

CHARLES SIMIC'S USES OF *HIS-STORY*

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ABSTRACT: This article consists of three sections. The first aims at presenting brief theoretical considerations on the issues of public history and autobiography. The second focuses on a synopsis of the North-American poet Charles Simic's memoir entitled "In the Beginning..." which is part of his book **Wonderful Words, Silent Truth** (1994). The third explores the interplay between his private history and the collective history of this century, observing closely some key aspects, such as the use of a child's perspective, the use of the comic to report the tragic, and the device of fragment in narrative. In doing so, I will be illustrating the fragility of boundaries between history and fiction, considering biography a fictional construction, since it is a made-up story, which does not necessarily lack truth.

KEYWORDS: Charles Simic, history, fiction, poetry, autobiography.

RESUMO: Este artigo consiste em três seções. A primeira pretende uma breve apresentação sobre as considerações teóricas a respeito de história pública e autobiografia. A segunda apresenta um resumo das memórias de do poeta norte-americano Charles Simic intitulada "In The Beginning...", que é parte de seu livro **Wonderful Words, Silent Truth** (1994). A terceira parte explora as interações entre a história do poeta e a história coletiva desse século, concentrando-se em alguns aspectos chaves, tais como, o uso da perspectiva da criança, o uso do cômico para reportar o trágico e os fragmentos usados como recursos literários durante a narrativa. Ao final, pretendo ilustrar a fragilidade das fronteiras existentes entre história e ficção, considerando a biografia uma construção ficcional, mas que não se distancia da verdade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Charles Simic, história, ficção, poesia, autobiografia.

*Ghosts move about me
patched with histories.*

(Ezra Pound)

Introductory considerations on public history and autobiography

In “Metaphors of Self: the meaning of autobiography”, the critic James Olney defines autobiography as an attempt to describe a lifework, in matter and content as well, which cannot be separated from the writer’s life and his personality. Olney says that “what an autobiographer knows, of course, or what he experiences, is all from within: a feeling of his own consciousness and the appearance of others surrounding him and relating to him more or less, in this way or that” (OLNEY, 1981: 35).

Olney affirms that if one places autobiography in relation to the life from which it comes, it becomes not only a history of the past or only a book currently circulating in the world; but also, intentionally or not, “a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition” (OLNEY, 1981: 35). Metaphor, in his concept, is essentially “a way of knowing”: “to grasp the unknown through the known, or let the known stand for the unknown and thereby fit that into an organized patterned body of experiential knowledge” (OLNEY, 1981: 31).

In regard to the interweaving of history and autobiography, Olney argues that if autobiography is in one sense history, then one can also say that history is autobiography.

He observes that,

The makers of history [...] could find in their
autobiographies the destiny of their time achieved in action and
speech; and the writers of history organize the events of which

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they write according to, and out of, their own private necessities and the state of their own selves. Historians impose, and quite properly, their own metaphors on the human past. (OLNEY, 1981: 36)

Olney endorses the conception that history is not an objective collection of facts but rather it is the historian's point of view on the facts, "a point of view that, taken as sum of what he has experienced and understood, reveals to us the historian" (OLNEY, 1981: 36). As readers, he says, we go to history, as to autobiography and poetry, to learn more not only about other people and the past but about ourselves and the present. Olney adds that the autobiographer not only repeats his past experience but also reconstructs this experience. Thus "symbolic memory" and imagination become necessary elements of a true recollection. The autobiographer, he concludes, "who draws out of the flux of events a coherent pattern, or who creates a sufficient metaphor for experiences, discovers in the particular, and reveals to us, the universal" (OLNEY, 1981: 45).

Charles Simic's autobiography "In the Beginning..." (1994) largely mediates between public history and personal history, and it is indispensable to help us account for this same combination in Simic's other works. Asked about the relation between his autobiography and history, in an interview with Bruce Weigl, Simic quotes Emerson who said: "There's properly no history, only biography." And adds, "[t]here's History too, independent of my life and your life. I'm more interested in history than in autobiography" (WEIGL, 1996: 222).

"In The Beginning...": A Memoir

Charles Simic starts the memoir of his childhood by placing the reader in time and place. The year is 1943, his country was at war, and occupied by German forces. The

Germans first bombed Belgrade in April of 1941 when he was just three years old. He asserts that he does not remember many things about that day, but he remembers the night the Gestapo came to arrest his father, who was lucky to be soon released. In 1944, the English and the Americans started bombing his hometown again. “We approved of American and the English bombing of the Germans,” he said, “I never heard anyone complain. They were our allies. We loved them” (SIMIC, 1994: 6). In addition to the German occupation, a civil war was going on in Yugoslavia. Royalists, Communists, Fascists, and various other political factions were fighting one another. Simic’s family was divided between the Royalists and the Communists.

