THE ART OF POETRY NO. 90

CHARLES SIMIC

Charles Simic was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, on May 9, 1938. His early childhood was, inevitably, dominated by the Nazi invasion, and some of his most powerful poems derive from memories of this period. In "Two Dogs," for instance, he recalls watching the Germans march past his house in 1944:

> The earth trembling, death going by . . .
> A little white dog ran into the street
> And got entangled with the soldiers' feet.
> A kick made him fly as if he had wings.
> That's what I keep seeing!
> Night coming down. A dog with wings.

Simic's father was arrested a number of times, and eventually fled Yugoslavia in 1944 for Italy, where he was again thrown into jail. On his release at the war's end, George Simic spent five years in Trieste, and then moved to America; he was not to be reunited with his wife and two sons until 1954.

Simic attended primary school in Belgrade. His mother, Helen, made various attempts to escape postwar Yugoslavia, and was herself briefly incarcerated, along with her sons, by the Communist

authorities. Eventually they were granted passports in 1953. Afraid the passports might be revoked, Helen hastily packed, and the family boarded a train that very evening for Paris. After a series of delays they were finally granted American visas, and set sail for New York in August of 1954.

The family lived in New York for a year, and then settled in Chicago. There was no money for Simic to attend college, so he worked as an office boy on the *Chicago Sun-Times* and attended night classes. In 1958 he moved back to New York, where he worked at a variety of jobs—parcel-packer, salesman, housepainter, payroll clerk—and studied and wrote poetry at night.

In 1961 Simic was drafted into the army and was obliged to spend two years as a military policeman in Germany and France. On his return to New York he enrolled at New York University, where he studied linguistics, and married the fashion designer Helen Dubin. His first collection, *What the Grass Says,* was published in 1967. In 1973, the University of New Hampshire offered him an associate professorship, and he has remained there ever since.

Simic, who has acquired a large and faithful following, has been astonishingly prolific, publishing collections of his poetry and of his reviews and essays at the rate of one, and sometimes two, a year. He has also translated the work of such writers as Vasko Popa, Ivan Lalié, Aleksandar Ristovic, and Tomaž Šalamun, and has been instrumental in bringing their writings to the attention of the English-speaking world. His own poetry has, in turn, been translated into most major European languages.

The following interview was conducted in November 2004, at my flat in Highbury, London. Simic was over to promote the publication of his *Selected Poems: 1963–2001,* and to read at Poetry International. He knows London well, and has many friends here. A longtime admirer of his work, I was delighted to find myself with an opportunity to discuss with Simic his life, his art, his politics, and his strongly held views on all matters relating to food, in particular rillettes, on which he discoursed over a serving of them I offered at lunch, at great and enthusiastic length.

—Mark Ford

INTERVIEWER

I'd like, initially, to talk a bit about your childhood in Belgrade. What were your parents like and how did they meet?

CHARLES SIMIC

My father came from a blue-collar background. He was the first child in that family to go to university. On the other side, my mother came from an old Belgrade family that had been living in the same spot for a couple of centuries. They were pretty wealthy in the late nineteenth century, but lost everything. My grandfather on my mother's side, who was a military man, gambled it all away, as I only found out years later.

INTERVIEWER

How did the different branches of your family get on?

SIMIC

To tell the truth, they despised each other. My mother showed her dislike for my father's relations with sighs, the rolling of eyes, and meaningful asides, while my father's side was more direct. They were a rowdy, hard-drinking bunch. I identified more with them. My mother's family was fearful, paranoid, and secretive. They had lost their wealth and were worried about keeping up appearances. They had no sense of humor. Nothing was ever funny to them. My father's family, when they got going at a dinner table, they were like a dadaist cabaret, so you can imagine how my poor mother felt in their company.

INTERVIEWER

How conscious were you of the ideological positions of the combatants—of what Nazism or Communism meant?

SIMIC

Very much—not in an intellectual way, but everyone around me argued politics all the time. My father had Royalist sympathies.

My grandfather on my mother's side, the one who gambled all the money away and spent it on floozies, was a highly decorated World War I officer who thought we should've stayed out of the war since our allies were going to screw us in the end—as they did at the Yalta Conference. My mother believed all her life—and said so openly—that Serbs are political morons who are bound to make the wrong choice no matter what. On my father's side, the young ones were all leftists and thus Communist sympathizers. They looked forward to the Russians coming to liberate us and shooting people like my mother's family. So, as you can imagine, there was a lot of shouting, a lot of tears and slamming of doors.

INTERVIEWER

How difficult were those years for you?

