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A Conversation with Charles Simic

Abstract

Charles Simic, who served as 2007-2008 United States Poet Laureate, is one of the nation's most honored and distinguished poets. Born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1938, he emigrated to the U.S. in 1954. Over the last few decades, he has published dozens of books of poetry and prose, including *Selected Poems: 1963-1983*, *The Voice at 3:00 AM: Selected Late and New Poems*, *The World Doesn't End*, which received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and, in the past year, his most recent volume of poetry, *That Little Something*, a collection of notebook entries, *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth*. Simic has been prolific not just as a poet but as an editor, translator, and reviewer, and he has received numerous awards, including Guggenheim, National Endowment for the Arts, and MacArthur fellowships, and, in 2007, the Wallace Stevens Award. He lives in Strafford, New Hampshire, and is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. This conversation with Butler Assistant Professor of English Chris Forhan took place before a group of Butler students in April 2009 and was continued through email correspondence.

Keywords

Charles Simic, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, Poet Laureate

Charles Simic, who served as 2007-2008 United States Poet Laureate, is one of the nation's most honored and distinguished poets. Born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1938, he emigrated to the U.S. in 1954. Over the last few decades, he has published dozens of books of poetry and prose, including *Selected Poems: 1963-1983*, *The Voice at 3:00 AM: Selected Late and New Poems*, *The World Doesn't End*, which received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and, in the past year, his most recent volume of poetry, *That Little Something*, and a collection of notebook entries, *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth*. Simic has been prolific not just as a poet but as an editor, translator, and reviewer, and he has received numerous awards, including Guggenheim, National Endowment for the Arts, and MacArthur fellowships, and, in 2007, the Wallace Stevens Award. He lives in Strafford, New Hampshire, and is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. This conversation with Butler Assistant Professor of English Chris Forhan took place before a group of Butler students in April 2009 and was continued through email correspondence.

Chris Forhan: You were born in 1938 in Yugoslavia, and you've often written and talked about how in your first few years, in Belgrade, you were bombed by both the Axis and Allied powers and were familiar with broken glass and burned-out buildings and the uniforms of dead German soldiers. It was quite an upbringing. Eventually you and your family immigrated to America—you have said that Stalin and Hitler were your travel agents. All of that has necessarily informed your sensibility. I wonder, as we have moved into this new century of wars, how those initial experiences affect your understanding of what is going on in the world today.

Charles Simic: Very much so. When a city is bombed, it's mostly innocents who get killed. Now we talk about precision bombing, and they're probably a bit more accurate in hitting what they aim to hit. But a lot of the time, as we see in Afghanistan, it's civilians who get it. And so when I see a city being bombed, I can imagine what's going on on the ground.

CF: Is it foolish to think that humanity might be improving in any fashion in regard to this, or are the weapons just getting more precise?

CS: No, I don't think humanity is improving. I mean, you still have the same kind of carnage even today, not as indiscriminate—I mean, the second World War was really incredibly cruel if you think of the carpet-bombing of German cities, the fire-bombing of Japanese cities. They just didn't care. Their intention was to kill a lot of civilians. I don't think that's true today, but innocents and bystanders still suffer.

CF: When you first came to the United States, you moved first to New York and then to Chicago, and you went to high school in Oak Park, where Hemingway went to high school, and you started writing poems. If my math is correct, this is the fiftieth anniversary of the first publication of your poems, in *The Chicago Review*.

CS: Yeah, it was the winter issue of 1959. It came out, I believe, in late December of 1958.

CF: Fifty years. Does that number make any sense to you?

CS: No. I'm glad you reminded me, since I don't think about such things. The two poems that came out I have never reprinted. I think I looked at them maybe thirty years ago and realized they were not very good. It was wonderful to have poems accepted, but it's hard for me to imagine today what the editors saw in them.

CF: Does that mean you were sending out your work too early?

CS: Oh, yeah, sure, I was sending my work out too early. When you're young, you don't grasp how badly you write. I remember sending poems to *Poetry* magazine in Chicago, and they came back within a week. Of course, it was Chicago, so it wasn't very far—but I was very surprised that there was not even a printed rejection slip.

CF: That's the way it was for me. I had no idea. I was writing poems and didn't know if they were any good, and I didn't know anybody who could tell me, so I sent them to magazines, and they were rejected, and I realized, well, they're no good.

CS: Yeah.