In the same year, after an Easter Sunday full of bombing raids, Simic’s mother, who was pregnant at that time, decided to leave Belgrade, since it was dangerous to remain in the city, and they went to live with his grandparents, in a summerhouse not far from his hometown. As the fight was intensified and there was too much indiscriminate killing, they went to a farther village. But they had to come back to the grandfather’s house in mid-October when they were warned about the coming of the Germans. When the Russians liberated Belgrade, Simic and his mother got back to their apartment. Soon, his mother would get a cot in the basement of a private clinic, and he was entrusted to the care of one of his mother’s aunts, the only relative they had left in the city. Her name was Nana, and Simic refers to her as “the black sheep in the family” (SIMIC, 1994: 9). Of the time with his aunt, Simic alternates joyful and tragic memories. He recounts his adventures with his friends roaming the neighborhood, climbing over the ruins and playing with war junk from dead soldiers. He also remembers that Belgrade quickly became the city of the wounded: “One saw people on crutches on every corner” (SIMIC, 1994: 11). He adds that the Russians had a formula for every serious leg wound: amputate the leg.

By the time his brother was born, he and his mother had come back home, and Simic started school in the spring of 1945. The Communists were in power and he said that people tried to do brainwashing in school: “[the man] said there was no God [...]” (SIMIC, 1994: 15). Meanwhile, Simic’s life on the streets was getting difficult, and he started stealing with older boys, both for profit and for fun: “I was usually the one to make the snatch, since I was the smallest and the fastest” (SIMIC, 1994: 16). He recounts that, at that time, most food was rationed, and if one took someone’s monthly portion, it was considered a crime. There was too much poverty and too much hunger everywhere.

The first time Simic’s family left Belgrade for Austria was in the fall of 1945. As the border was closed, and they could not cross illegally, they came back to Belgrade. At the second time, they crossed the border, but got into the hands of an American-Austrian border patrol, that handed them over to the English Army, who drove them back to Yugoslavia, where they were under arrest by the Yugoslav border guards. Then, for two weeks, they were transported from prison to prison until they reached Belgrade. His mother was kept in prison for four months, while he and his brother were sent home to their grandfather’s house. Besides the picture of devastation, Simic remembers that “[e]verything looked different,” and “[Yugoslavia] was no more the same country.” Simic also remembers the time they had almost nothing to eat: “I remember coming back from school one afternoon, telling her I was hungry, and watching her burst into tears” (SIMIC, 1994: 21).

Among his happiest memories, there were the moments he used to spend with books: “My friends read too. We liked Westerns, mysteries, adventure stories, comic books... I read Zola, Dickens, and Dostoevsky [...] I loved the Serbian folk ballads and poems [...]” (SIMIC, 1994: 23). Simic first experiences with reading dates from very early, as he declares: “By the time of ten I was in love with books [...]” (SIMIC, 1994:

23). He credits his continuous need of reading to the fact of his father having a large library. Since then, he says, “the need to read has never left me. I still read all kinds of books on all kinds of subjects” (SIMIC, 1994: 23). Music is also part of his cheerful memories. He affirms that his radio was always on, and since he discovered American jazz, he could not get enough of it. Reading and imagination would lead him into the world of Johnny Hodges, Lester Young and Billie Holliday.

By June 1953, his mother told him that they would leave at once. She had finally got their passport, and had decided to leave for Paris to stay with her brother while they waited for the visa. Her plans were to join his father later, who was already living in America. For one full year, in Paris, Simic slept on the floor of a tiny room, and then he realized how poor they were. When he enrolled in school, he felt inferior. The teachers kept giving him zeros until he gave up. In his opinion, the only advantage of being in school was that they got free lunch there.

Simic remembers that his only entertainment in Paris was walking, and eventually he went to the movies with some bad boys from his school. Nevertheless, he affirms that the most important thing he did in Paris was studying English: “I worked hard. I liked the language immediately” (SIMIC, 1994: 36). By June of 1954, they had received their American visas. He was optimistic, but not completely. Since he had flunked everything in French school, he wondered if he would not be a failure in America too.