SIMIC

There's a story they used to tell in my family. The war ended the day before May 9, 1945, which happened to be my birthday. I was playing in the street. Anyway, I went up to the apartment to get a drink of water where my mother and our neighbors were listening to the radio. They said, "War is over," and apparently I looked at them puzzled and said, "Now there won't be any more fun!" In wartime, there's no parental supervision; the grown-ups are so busy with their lives, the kids can run free. A few years ago I reviewed two huge books of photographs of the war in Bosnia. Every face looked unhappy, except for some kids in Sarajevo who were smiling as if saying: Isn't this great, isn't this terrific! When I saw those faces, I thought, That's me and my friends. Then, after the war, the fun continued. Yes, we had poverty, Communist indoctrination, but also a few American movies, jazz music on the American Armed Forces Radio, and gangs of kids fighting in the streets. I lived in the very center of Belgrade in a bustling, crowded neighborhood, so it was never dull. In school, there were pictures of Tito, Stalin, and Lenin over every blackboard, watching us do

our schoolwork. Our teachers told us daily that these were three wise men who were bringing happiness to children like us all over the world. I, myself, didn't know what to believe. At home, I was told they were bad men who were responsible for my father being away.

INTERVIEWER

When you arrived in France, you were classified by the French authorities as a "displaced person." Displacement, deracination, exile, not belonging are persistent themes in your poetry. Was it in Paris that you most acutely felt that you didn't belong?

SIMIC

Yes, I think it was. I like the French, but they did enjoy humiliating us. Every few months we had to renew our permits, and would have to wait in line for hours only to be told that some document was missing, such as the birth certificate of my great-grandmother, which we had instantly to obtain from Yugoslavia, and then when we did, they'd say we didn't need it after all. We spent a year in Paris living in a small hotel room, surviving on money that my father sent from the United States. We had no idea how long it would take to get our visas. In the meantime, we roamed the city on foot, went to movies and studied English. My mother bought us *LIFE, LOOK,* and other American magazines where my brother and I studied women in bathing suits, new model cars, and refrigerators packed with food. It was while at school in Paris, however, that I first got interested in poetry. We had to memorize poems by Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud and recite them in front of the class. You can imagine what a nightmare that was for me with my accent. Still, those poems brought tears to my eyes.

INTERVIEWER

You've often said New York is your favorite city: Was it love at first sight?

SIMIC

It was. It was an astonishing sight in 1954. Europe was so gray and New York was so bright; there were so many colors, the advertisements, the yellow taxicabs. America was only five days away by ship, but it felt as distant as China does today. European cities are like operatic stage sets. New York looked like painted sets in a sideshow at a carnival where the bearded lady, sword-swallowers, snake charmers, and magicians make their appearances.

INTERVIEWER

How did you get on with your father after not seeing him for, what, ten years?

SIMIC

Fabulously. Of course, I had no idea what to expect. My father didn't want us to have a typical father-son relationship, which wouldn't have been possible in any case. He loved going out to jazz clubs, bars, restaurants—in fact, he took me out to a jazz club my first night in New York. Talking to him was always fun since he had a lot of good stories. Plus, he read everything: history, literature, political studies, Eastern religions, mysticism, philosophy, mysteries, sports pages, and even gossip columns in newspapers. He was one of those people who are always trying to figure out the big questions. The nice thing about him was that he also had an ability to listen. He was interested in what anyone said, so it was easy being with him. Many years later, he met my poet friends James Tate and Mark Strand and they confirmed that he was excellent company.

INTERVIEWER

But he and your mother didn't get along so well?

SIMIC

No. They divorced more or less amicably, two years after being reunited. It was the ten-year separation, of course, and the simple fact—which I grasped at an early age—that they had

absolutely nothing in common. My mother was a woman of incredible personal courage and integrity whose political views proved to be much more lucid and prophetic than my father's, but from day to day she was no fun to be with. She expected only the worst. If she sent me to the corner grocery for a bottle of milk she would fret and imagine every awful thing happening to me and was astonished to see me return safe and sound. The horrors of war left a much bigger impact on her than on the rest of us. She would say often that my father was not a serious person, that he did not understand what had happened to us. She felt defeated and he wouldn't admit defeat; she felt that their lives had been made meaningless by historical events.

INTERVIEWER

And you? Did you ever feel oppressed by history?

SIMIC

Not when I was younger. Now, I'm not so sure. The same type of lunatics who made the world what it was when I was a kid are still around. They want more wars, more prisons, more killing. It's all horribly familiar, very tiresome and frightening, of course.

INTERVIEWER

How did you like Chicago?

SIMIC

Chicago was like a coffee-table edition of the *Communist Manifesto,* with glossy pictures of lakefront mansions and inner-city slums. On one side you had Michigan Avenue with its swanky hotels and luxury stores and, a few blocks away, the rest of the city wrapped up in smoke where factory workers, their faces covered with grime, waited for buses. An immigrant's paradise, you might say. Everyone was employed. There were huge factories humming twenty-four hours a day short distances from beautiful beaches where beautiful young couples sat reading Camus and Sartre. I had

Swedes, Poles, Germans, Italians, Jews, and blacks for friends, who all took turns trying to explain America to me. Chicago, where I only spent three years, gave me my first American identity. Everything that happened to me there made a huge impression on me.

INTERVIEWER

Like what?

SIMIC

It was all new. Looking for a job, going to work every day, meeting all kinds of people at work who were mostly older than me, going to bars every night with some of them and hearing them talk about their various lives.

INTERVIEWER

Was it there you began writing poetry?

SIMIC

Well, at first my secret ambition was to be a painter.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of painter were you?