CF: As I read your work, these are images, or objects, that appear again and again: dusty storefronts; pawnshops; fortune tellers; birds—caged or otherwise; maimed dogs and black cats; dolls—perhaps headless or stuck with pins; lipsticked lips; mirrors; broken windows; world-weary grandmothers; mysterious waiters; threadbare coats; dust and rain. That's almost a comprehensive list. There are more. My question is do you have any sense of why these things keep bubbling up into your poetic consciousness?

CS: Well, they're all things that I have a great deal of interest in. Something like dusty pawnshop windows: it's not often that you can see a pawnshop today, but if you lived in New York or Chicago in those days, in the '50s, there were pawnshops on the Lower East Side in New York, a few per block. I always liked windows, store windows, but pawnshops have the best. All sorts of interesting things—musical instruments, radios, steak knives, a kid's pair of roller skates--and you're thinking: "Some poor kid's parents pawned them." You always have the impression that each one of these objects has a story to tell. All you have to do is look long enough and you'll begin to hear the story behind the object. They're also aesthetically interesting, just the way they look, thrown together, without rhyme or reason by the owner of the shop.

Broken windows—I saw a lot of broken windows in my life because of the bombings. I think the thing about dolls, too, that also is a wartime memory. There were a lot of ruins of buildings that were bombed, and I played in some of them with my friends. It was terrific climbing up and down. And, you know, you see a doll and it makes an impression.

I forget what else you mentioned . . .

CF: We can go through them one at a time if you want . . .

CS: Don't. But mention another one.

CF: Well, how about the waiters? You have really strange waiters in your poems.

CS: Waiters, yeah. Well, I always had an interest in waiters. I spent a lot of time in restaurants, bars, and these waiters that I describe are not precisely the kind of waiters you encounter today, or at least less so, but old-time waiters—you had that job probably for life. I remember an old Polish restaurant where the waiters had to wear tuxedos, and these tuxedos were 100 years old, and the waiters all walked slowly, taking forever to get from the kitchen to your table. You'd order a lobster—I didn't, but somebody I knew once did—and they brought lobster with sauerkraut.

CF: Sauerkraut goes with everything.

CS: Exactly. But looking at these waiters—there's something very theatrical about them. They were like characters in a play one walked into the middle of.

CF: Your description of the pawnshop windows and the collection of odds and ends in them reminds me of your interest in Joseph Cornell's work. He has these boxes in which he's collected various things from all around the city and found this unique arrangement of objects that originally didn't seem to belong together. I'm not sure how to formulate this question, but I'll give it a shot. Your poems are oftentimes like that for me: a collection of disparate details, and they start talking to each other. You've written a lot about chance as a force in our lives and in art, and sometimes I read your poems, and it seems that the idea is that any given moment or collection of experiences or objects is unique—it's there and it's gone, and it's marvelous, or horrifying, or whatever. But it doesn't necessarily mean anything beyond itself. Then there are times when it seems you have this hunch they might mean something beyond themselves; in other words, there may be some kind of transcendent reality that underpins all of this, and your trees are often seemingly whispering about this big secret. So: which is it? Is there a transcendent truth, or do we exist amid a random collection of things and it is foolish to infer something larger from them?

CS: There are two questions here. The first question was about Cornell. Joseph Cornell was an American artist who spent most of his life roaming the streets of New York City and peeking into junk shops, dime stores, and used book stores and so forth and collecting things that no one else would collect, odd objects, programs for old concerts, movie posters, just all sorts of odd and strange things which he then incorporated in his art. He would have little wooden boxes, and inside the box he would put two or three of these objects—arrange them in a way that seemed pleasing to him and certainly is pleasing to us. But it was all done in a very strange way. He would find something interesting, like some little marble, a kid's marble, and some other kind of little thing, and he had a box all ready for it, and he'd feel in New York City there are three or four other little things like that—odd, found things—that would fit with this. But he didn't know where they were or what they were. And he would make his daily trips into the city—he lived in Queens and went to the city and just kind of poked around. And, of course, his house, his basement, was just full of junk. Everybody else would think it was trash he was collecting because these were not valuable things; these were things that a normal person would throw out.

But he was in love with them. He used to call them “his loot.” He’d go over them the way a miser goes over his hoard of gold, and then put one of them aside and look at it, and look at it, and finally place it in one of the empty wooden boxes he used as a kind of frame. And then he’d find another one that he felt went with the first. And when they were together, he suffered over their position, over how they were placed. He’d move them just a little this way and then that way. I didn’t know about him when I was in love with pawnshops, but once I read about Cornell, I realized this is the way I work, too, putting words and images together waiting for them to fit in a kind of collage, a combination of deliberation and accident.