On August 5, they left Paris in the cheapest class of the boat *The Queen Mary*. From that journey, Simic remembers the contrast between his family and the elegant ladies and men in dark suits smoking cigars. Rich people, who never lost their composure, not even when there was a storm. Since his first sight of the Statue of Liberty and the island of Manhattan, he instantly fell in love with America. He says: “It was incredible and wonderful! The trash on the streets, the way people were dressed, the tall buildings, the dirt, the heat, the yellow cabs, the billboards and signs [...]. It was

terrifically ugly and beautiful at the same time! I liked America immediately” (SIMIC, 1994: 40).

After the expected gathering with his father, Simic’s day was full of many good surprises: the television set in their hotel room, American food, new clothes and shoes, among others. Simic’s relationship with his father was always a very frank one: “The ten years that we didn’t see each other made it difficult to reestablish our relationship on a father-son basis. It was much easier to be friends, to talk like friends” (SIMIC, 1994: 42).

Later, Simic attended a high school in Elmhurst Queens, and had a part-time job in a small company that supplied special crews for airplanes. He remembers that with his payment he bought a cheap phonograph and his first jazz records. On Sundays, he used to go to Manhattan and to the movies. Simic’s liking for America was deepening each day and he was beginning to feel very comfortable there: “I am surprised how quickly we felt at home in the United States” (SIMIC, 1994: 45).

Because his father was transferred, in June of 1955 they moved to Chicago. They moved to Oak Park shortly after that. While a student at Oak Park High School, a suburban school with caring teachers and motivated students, Simic began to take a new interest in his courses, especially literature. Soon, he would reveal himself a voracious reader. Influenced by the teachers, he started to read Joyce and many other contemporary classics, as well as contemporary French poets. In addition to that, he used to go to the public library every day. He also took an interest in painting, and discovered modern art and its aesthetics. He remembers that he started to write poems at school and that it all began with his wanting to impress his friends, but then, in the process of writing, he found out a part of himself, an imagination and a necessity to verbalize certain things, that he could not afterwards forget.

After graduation in August of 1956, he worked in a full-time job as an office boy for the *Chicago Sun Times* while attending college at the University of Chicago at night.

At that time, he decided to move from his parents' house and to get a basement for himself. Later, as he got promoted to a proofreader, which gave him an excellent salary, he bought many books, jazz records, and started painting again.

He then started to make friends in the neighborhood and got to know girls at the University. Poetry continued to be his ambition, and he was introduced to the poems of Lowell and Jarrell, and to the works of Stevens and Pound. He also used to go the Newberry Library to read the French Surrealists and literary magazines: "I'm amazed by the change I underwent in that four to five year period. One moment [...] I was an unremarkable Yugoslav schoolboy, and the next moment I was in Chicago writing poetry in English, as if it were the most normal thing to do" (SIMIC, 1994: 52).

Simic's first poems were published in the winter 1959 issue of the Chicago Review. He recalls his unsteady position at that time: "One month I was a disciple of Hart Crane, the next month only Walt Whitman existed for me. When I fell in love with Pound I wrote an eighty-page long poem on the Spanish Inquisition." (SIMIC, 1994: 52) Between 1959 and 1961, he churned out a number of poems, but according to him, except for a few poems, it was all bad. When he was in the Army, in 1962, he destroyed them all: "I still wanted to write poetry, but not that kind" (SIMIC, 1994:53).

Simic's *his-story*

Along Simic's autobiography we hear about his birth in Belgrade, the Second World War and his life under the Nazi occupation, the Yugoslav Civil War before his escaping to Paris, and then to the U.S. when he was fifteen, and many other crucial facts linking his story to a larger history. Throughout his memories, we can recognize that a double perspective — the child's and the adult's — is subtly and regularly interwoven. It is an adult narrating, but an adult who is capable of reliving the child's perspective and

voice. This happens, for example, in the passage, in which he remembers his lifelong insomnia:

I was supposed to be asleep. Come to think of it, I must have been afraid to be alone in that big room. The war was on [...] Terrible things happened at night. There was a curfew [...] I see myself on tiptoes, one hand in the curtain, wanting to look but afraid [...] My father was late and outside the roofs are covered with snow. (SIMIC, 1994: 3-4)

Along the first part of his memoir, Simic recreates the child's language using short sentences and simple words, to tell us about the war game and its paradoxes, among which his experience living the horrors of the war and yet having to be a child. In the following passages, he describes his and his friends' necessity of living their childhood in that catastrophic context:

In the meantime, my friends and I were playing war. All the kids were playing war. We took prisoners. We fell down dead. We machine-gunned a lot. Rat-tat-tat! How we loved the sound of machine guns [...] This kind of playing drove the grown-ups crazy. There was already so much real shooting in the world, and now these kids with their imaginary guns! [...] I had a friend [...] who could imitate an air-siren perfectly. Every time his parents left him at home alone, he'd stand on their sixth floor balcony and wail. People on the street would threaten him first, then plead with him to stop. He wouldn't. Instead, he'd get even louder, even

more inspired. We thought it was all very funny. (SIMIC, 1994: 5)

Simic's innocence as a child stands in contrast with the desolation of war, that emerges permeated with uncertainty, violence, and hunger. Nevertheless he uses humor and irony as a means to avoid the *cliché* of the usual narratives which deal "only" with the horrors of war, and the worn-out discourse of sentimentality. The child's voice mixed with his sense of humor acts as a release, soothing his sense of loss. Later, he describes life during the Russian liberation as a challenging experience, as in the passage where he remembers wandering with his friends and taking ammo belts, helmets, and war-junk to play with, from the bodies of German soldiers:

I was happy. My friends and I [...] roamed the neighborhood, climbed over the ruins, and watched the Russians and our partisans at work. There were still German snipers in a couple of places. We'd hear shots and take off running. There was a lot of military equipment lying around. The guns were gone, but there was other stuff. I got myself a German helmet. I wore empty ammo belts. (SIMIC, 1994: 10)

It is clear that all that scene of violence and hunger does not really frighten the little boy, who usually went for days without food, hid in shelters, and played on the rubble-spattered streets with ammunition from soldiers' corpses. In fact, he was glad, as he declares, in an interview with Sherod Santos:

The truth is, I did enjoy myself. From the summer of 1944 to mid-1945, I ran around the streets of Belgrade with other half-abandoned kids. You can just imagine the things we saw and the adventures we had. You see, my father was already abroad, my

mother was working, the Russians were coming, the Germans were leaving. It was a three-ring circus. (In: SIMIC, 1995: 68)

But of course not all was adventure. Along with the intensification of the fighting there was a lot of indiscriminate killing, some in the neighborhood: “After I found some bodies in the roadsides ditch near our house, I was not allowed to go out anymore. Our neighbors were executed in their own home. The people across the street just disappeared” (SIMIC, 1994: 8).

Although Simic’s father had spent a considerable time apart from him, he had a great influence on Simic, especially if we consider his cultivated sense of humor, as we can confirm in this passage when Simic introduces him:

One night the Gestapo came to arrest my father... He was saying something, probably cracking a joke. That was his style. No matter how bleak the situation, he’d find something funny to say. Years later, surrounded by doctors and nurses after having suffered a bad heart attack, he replied to their ‘how’re you feeling sir’ with a request for some pizza and beer. The doctors thought he had suffered brain damage, I had to tell that this was normal behavior for him. (SIMIC, 1994: 4-5)

Like his father, Simic never separates humor from seriousness and quite often he selects and juxtaposes dazzling images and blends horror and fun. His observations about his life in Belgrade are filled with wisdom and humor, often irreverence, and a certain irony, as when he talks about the time when the English and the Americans started bombing Belgrade:

The building we lived in was in the very center of the city [...] near the main post office and parliament. A dangerous place to be. That’s what we realized in the spring of 1944 [...]. It was

Easter Sunday (a nice day to pick for a bombing raid)...the windows were open, since it was such a beautiful spring day. 'The Americans are throwing Easter eggs,' my father said (SIMIC, 1994: 5-6).

When asked by Weigl about this issue of humor in his work, he quoted Horace Wallop, who said: 'The world is a comedy for those that think, a tragedy to those that feel' (213), and added that since we are capable of both, he cannot see a literature which excludes one or the other: "Look at most of our leaders in political and intellectual life with their vanity, gullibility, greed, malice – they could be stock characters out of classical comedy," (WEIGL, 1996: 213) he concludes. When asked by Santos if those days are the origin of his constant sense of humor, he declared:

I'm the product of chance, the baby of ideologies, the orphan of history. Hitler and Stalin conspired to make me homeless. Well, then, is my situation tragic? No. There's been too much tragedy all around for anyone to feel like a Hamlet. More likely my situation is comic... One has just to laugh at the extent of our stupidity. (In: SIMIC, 1995: 68)

"Perhaps," Helen Vendler analyzes, "for one who as a child saw World War in Yugoslavia, life will always be overcast by horror; and yet for one who escaped destruction, life will also seem charmed, lucky, privileged" (VENDLER, 1995: 20).