SIMIC

I started out when I was fifteen as a kind of Postimpressionist. Later on, I imitated Soutine, Vlaminck, and the German Expressionists. When I stopped painting around the age of thirty, I was an Abstract Expressionist, at times aping de Kooning, at times aping Guston. The truth is, I had little talent.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing seriously?

SIMIC

I started writing in my last year at Oak Park High School, but not seriously—whatever that means. I wrote a poem now and then, but was more interested in what I was painting.

INTERVIEWER

On graduating from Oak Park you got a job as an office boy at the *Chicago Sun-Times;* had there been talk of your going to college?

SIMIC

Sure, there was a lot of talk. I was accepted at New York University and the University of Chicago, but there was no way for me to go. When it came to money, my father was completely irresponsible. He made a terrific salary and spent every penny immediately.

INTERVIEWER

When did you leave home?

SIMIC

When I was eighteen. I got a place near Lincoln Park in the same neighborhood as a friend who worked at the *Sun-Times*. He was finishing a degree in philosophy at the University of Chicago. He was the first serious reader of my poetry, an ideal one since he had every reasonable person's understandable suspicion of the imagination. Logic is what he valued and not metaphor. We'd sit on the beach on Lake Michigan and I'd try to explain "Prufrock" to him and he'd say, "How can the evening be etherized like a patient upon a table?" By questioning everything I assumed to be self-evident, he forced me to think seriously about poetry. He turned out to be a very important person in my life. We've stayed friends for over forty-five years.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of poets were you reading?

SIMIC

The modernists, European and American. Pound, Eliot, Williams, Stevens, Apollinaire, Brecht, Rilke, et cetera. The novelist Nelson Algren, whom I knew a bit in Chicago, saw me with a volume of Robert Lowell one time and said, "Simic, don't read that shit! You're a kid off the boat. You ought to read Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay!" In the Midwest, with its populist tradition, there was a suspicion and dislike of the East Coast intellectual elites. They preferred Robinson Jeffers to Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters to Wallace Stevens. As for me, the first poet I remember really liking was Hart Crane. He appealed to me because he was obscure. His impenetrable poems sounded like a higher form of poetry. I had no wish to find out if there was a meaning concealed by the obscurities. I wrote a number of Crane imitations, reaching frequently for the thesaurus to seek out the least familiar word and phrase until I had a poem no one, not even I, could understand. Luckily, they have all been destroyed.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your poems throughout your career represent life on the margins—your characters are often loners, winos, bums, desperadoes, street mystics, long-term residents of fleapit hotels . . . Would it be true to say that the nearest you came to living such a life were the years you spent in New York in your early twenties?

SIMIC

Yes. I came to New York in the summer of 1958 and found myself alone. I had a lot of friends in Chicago, who wondered: What do you want to go to New York for? But New York had more of the things I liked—more movies, more jazz clubs, more bookstores. I attended university classes at night, and I worked during the day at various jobs. I sold shirts in a department store, worked in a bookstore, did a bit of house painting, was an accounting clerk, then a payroll clerk, and a few more things like that. When I was not working or in class, I went to bars and

movies. I slept little, read a lot, and fell in love frequently. As I recall, I was neither terribly happy nor terribly sad. One of the distinct advantages of growing up in a place where one is apt to find men hung from lampposts as one walks to school is that it cuts down on grumbling about life as one grows older.

INTERVIEWER

Did you participate in the poetry scene at all?

SIMIC

Yes, I did. I went to a lot of readings. In the 1950s and early 1960s poetry readings were modest affairs with five or six friends of the poet, two or three retired schoolteachers, and a few more who by their furtive or outright hostile manner were most likely aspiring poets. I heard Allen Tate, Lowell, Berryman, James Wright, O'Hara, Creeley, Levertov, and many others. Of course, I took a critical view of just about everything I heard. I sat fuming. That's how I met other aspiring poets. I'd blurt out something to someone on the way out; we'd start arguing about it and end up going out for a beer. Some of them were older, knew more than I did and did their best to enlighten me.

INTERVIEWER

Who were the aspiring poets you were hanging out with? What did you argue about?

SIMIC

People passionately interested in poetry, who occasionally published a poem in one of the little magazines and who afterwards were never heard from again. We tried to make sense of what was happening in poetry from the books and magazines we were reading.

INTERVIEWER

Were you yourself sending the poems you wrote to magazines by this stage?

SIMIC

Yes. My first poems were published in 1959 in an issue of the *Chicago Review,* so they must have been submitted the summer of 1958, four years after I came to the United States.

INTERVIEWER

Were you writing in English?

SIMIC

I always wrote in English since I wanted my friends and the girls I was in love with to understand my poems.

INTERVIEWER

I understand you destroyed all of your unpublished early work. Why?

SIMIC

That happened during my military service—I was drafted into the army in 1961, and sent overseas to France. After about a year there I had my brother send me a shoe box full of poems, and, when they arrived and I read through them, they all struck me as fraudulent. They were so derivative, so bad, so wrong; I never felt so ashamed in my life. I rushed out of the barracks into the night, ripped them all up, and threw them in the trash in a kind of ecstasy.