As far as transcendence, and what the trees are whispering, someone told me recently after a reading that I have too many poems about trees. You’ve been to my house. I live surrounded by woods, so—

CF: What are you going to do?

CS: Yeah, what can I do?

CF: Not everybody’s trees whisper things to them.

CS: Well, trees are always talking. Read Robert Frost. He’s got a lot of poems about trees rustling, the leaves carrying on like they were talking. But as far as transcendence goes, that’s a very complicated question. Is it simply a feeling that there is another world, another reality out beyond what we see and hear? I don’t think I ever quite say there is another world beyond the visible in my poems, but I tend to agree with the trees that one ought to worry and think about that possibility.

CF: I’m reminded of a very early poem of yours, “Evening,” in which you write, “The snail gives off stillness. / The weed is blessed.” This feels of its time . . .

CS: Those early poems were very much in that tradition of the Transcendentalists. I was reading Roethke a lot and James Wright, too, so it wasn’t so much my own experience, but my experience colored by literature. Once I became my own poet, I was less willing to say things like that.

CF: From the beginning, your images have been striking. In a notebook entry, you write, “‘He has great images,’ we used to say, and we meant that the poet kept surprising us by his wild associations. Total freedom of the imagination was our ideal then. That’s all we loved and demanded from the poetry we were going to write.” Is this still true? Or do you love and demand other things, too, from your poems and the poems of others?

CS: Not true any more. Now I want the whole poem to be memorable.

CF: Your poems emphasize, on one hand, the dream-like and surreal and, on the other, the literal—including both moments of simple domestic joy and war and suffering. What is the relationship between these two modes of expression, or have I created a false dichotomy?

CS: We look at the world both with eyes closed and with eyes open. I can't conceive leaving my memories and my imagination out, nor can I conceive not paying attention to what goes on around me. They can be seen as two points of view.

CF: Is there a *moral* component to—or consequence of—great images or good poetry—or only an aesthetic or imaginative one?

CS: Only if one thinks of morality as a form of integrity. Things well made, be they pieces of furniture or poems, have a moral component in that sense.

CF: You tend to be a minimalist; you write short poems—

CS: Sure.

CF: And there's something Louise Glück says—she's very interested in things that are unfinished, the elliptical nature of a lot of art—and she says, "What is wanted in art is to harness the power of the unfinished." Does that make sense to you as an aesthetic?

CS: It makes sense to me. You know, "less is more" is the old saying about poetry—because poems are really collaborations between the reader and the poet. You read a haiku. If it works and engages your imagination, you fill in all the things left out. And if nothing happens, that's it; it's the end of it. You turn the page. That has always amazed me: how you can bring to life something so brief. There is a haiku which I read, like, twenty or thirty years ago and I still remember it. I've no idea who wrote it, but the guy gets out of bed in the morning on his dead wife's side and steps with his bare foot on her comb lying next to the bed. As a reader you shudder and begin to imagine that bare foot stepping on a comb of the dead wife with perhaps her hairs still sticking out of it. So the power of something small—and, as Louise says, unfinished—can have immense power. Cold morning, cold foot, cold comb—I wonder what their marriage must have been like? If you give the reader something like that, then they'll never forget the poem.

CF: At the same time—and, granted, you've never written an epic as far as I know; you don't have a *Paradise Lost* in a drawer somewhere—some of the poems of yours that I appreciate the most are a little looser-limbed. I was happy that you read "Shelley" last night; I like those "being a young guy in New York" poems: "Shelley," "St. Thomas Aquinas," and "The Initiate." And then there is a different kind of poem but, again, a longer poem, *White*—

CS: A series of lyrics, yes—

CF: —which feels to me central in your work. Do you see those longer poems, either those two- or three-page narrative poems or *White*, as being somehow anomalous for you, or are they all part of the same project as your other poems?

CS: I like them both very much. One of the problems with something short, very brief, is that you get obsessed to encompass everything in a few words and end up writing the same poem over and over again. You become predictable. My tendency has been, even with things that are

longer, to cut down. I've very often written poems the length of "Shelley" or "Aquinas," and then looking at them realized that a passage of ten or twelve lines was the heart of the whole thing.

CF: Speaking of predictable—and I don't mean to be critical at all—but, reading your most recent book, *That Little Something*, I notice a pattern. There's a continual sense of the speaker of the poems, the consciousness of the poems, being in an in-between state, on the way to some place or having just left some place—caught in time or something. These are the endings of the first four poems of the book:

I've no return ticket
To wherever it is I came from earlier this evening.