Simic's autobiography demonstrates periods of trouble and perplexity. Nevertheless, it is not only centered on what went wrong. Besides presenting the pitiful reality, he also presents the ironic side of history: the war that kills is the same that saves, as we can see in the following passage:

Now the tragic farce begins. The Russians in those days had a cure-all for every serious leg wound: amputate the leg. That's what they told my uncle they were going to do. He was very unhappy, crying even, while the doctor cheerfully reminded that he still had one leg left. Anyway, they strapped him to the field operating table and got ready to cut the leg, when all hell broke loose. Grenades, bombs flying. The tent collapsed. Everybody ran out, leaving him there. When the shooting was over, they came back but they were no longer in the mood for the operation. He ended up, somehow, on a farm, where he was exceptionally well nursed by the kind people who lived there, and so on. End of that story. (SIMIC, 1994: 12)

In his essay "Cut the Comedy," Simic argues that comedy says as much about the world as tragedy does, and "in fact, if you seek true seriousness, you must make room for both tragic and comic vision" (SIMIC, 1997: 40).

Simic writes vividly and insightfully about his immigrant experience, moving to stay ahead of the war and bad economics. Life in exile is experienced as a salvation, and America is the place of happiness for the young boy. He discovers a new life and a new history in postwar. The interplay of the child's and the mature voice ceases by the end of his memoir, when he starts talking about his adult life, his feelings about his first days in New York, sleepless nights, dreams, and other poets. The poet reflects on his peculiar relation with the past and learns not to take things for granted. The war was experienced as loss of points of reference as well as a great deal of illusion and idealism. For him, anything is possible in this century. He wrote: "My previous life has taught me that making plans was a waste of time. My father used to ask me jokingly, 'Where are we going to immigrate next?' Anything was possible in this century" (SIMIC, 1994: 53). If the experience of loss destroyed the child's illusion that all is permanent, paradoxically such experience also supports the adult existence. Life, to Simic, is still unpredictable.

According to Matthew Flamm, in his essay “Impersonal Best: Charles Simic Loses Himself,” Simic writes “about bewilderment, about being part of history’s comedy act, in which he grew up half-abandoned in Belgrade and then became, with his Slavic accent, an American poet” (In: WEIGL, 1996: 166).

Throughout his memoir, Simic reconstructs history as well as his history, and trying to understand what has happened to him and to his life, many times he transports himself to the past, and from past gets into the present: “Someone else *was* pacing up and down in the next room [...] It *was* dangerous even to peek between them at street [...] I *see* myself on tiptoes [...] My father *is* late [...]” (SIMIC, 1994: 4).

Often Simic recalls time, place, circumstances, emotions, bringing back some facts of memory and neglecting others, because some things are better to forget: “Did we leap into a ditch by the railroad track, or was that some other time? How many of us were there? I remember my mother but not my father... My film keeps breaking. An image here and there, but not much continuity” (SIMIC, 1994: 4). Images, feelings and reminiscences are brought back through the language of his new country, and retold as a way to resist the destiny of exile and defend him against the power of forgetting, as he says, “Writing brings it back. There’s the logic of chronology, which forces one to think about what comes next. There’s also the logic of imagination. One image provokes another without rhyme or reason--perhaps with plenty of hidden rhyme or reason! I have to believe that” (SIMIC, 1994: 30).

In Simic’s case, even after a number of years of writing, things do not come out easily. It requires patience, a “monastic solitude,” an obsession to cultivate what he calls “madness,” as he declared in an interview with George Starbuck: “Madness... means *your own sense* of reality, your own sense of yourself existing in this world. *Consciousness* of yourself existing in this world” (In: SIMIC, 1995: 45).