INTERVIEWER

I guess everyone who lived through the cold war was a cold warrior in some way, but during standoffs such as the Cuban Missile Crisis you must have felt pretty close to the front line.

SIMIC

Yes, we were permanently on the alert because we were expecting war to start any minute, perhaps even a nuclear war. I recall, during the height of the Cuban crisis, a seal on a safe being broken with great solemnity by our commanding officer. It read

Not to be opened except in case of war, so this was clearly it. Our orders, as it turned out, were so stupid that even our officers and sergeants were at a loss for words. PFC Simic was supposed to proceed alone to an intersection on the border of Germany and France and advise foreign nationals who were fleeing the Russian troops not to use that particular highway because by NATO agreement it was reserved solely for retreating families of American enlisted men. If they objected, I had my gun and presumably could use it in some fashion. The rest of the orders were equally unrealistic. Fortunately, the crisis was over in a few days so I didn't have to make a fool of myself.

INTERVIEWER

Were you writing poems during this time? Was it possible to write under those conditions?

SIMIC

It was possible, but I had no desire to write poems. I kept a journal for a few months and had a notebook where I jotted commentaries on books I was reading, but all in all I did very little writing during that time.

INTERVIEWER

Editions of your selected poems always begin with "Butcher Shop." Do you think of this poem as a kind of gateway to your oeuvre, as the first in which you found your voice?

SIMIC

It was the first poem I wrote that I knew I wanted to keep. I wrote it in 1963, when I was living on East Thirteenth Street. In those days there were still Polish and Italian butcher shops in that part of town with wonderful displays of sausages, pig knuckles, slaughtered lambs and chickens. I never in my life went past a butcher shop like that without stopping to take a close look. Of course, it reminded me of Europe, of my childhood. I slaughtered

chickens when I was a boy, saw pigs have their throats slit and then be butchered afterwards.

INTERVIEWER

Would I be right in suggesting its final lines posit some kind of connection between violence and creativity?

> There is a wooden block where bones are broken,
> Scraped clean—a river dried to its bed
> Where I am fed,
> Where deep in the night I hear a voice.

SIMIC

I think so, but I have no idea how conscious I was of that when I wrote the poem. Most likely not. It took me many years and meetings with some of my childhood friends from Belgrade to realize that I grew up in a slaughterhouse. We were not only occupied, but there was a civil war going on with multiple factions fighting each other. Blood in the streets was not a figure of speech, but something I saw again and again. There's no question that all that had a lot to do with my outlook on life. Innocent human beings get killed—that was my earliest lesson. Whenever I read about a "just war" in which thousands of innocents have died or will die, I want to jump out of my skin.

INTERVIEWER

From the outset you were drawn to subjects many people wouldn't consider that poetic, like, say, cockroaches.

SIMIC

That was another early poem. Cockroaches appear for the simple reason that the places where I lived in New York were infested with them. They were the only visitors I had all day. I was brought up to be polite to strangers and help old ladies across the street, so I'd stop whatever I was doing and inquire about these roaches' health.

INTERVIEWER

Insects feature a lot in your work. You seem to be pretty fond of ants, too, particularly in *Jackstraws*.

SIMIC

I know—when friends read that book they said, "Simic, are you drinking too much? All these bugs!" Actually, I've always been curious about these little creatures going their merry way, taking care of business—whatever that business is. Flies are neurotic, moths are crazy, but for serenity you can't beat a butterfly. Even ants seem pretty cool. When I was little I used to step on them out of sheer nastiness or boredom. Now I can't hurt a flea that's biting me.

INTERVIEWER

Returning to your early work, and poems like "Butcher Shop" and "Cockroach" and "Fork"—what kind of responses did they elicit from their first readers in the midsixties?

SIMIC

A couple of editors I showed the poems to were kind of irritated. They said I was just trying to be a smart aleck. More interestingly, they thought these were not worthy subjects. My pals, on the other hand, liked them. They wanted me to write epics about toothpicks and dripping faucets.

INTERVIEWER

Was there anyone who particularly influenced them?

SIMIC

Well, maybe Apollinaire is behind "Butcher Shop." As for the object poems, there were William Carlos Williams and the French surrealists. It's not that I read their poems and wanted to do something like that immediately, but their example was certainly in the back of my mind. Still, it was a breakthrough. I felt, This is what I want to do from now on and I don't care if so-and-so doesn't like it.

INTERVIEWER

A number of critics have suggested your work achieves a kind of fusion between European and American influences. Do you see it at all in those terms?

SIMIC

I don't really know how to answer that. I did read a lot of European poets, but so did almost all my American contemporaries. No doubt my way of reading the Europeans was different because of my background. On the other hand, as Serbs will tell you, my poetry sounds mostly foreign to them. "He is no longer one of us," I hear them say both in anger and disappointment. I realize I'm an odd case, difficult to classify, neither an exile nor an immigrant exactly, but this is not something I worry about. It's not like I had a choice about the life I was going to have or the kind of poet I was going to be. It just happened this way.

INTERVIEWER

You said that your way of reading the Europeans was different because of your background. How so?