. . . you hurry to some appointment
Where you are now certain to arrive late.

. . . you,
All frazzled and descending in a hurry.

I better get the passkey and see for myself.
I better bring along a book of matches too.

This reminds me of one of my favorite poems of yours, an earlier poem, "Furniture Mover," in which, in my reading of the poem, anyway, this furniture mover is maybe time itself or whatever is this thing just beyond our grasp which holds everything together, and the speaker of the poem desires for once to be ahead of the furniture mover and meet him at his destination, ahead of time. Is there some sort of obsession or philosophy, or at least interest, of yours that accounts for these poems? Or am I reading too much into it?

CS: No. I think it's interesting what you say, that I'm always in transit. It most likely has something to do with my life because I've certainly moved around a great deal. When I was a kid in Yugoslavia, it never occurred to me that I would ever leave the street where I was born. It never occurred to my parents either. They were the kind of people who just stayed where they were born, in the same place, in the same city or town, the same house. Of course, once you move, you take it in stride—at least I did—but for them it was much harder because they remembered what they'd left behind. Even I divide my time between New Hampshire and New York, so I think I carry something unsettled in me, some desire to go back and forth. There are other people like that, too, so I don't know if this is just due to my background. My good friend Mark Strand is even more restless than I am. He always wants to go someplace place. There are people who had no desire to leave Strafford, New Hampshire, and I understand that, but . . .

CF: I think of Emily Dickinson, who rarely went anywhere.

CS: One time she went to Boston—and there was Washington, too, right?—but she hated both places. She couldn't wait to get back.

CF: Let me read you a few quotations that are going to be familiar to you. My question is: are you sympathetic to any or all of them? This is about poetic form. Robert Creeley said, “Form is never more than the extension of content.” Denise Levertov revised that to “Form is never more than the revelation of content.” Your friend Charles Wright: “Form is never more than a transubstantiation of content.” And Frank O’Hara: “You just go on your nerve.”

CS: I know all four of them. I like Denise Levertov’s formulation the best. It makes sense to me, although it has a religious, even mystical dimension to it—the idea that form is a revelation of content. In other words, we don’t choose a form of the poem but it is revealed to us in the process of writing it. So, for example, if you’re lying under a tree in the shade after lunch, a heavy summer lunch of fried chicken, corn on the cob, watermelon and much wine, you look out there and see a beautiful meadow, maybe horses, summer sky, and you feel good about the world, and maybe you have a notebook and a pen and you attempt to write about this feeling, this sense of the moment, that mood would influence how you wrote. I don’t think you would write in very short lines, choppy lines. You’d sound more like Roethke than Creeley, your lines would get longer and longer. Or say you’re on a farm, and your wife comes in and brings an egg that has just been laid, a brand new egg in the palm of her hand. A nice looking egg, a perfect egg, and you feel moved to write about it. Well, it’s likely to be not a long-winded poem but something more compact, pared down, careful about every word and image, not because you’ve decided ahead that it should be so, but because the experience itself of seeing that egg has revealed to you how to proceed.

CF: You wrote once (in a letter to Charles Wright), “The ambition of each image and metaphor is to redescribe the world, or, more accurately, to blaspheme.” A consistent theme in your work is blasphemy—thumbing your nose at power, at convention, at institutions. Is the blasphemy of the young man, the Simic of his 20’s and 30’s, the same as that of the older Simic?

CS: Sure. Poets are in competition with God. He has his idea what this is all about and we have ours. Look at American poetry since Whitman and Dickinson, they are all constructing their little model of the universe. So, yes, I’m still at it, happily blaspheming away.

CF: Finally, I have a multiple choice test for you. We can go through this rapidly, then tally your responses and see how you did.

CS: Sure.

CF: Coleman Hawkins or Lester Young?

CS: Lester Young.

CF: Fellini or Bergman?

CS: Fellini.

CF: Howlin’ Wolf or Lightnin’ Hopkins?

CS: Lightnin' Hopkins.

CF: Schoolhouse or prison?

CS: That's a tough one. Prison.

CF: Dusk or twilight?

CS: Dusk.

CF: Rooftop or fire escape?

CS: Rooftop.

CF: Porcupine or armadillo?

CS: Porcupine.

CF: Whitman or Dickinson?

CS: Dickinson.

CF: Eliot or Williams?

CS: Williams.

CF: Frost or Stevens?

CS: Stevens. But I love them both.

CF: Bishop or Lowell?

CS: Bishop.

CF: Polka dots or stripes?

CS: Stripes.

CF: Congratulations. A perfect score.