Throughout his memoir, Simic dramatizes scenes of subhuman lives, political violence, resignation, destruction, hunger, and exile, and establishes a strong link between his life and the collective one. Historical precision enters the picture along with people, places, and dates, as we can see in these passages:

The war is on. The year is 1943. (SIMIC, 1994: 3)

It was a relief when the Russians finally came... It was mid-October 1944. (SIMIC, 1994: 8)

There was a time in 1947 or 1948 when we had almost nothing to eat. (SIMIC, 1994: 21)

What these passages indicate to us is that the author intends to portray something that really happened, but the most important, in this case, is the imagination of the author, which is at work, not in producing an imaginary scene, but in bringing together these various elements to portray something real. Talking about his war poems to Starbuck, he declared:

I don't wish to come out and say 'I've seen this and that.' I've seen terrifying sights. But on the other hand, I wasn't very unique in that. Everyone else was there. They saw the same thing. Men hung from lampposts, whatever. There would be another falseness. All those things did not really astonish me at that time [...] If you were writing a poem about it, one really has to capture that complicated game. That innocence. One can't say, 'I turned over dead Germans to get hold of their holsters.' Because it wasn't like that at all [...] There was something there, which I can't quite name, but I felt touched and disturbed. But it wasn't any of the obvious things: that here was a dead man, that this was War. (SIMIC, 1995:35- 6)

Most of Simic's memoir echoes the history of the world's inhumanity and how it continues to mean in the present. Recent events in Yugoslavia reflect his own story. His childhood experience is repeated and multiplied today by more than a million children displaced by the civil war. Simic describes the human condition in a century of mass destruction. His story mixes with the current atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. He says:

It seems to me that all those events still go on [...] I think every tragedy, every event, some place on some scale continues. It is still current. It is still present. You cannot say, 'Well, this was in the past, but we live different.' Or, 'I live differently.' It still goes on, as vivid as it ever was. (SIMIC, 1994: 36)

Simic's memoir not only joins past history but is also in constant dialogue with history's continuity. More than a half century after the Second World War, one can see all those atrocities everywhere. In his essay "Orphan Factory," Simic establishes a link between his childhood and recent tragic events in the region of Yugoslavia. He says, "Today when I watch the war in Yugoslavia on TV, I have the feeling I'm watching the reruns of my childhood [...] The bombed buildings, the corpses lying in the streets and Sarajevo, the crowds of refugees are all frighteningly familiar" (SIMIC, 1997: 23).

Simic's reminiscences of the massacre of innocent people in his homeland during the war are repeated up to our time. In his essay "Open Wound," Simic comments about the siege state of Sarajevo in the years 1992 and 1993, and says that, like him and his friends in the past, these children are also playing among the ruins. But obviously there are differences, whereas Simic and his friends used to "sell" gunpowder, these children from our present days are selling cigarettes. He adds that, in the present, there are also many "sniper victims lying in the streets, people with arms and legs blown off, corpses wrapped in plastic, wrecked churches and mosques, crowds of refugees on the run" . As

in his homeland, “every window is broken, every street strewn with rubble” (SIMIC, 1997: 87).

Simic is aware of the fact that all this is part of our routine, and he says in this same article: “One sits at the breakfast table sipping coffee and turning the pages of the daily newspaper only to come to a photograph of a child killed in the street, lying in a pool of blood” (SIMIC, 1997:87). But, differently from most people that seem not to care anymore, he argues that the poet must be aware, otherwise he will live in a “fool’s paradise” (SIMIC, 1997: 125).

Asked by Santos to comment about his engagement to historical issues, he reaffirms what he had advocated in his essay “Notes on Poetry and History,” when he says that, despite everything, one must give true testimony of his condition. He says, “The world is mean, stupid, violent, unjust, cruel [...] Well, what do you say to that? And you must say something... I’m uncomfortable with poetry which just keeps telling me how wonderful nature is, or how much the author is misunderstood” (SIMIC, 1995: 76).

The question of individualism is present in Simic’s arguments, and he is totally against the egotism and narcissism of some contemporary poets that insist on putting themselves at the center of their poems, and do not comment on the real world. Simic’s “I” often seems impersonal: “It doesn’t seem necessary for me to equate that “I” with myself,” he states in an interview with Rick Jackson, and adds: “I’ve always felt that inside each of us there is profound anonymity. Sometimes I think that when you go deep inside, you meet everyone else...” (SIMIC, 1995: 62).

In an interview with Wayne Dodd, Simic reaffirms his engagement, “I feel a certain responsibility toward other lives [...]” (SIMIC, 1995: 26) and reinforces his concept that a poet who ignores the world around him, and keeps talking about himself all the time, is miserable, since every day in the world millions of children and adults are

maimed or die of hunger and disease caused by the wars, or are left with emotional problems, which they have to bear for the rest of their lives.

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