SIMIC

For obvious reasons. In addition to knowing some of the languages, I knew what Europe looked like and had a firsthand experience of its recent history.

INTERVIEWER

How did it feel writing in a language that wasn't the one you'd grown up speaking?

SIMIC

I don't know how to answer that question since I never wrote any poetry in my native language. There was never an inner struggle.

INTERVIEWER

How crucial to your sense of the poetry you wanted to write was your experience of reading Yugoslav poets such as Vasko Popa and Ivan Lalić?

SIMIC

It is all mixed up in my mind with the experience of translating them. Translation is the closest reading of a poem so it's almost impossible not to be influenced. They were two very different poets, Popa coming from French surrealism and Serbian folklore, and Lalić with his roots in Hölderlin and Rilke, so I got myself an extended education on how to compose poems in such radically dissimilar ways. This is true of other translations I did over the last forty years. I did all kinds of poets and learned how poems are made and, most importantly, about languages, the relationship between my first and second language. It's mind-boggling to discover that a word, a phrase, or an entire poem perfectly understandable in one language cannot be translated into another. Whatever the answer to this puzzle, it has something to do with the relationship of experience to language and the way each language encompasses a particular worldview. In fact, it's not only a question for poetry to concern itself with, but for philosophy, too, to ponder.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give an example of a word or a poem that can't be translated?

SIMIC

> Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

The more a poem depends on language to make its effect, the harder it is to translate. I mean, there are lyric poems where there's almost no content, where the gorgeousness of the vocabulary and

the music are everything. As for individual words, I met a fellow once who insisted that the word for *bread* in any language cannot be translated. Sure, one can find an equivalent in a dictionary, but can that other *bread* really do justice to what one knows of *bread?*

INTERVIEWER

You've also talked of the enormous impact made on you by Dudley Fitts's *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry,* which was where you first came across the work of such poets as Pablo Neruda and César Vallejo.

SIMIC

Yes, that is still one of the most wonderful books I know. These poets were nothing like anything I'd ever read. South American poetry is in some ways closer to American poetry than European poetry is. It's the frontier, the immense space and the sense of always being a provincial. I cannot imagine a French or German Whitman or Dickinson, but have no trouble placing them in some hick town in Argentina or Brazil. Of course, there are also profound differences between us, but at the time I was reading them in 1959, they seemed close and worth emulating.

INTERVIEWER

What did you study for the B.A. degree you took at New York University in the midsixties?

SIMIC

Linguistics—mainly Russian language and linguistics. I used to say that I wanted to read Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov in the original—or something like that—but that was not really the reason. I thought that studying languages would be beneficial to my writing and also that it would be a breeze since I already knew some Russian. I was completely wrong. I ended up having to memorize verb endings in Baltic languages and rules for the

formation of nouns in Old Prussian and hating it. I stuck with it out of stubbornness and laziness, unwilling to start anything else.

INTERVIEWER

What would you recommend a poet study?

SIMIC

There's no preparation for poetry. Four years of grave digging with a nice volume of poetry or a book of philosophy in one's pocket would serve as well as any university.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first discover the work of the New York school poets, and were they a significant influence or inspiration?

SIMIC

I think I first came across their poetry in an issue of that small magazine they edited, *Locus Solus*. When would that have been?

INTERVIEWER

1961–1962.

SIMIC

And I once went to a reading of Frank O'Hara's on Second Avenue at a place that I believe was called Metro. I also recall reading his "In Memory of My Feelings" thinking, This is the greatest poem ever written. We had a kind of nodding acquaintance since I frequented the same bars he did. Aside from that, it's hard to be more precise since there were so many little magazines, so many poets whom I read. Ashbery's poetry I did not know well and Koch's only a bit better. I certainly did not see them early on as a distinct group. All that became clear much later.

INTERVIEWER

What about the poets who were seen as the era's heavyweights, —Robert Lowell and John Berryman?

SIMIC

I looked down my nose at them. Years later, I changed my mind, but at that time I simply had no use for their poetry, nor did any of my friends.

INTERVIEWER

Why not? What didn't you like in their work? What made you change your mind?

SIMIC

They were too literary, too self-conscious, too intent on writing a "great" poem. Later, I began to appreciate Berryman's fine lyric sense, his ear for language, and Lowell's historical vision and verbal skill.

INTERVIEWER

What about this era's heavyweights? What is the state of contemporary poetry?

SIMIC

Ask me in a hundred years.

INTERVIEWER

Your work has always been admired by poets and critics on both sides of the "great divide"—I mean the divide between establishment and avant-garde, paleface and redskin, cooked and raw, traditional and experimental. How conscious were you back then of "the poetry wars"?

SIMIC

That's all we talked about. There were the Beats, Charles Olson's projective verse, and Robert Bly's prescriptions for American poetry in his magazine *The Sixties* to argue over. I gravitated toward poets like W. S. Merwin, James Wright, and Bly, who had a bit of surrealism in their work, but found poems and ideas about poetry that appealed to me elsewhere. What makes a good poem never seemed to me a simple issue. If the literary history of the last hundred years proves anything, it proves that. I like Frost *and* Robert Creeley, Gertrude Stein *and* Donald Justice. Today, I guess there are the so-called Language Poets and the new generation of formalists to squabble over, but I consider it a waste of time.

