown shacks of the first two stanzas of “View From a Train” with the American Riviera in the second half. All are fleeting, ephemeral, as delicate as a butterfly’s wings, and thus fundamentally of the earth.

This notion of poetry that is “of the earth” —rather than “of the world” —brings us directly what I have merely alluded to above, which is the enormous influence Heidegger’s aesthetic philosophy exercised on Simic, about which he has commented on in many venues. In an interview in *Uncertain Certainty*, Simic explains:

I've always felt that inside each of us there is a profound anonymity. Sometimes I think that when you go deep inside, you meet everyone else on some sort of common ground –or you meet nobody. But whatever you meet, it is not yours though you enclose it. We are the container, and this nothingness is what we enclose. This is where Heidegger is very interesting to me. (62)

In a 1991 interview, Simic speaks in clearer terms about Heidegger's meaning for him, explaining "Heidegger [says]: 'In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced by those who reach into the abyss.' I continue to believe that poetry says more about the psychic life of an age than any other art. Poetry is a place where all the fundamental questions are asked about the human condition" (Weigel 210).

The notion that poetry is a privileged practice and a model for all other art forms is taken directly from Heidegger's seminal essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1936). In this essay, Heidegger sets out to examine the essence, or "thingness," of a work of art, defining two particular types of art: "world-art" and "earth-art." The former he relates to Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes, and the latter with a Greek temple. Adam Kirsch describes this move as Heidegger arguing that "art confronts us with 'the earth' –the sensuous reality of the non-human, which we tend to forget or ignore when we are engaged in practical tasks. At the same time, art sets the earth into 'the world,' –the historical human context in which we work, suffer, and hope" (441). He further elucidates:

The decline of the poetry of the world has meant the rise of the poetry of the earth. This poetry—our poetry—prefers to imagine the artist not as a creator, but as a witness. It has a strong sense of ethical obligation, holding that a poet must serve as a bearer of memories and perceptions that history would otherwise sweep away. Whenever a poet is concerned with giving things their proper names, or with remembering what everyone else forgets, or with seeing nature so intently that it seems to yield up secrets, he or she is practicing this Heideggerian poetry. (242)

What I have identified as "Simician humor" exists fundamentally in reaction to the horrific events of the twentieth century even as it resists them. As Simic himself writes, "It is impossible to imagine a Christian or fascist theory of humor. Like poetry, humor is subversive" (Simic, *The Orphan Factory* 41). However, unlike Adorno's epigraph, Simic's art—fittingly for a child of Stalin and Hitler—perceives sinister traces of World War II, the Holocaust, Stalin's purges and the bombing of

Japan in the most minute and quotidian things. Since “tragedy is all around us,” it has become banal: the banality of evil—to paraphrase Hannah Arendt—is a major presupposition of Simic’s humor, and this reduces tragedy to a more humane and less aristocratic term: suffering. The constancy of the suffering results in a bemused acceptance of it; the humor is indeed black, sardonic or indeed ironic, like the *koans* of the Buddhists, like whom Simic sees suffering as an essential and important part of Being-in-the-world. As he writes in “Driving These Roads”:

What good does it do to you

To complain, Charles.

The Fates shuffling the deck

Are old and blind. (1-4)

END NOTES:

¹ John Lysaker writes prophetically of this twentieth-century phenomenon, observing “before long, it will be time to gather, distinguish, and evaluate the various responses to our century of disaster. Given the range of work associated with the poetics of witness, e.g. Akhmatova, Celan, Forche, Milosz, the various ways in which theoreticians have explored the work of memory, counter-memory, and mourning, e.g. Benjamin, Blanchot, Foucault, and then responses like Simic’s which bear witness from the recesses of oblique angles but strike at totalitarianism nevertheless, one should not suppose that a univocal front exists” (“White Dawns...”).

² This marriage of the universal and the comic recalls and echoes an observation by Vladimir Nabokov, perhaps the previous generation’s ultimate chronicler of exile, who noted (somewhere) that “the difference between the comic side of the things, and their cosmic side, depends upon one sibilant.” Nabokov, Vladimir. *Nikolai Gogol*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944. P. 172.

³ Simic, Charles. “My Quarrel With the Infinite.” *The Voice at 3:00 A.M.: Selected Late and New Poems*. Orlando: Harcourt Press, 2003. p. 68.

⁴ Simic’s poem “Dream Avenue,” opening with its description of “Monumental, millennial decrepitude/As tragedy requires,” echoes the tone and imagery of “The City.” Here again the speaker “has no idea what this city is.” The final stanza describes the typical dystopia:

With a few figures conveniently small

And blurred who in any case

Have their backs to you

As they look everywhere, beyond

The long row of gray buildings and their many windows [NB: line itself is a “long row”],

Some of which appear to be broken.

⁵I don't mean to imply that Simic envisions America as superior to or in some bizarre way a solution to the problems of 20th century history in Europe—as if America were like that scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when the film colors—but rather that the domains are so distinct that separate psychological or existential perspectives result.

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