INTERVIEWER

Your first two books, *What the Grass Says* (1967) and *Somewhere Among Us a Stone Is Taking Notes* (1969), were published by a small press in San Francisco called Kayak. How did that come about, and how were they received?

SIMIC

Kayak was a poetry magazine in Santa Cruz, California, that published poets who more or less wrote like the surrealists. Its editor, George Hitchcock, was a theater actor and a poet influenced by Breton and Péret. After publishing many poems in the magazine over two or three years, he asked me to do a book. I was, of course, delighted. Even though it was cheaply produced, *Kayak* was widely read and respected. *What the Grass Says* came out in 1967 and was the second book the magazine published. The day it arrived, I couldn't believe my eyes. I was happy to have a book and at the same time astonished by how ugly it was. It embarrassed me to show it to anyone. The joke is that book made me known. It was distributed by City Lights, the same publisher that distributed Ginsberg's best-seller *Howl,* so it got around. I had a number of

reviews, most of them favorable. Every other poet in the country seemed to have read it, so I did another book with Hitchcock, *Somewhere Among Us a Stone Is Taking Notes*. It was a bit better looking, though still amateurishly produced, but, as I said, my name became known.

INTERVIEWER

The new Faber edition of your *Selected Poems* doesn't include your longest poem, "White," which has been published in a number of different versions. I hope that's not because you now repudiate it?

SIMIC

No, no, I wanted this book to be made up of shorter poems. I like "White" very much, though there are still a couple of small things I want to change.

INTERVIEWER

Is "White" your only attempt at a long poem?

SIMIC

There were other longer poems I wrote when I was very young—for instance, a long narrative poem I wrote back in 1957–1958 about the Spanish Inquisition with veiled allusions to the McCarthy era. It's one of the poems I threw out. There were other attempts early on, best forgotten. I've grown to favor conciseness and pithiness. Less is more in my book. I'm always paring down—perhaps too much.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of part does revision play in the way you write—do you often get a poem in one go, so to speak, or do you work on draft after draft?

SIMIC

Even when I'm stretched out in my coffin they may find me tinkering with some poem. Even published poems I won't leave alone. I very rarely get it right in one go. Mostly I revise endlessly. I don't keep old drafts, but I imagine in some cases they must number into the hundreds. There's a danger in endlessly tinkering like that. I've ruined many poems, took all the life out of them by not letting them remain a bit awkward, nonsensical, and inept. At times, such "weaknesses" give the poem whatever charm it has, but it's not easy to know until one tries to improve it.

INTERVIEWER

One of the most distinctive features of your poetry is the way it combines wildly unpredictable imagery with a narrative style that is terse, clipped, at times elliptical. How did that tension evolve?

SIMIC

William Carlos Williams made a big impression on me. I think my style was formed partly in reaction to my early Crane and Stevens imitations. I wanted something seemingly artless and pedestrian to surprise the reader by conveying so much more. In other words, I wanted a poem a dog can understand. Still, I love odd words, strange images, startling metaphors, and rich diction, so I'm like a monk in a whorehouse, gnawing on a chunk of dry bread while watching the ladies drink champagne and parade in their lacy undergarments.

INTERVIEWER

I guess if I were trying to locate you on a map of postwar American poetry, the writers in whose vicinity I'd place you would be Charles Wright and James Tate. Would that be right?

SIMIC

Sure. I've known them forever. I met Charles Wright in 1963 in Nancy, France, when I was in the army. We've stayed friends

ever since. At one time, thirty years ago, we were all labeled neosurrealists and attacked for writing self-indulgent, meaningless, and supposedly anti-intellectual poems, but that label really meant nothing to us. Surrealism was lots of fun while it lasted, but it was long dead and gone. Of course, we used lots of images in our poems and made unpredictable leaps and juxtapositions, but that was no big deal. To prove that it was no big deal I made a little study of American folklore in the New York Public Library in 1963–1964. I was interested in magical sayings, jump-rope rhymes, superstitions, riddles, and proverbs. I would zero in on some little phrase like "extracting sunbeams out of a cucumber," and write it down in a little notebook with the intention of publishing a collection of the native surrealist imagination and making all these know-nothings in the literary world shut up and leave us alone. Well, it never happened. When the notebook was full, I lost it on the subway. I could prove it to no one else, but I proved it to myself.

INTERVIEWER

I am somewhat puzzled by the way you and Tate were seen by so many as heirs to the so-called Deep Image Poets—Merwin, Bly, Mark Strand, and James Wright. The most obvious difference is, your poetry makes much more use of humor than theirs does.

SIMIC

Strand can be funny, but yes, we don't belong in that group. The goofiness, the playfulness in our poems makes us much closer to the New York school. We don't have any lessons to teach; we don't worship nature or tell the reader how much we suffered. As Tate says somewhere, "It's a tragic story, but that's what's so funny." I agree with that. We are a country of millions of fools, who believe the most imbecile things about ourselves and the world, but when it comes to poetry only solemnity counts and joking is un-American. What I like about Tate is his complete trust in imagination, that it can find poetry everywhere and in every conceivable human situation, not just on a mountaintop as the sun

is about to go down some June evening. He is wisely irreverent and far more daring as a poet than I am. I can only emulate his example.

INTERVIEWER

You took up a job teaching in California in 1970, then moved to the University of New Hampshire in 1973, where you've remained ever since. Did the business of teaching poetry affect your practice at all?

SIMIC

It enabled me to read and reread a lot of literature, to formulate ideas in class and have smart students challenge me on the spot and force me to rethink everything. I imagine the vast amount of reading I've done over the years, more than the teaching itself, affected my practice as a poet.

INTERVIEWER

You've now been a New Englander for over thirty years. What writers associated with the New England tradition have meant most to you?

SIMIC

Emily Dickinson, Emerson, Hawthorne, Frost. I didn't care for Frost until I came to New England, but then I found myself living in the same landscape that he describes in his poetry. When I look out of my window, every tree, every bird has already been talked about by Frost. Then there's a whole range of philosophical and aesthetic issues he and the other New England writers raise with which I am temperamentally in tune. If one lives where I live, it's impossible not to have a dialogue with them. Even my dog as we walk in the woods gives me the impression that he is familiar with the writings of Henry David Thoreau and is curious to know how I feel about certain of his ideas.

INTERVIEWER

And how about Wallace Stevens?

SIMIC

Stevens was a very great poet and a very smart man. He understood what the Romantics, Emerson, Whitman, and William Carlos Williams were all about—that every theory of poetry in the end is a theory of reality. I like poems that have interesting philosophical ideas, and his poems do. What Dickinson, Frost, and Stevens share is an ability to construct a brief lyric poem about some ordinary experience that eventually ends up asking all kinds of metaphysical questions. Poems like Stevens's "The Snow Man," Dickinson's "There's a certain Slant of light," and Frost's "An Old Man's Winter Night." I love that stuff.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to ask also about the impact on you of the work of Joseph Cornell; you wrote a kind of homage to him, *Dime-Store Alchemy,* which was published in 1992. When did you discover him?

SIMIC

I imagine in the late 1950s when I first looked at books on surrealist art. He was the only American, so he stood out. Once I understood how he went about constructing his boxes, I knew we were soul brothers. He roamed the city looking around and finding from time to time some odd, seemingly useless item, which he saved and then brought together with other, equally useless items. A Cornell box is like a poem, a place where unlikely things come together to give the viewer a new aesthetic experience. Beauty for Cornell is something one finds. I never met him, but knew people who did, and he'd say things like, On the Twenty-eighth Street IRT station, there's a great gum machine with a broken mirror that's really beautiful. That way of seeing New York City made a lot of sense to me.

INTERVIEWER

Your urban scenes often have a kind of noirish feel to them, in particular pieces such as “Hotel Insomnia” or “Hotel Starry Sky.” When did your love affair with the movies begin?

SIMIC

When I was ten or eleven years old. I had seen many movies before, but not until I saw my first noirs did I feel the poetry of a city. Belgrade, where I grew up, was very dark, very dangerous in the war years and even after. These American movies were a link to my sleepless nights when I peeked out of the window at the streets wet with rain. I recall the pain I felt when I discovered that some of my closest friends did not like them as much I did. I couldn’t understand how that was possible.

INTERVIEWER

What were some of your favorite films?

SIMIC

The Asphalt Jungle, The Naked City, The Blue Dahlia, Out of the Past, Laura, et cetera.

INTERVIEWER

Another nonpoetic influence I’d like to touch on is American music—in particular jazz and the blues.

SIMIC

Well, in Belgrade I heard a lot of jazz on the radio—Glenn Miller and big-band jazz were very popular in Yugoslavia. Then when I got to Paris I discovered Charlie Parker, Monk, Davis, and Bud Powell. Once in the United States, I heard live jazz with my father, but more importantly listened to it on the radio for hours every day. I have a fanatic collector side. Once I get interested in a subject, I have to know everything. I daresay I’ve heard almost every jazz record made between 1920 and 1960. The same goes for

the blues. How many people have heard of Paul Howard's Quality Serenaders, Jabbo Smith, or Cripple Clarence Lofton? Not many, I imagine. Did some of it influence my poetry? I don't know in what way. In America, if you want to know where the heart is you listen to the blues and country music. The most astonishing thing about the blues is the economy of the lyrics, which can convey a complex human drama in a few lines.

Here's an example:

> I said, good morning, Mr. Pawnshop man
> As I walked through his door.
> I feel bad this morning
> And I really want my .44.
>
> I was at a party last night.
> I was there till about past 2.
> I'm going back there tonight.
> I might have some shooting to do.

That comes from a 1929 recording by one Roosevelt Sykes, who plays the piano and sings. There are more lyrics, but this gives you an idea.

INTERVIEWER

I once interviewed Allen Ginsberg, and asked him why he wrote the way he did—to which he replied, "Just because I do!" Is there much more to be said by poets about why they write the way they do?

SIMIC

Probably not. I write to annoy God, to make Death laugh. I write because I can't get it right. I write because I want every woman in the world to fall in love with me. One can try to be clever like that, but in the end it comes down to what Ginsberg said.

INTERVIEWER

How would you characterize the way your style has evolved over the forty years you've been writing poetry?

SIMIC

In the early poems, the idea was to make poems entirely of images, not caring too much about sound, using the simplest possible vocabulary. I think my poems eventually got to be more careful about language and music. There are more autobiographical elements, more narratives. I became a country poet as much as a city poet. Naturally, I still have my obsessions, my bad habits, my blind spots. Like all poets who have written this long, I repeat myself. I wish I didn't. Then again, like all insomniacs, I tend to brood and dwell over the same old things night after night.

INTERVIEWER

In recent years politics must have figured largely in the things you brood over at night—in particular, events in what used to be Yugoslavia. Did you anticipate the various conflicts that erupted in the Balkans in the nineties?

SIMIC

It was odd. I both saw it coming and didn't see it coming. Nationalism was everywhere on the rise, and in Serbia, Milošević got elected. I knew that his policies were going to lead to a bloodbath, but you know how it is, one always assumes people are more reasonable than they really are. In every society there are those who can't kill and those who can. I got the proportions wrong. Who could have anticipated Srebrenica? I lost many friends who became rabid haters. It was an awful time. Nationalism is collective madness, a form of narcissism with millions preening in front of an imaginary mirror, telling themselves they are God's favorites. Their happiness can only come from the unhappiness of others, so they need to kill and make miserable a lot of people. At the same time there's something suicidal, something self-defeating about the

whole enterprise. Sooner or later they always come to a bad end. The story of nationalism in the Balkans is that everyone remembers what was done to them for the last thousand years, and no one remembers what they did to someone else. I kept reminding them, and they kept calling me a traitor.

INTERVIEWER

When was the last time you visited Belgrade?

SIMIC

1982 was the last time I was there. I had a Fulbright Fellowship and I spent a summer there traveling all over the place. It was very enjoyable, and yet I felt even more a stranger than I did in 1972. Many of the writers and intellectuals still pretended to be convinced Communists or at least Marxists, so there were subjects one had to avoid asking about or criticizing. I could not talk the way I usually do and that got to be tiresome after a while. Later on, during the Milošević years, that was not the case. The opposition papers I wrote for were amazingly free and often gutsier than their counterparts in the West.

INTERVIEWER

You tend not to write directly about particular historical crises or catastrophes, but surely the war in the Balkans underlies the bleak historical perspectives of poems such as "Reading History" or "Empires," both from the early nineties?

SIMIC

I'm sure it was in the background. "Reading History" was written after going on a binge and reading a pile of books on Chinese and Indian history. Every few pages, of course, there was some atrocity, some massacre, or some battle in which thousands died, so that got me thinking. "Empires" is a poem about my grandmother on my mother's side, who died in 1948, when I was ten. She took care of me from when I was very little while my

parents were at work. She used to listen to Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and other lunatics on the radio. I understood nothing, but she knew several languages. She got very upset. She could not get over the lies she heard. What's wrong with the world? she'd ask everyone. Good question. I still haven't figured it out myself. There have been so many wars in my lifetime, so much killing. I'm as uncomprehending as she was. The ease and arrogance with which so many are sent to their deaths continues to astonish me.

The use of murder to improve the world, for instance, is popular in American intellectual circles as if there had never been any historical precedents. I think about these things all the time.

INTERVIEWER

"All I have is a voice," Auden wrote in "September 1, 1939," "To undo the folded lie." Of course he then later disowned this poem . . . But it seems to me your poems are often motivated by the desire to "undo folded lies," or at least to expose the various complexities that politicians and pundits attempt to disguise from us.

SIMIC

Let's hope so. Poetry in my view is a defense of the individual against all the forces arrayed against him. Every religion, every ideology and orthodoxy of thought and manner wants to reeducate him and make him into something else. To sing from the same sheet is the ideal. A true patriot doesn't think for himself, they'll tell you. I realize that there's a long tradition in poetry of *not* speaking truth to power and, in fact, of being its groveling apologist. I just don't have it in me.

INTERVIEWER

On the other hand, one of the main pleasures of your work, for me anyway, is the way it reminds us of all the ordinary pleasures of life, and urges us, or rather invites us, to enjoy them while we still can—things such as fried shrimp, tomatoes, roast lamb, red wine . . .

SIMIC

Don't forget sausages sautéed with potatoes and onions! It's also highly advisable to have a philosopher or two on hand. A few pages of Plato while working on a baked ham. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* over a bowl of spaghetti with littleneck clams. We think best when we bring opposites together, when we realize that all these realities, one inside the other, are somehow connected. That's how the wonder and amazement that are so necessary to both poetry and philosophy come about. A "truth" detached and purified of pleasures of ordinary life is not worth a damn in my view. Every grand theory and noble sentiment ought to be first tested in the kitchen—and then in bed, of course.