World of objects | The poetics of Charles Simic

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A World of Objects: The Poetics of Charles Simic

by

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Charles Simic once remarked that "it" was the most interesting word in the language. His fascination with the world of objects is an integral part of his poetics and of his metaphysics as well. Simic's poems are filled with forks and spoons, crumbs and mangy dogs, children's toys, and of course, stones. This study seeks to examine the ontological and metaphysical inquiries at work in Charles Simic's poetry as they manifest themselves in the world of objects. I will argue that Simic's investigation into this territory is significant not only because it comprises such a considerable part of his poetics – his fascination with objects remaining a subject of sustained inquiry throughout his career – but also for the ways his work may call into question the extent to which critics have tended to separate those literatures focusing on the transcendent from those dwelling on the "here and now." His studies of the mundane objects of everyday life point paradoxically to the beyond, linking him with the romantic tradition of the lyric even as his work is of an immanentist and contemporary ilk. In order to ground my understanding of Simic's work and its metaphysics of objects, I will be pulling from diverse philosophical and critical texts, including Charles Altieri's study of postmodern poetics, Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*, and the fifty years of criticism surrounding the poet's work. While all of Simic's œuvre will be considered, particular attention will be paid to his book of prose poems, *The World Doesn't End.*
It, it, I keep calling it. An affinity of "it" without a single antecedent – like a cosmic static in my ear.

– Charles Simic (FIS 181)
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INTRODUCTION

Dear Mr. Simic:

... You're obviously a sensible young man, so why do you waste your time by writing about knives, spoons, and forks?

In the late 1950's, poet Charles Simic began publishing his work in small literary journals, but more often than not during this period, his work was returned to him with rejection slips; the above note was scribbled on a rejection that Simic received in 1965 from an editor of a now-forgotten journal (NLH 217). Almost fifty years later, with over sixty books to his name – twenty-five of them volumes of poetry – Charles Simic has developed into one of the most important and enigmatic contemporary North American poets. In 1990 his collection The World Doesn't End received the Pulitzer Prize, the first collection of prose poems to ever win this prestigious award. That collection, and all his others, are filled with forks and spoons, crumbs and mangy dogs, children's toys, and of course, stones. Simic's fascination with the world of objects, the here and now of existence, is an integral part of his poetics and of his metaphysics as well. Though the explicit "object meditations" that characterized his early work gave way to other kinds of poems, Simic never relinquished his fascination with objects. Critics have tended to pay a good deal of attention to his early object meditations, mostly as evidence of his curious beginnings or to bolster claims that Simic works in the surrealist vein, but few have

1 He did, in fact, find a home in 1969 for his poems "Fork," "Spoon," and "Knife." All three poems can be found in Simic's collection Somewhere Among Us a Stone Is Taking Notes.
explored or sufficiently emphasized the ways in which objects have remained an integral part of Simic's poetic practice, and in fact, no extended study of this matter exists to date. This study aims to fill that gap.

In a recent interview, when asked about the everyday objects in his poems, Simic remarks on their primacy to his work:

The visual presences of these simple things have always meant a great deal to me. It's where I begin. In the spirit of William Carlos Williams's famous line, "No ideas but in things." Everything begins with the rock-bottom reality, which is the reality in front of my nose. The table, the teacup – for me, writing always has to begin with something concrete – and ideas come out of that later. I never trust ideas first. I never begin a poem because I have an idea. But it's always some kind of experience – an experience which is tied to a physical place, some object, some image – they're the ones that make the poem begin to be written. (Ratiner 83)

Objects in Simic's poems, as he himself attests in the above quote, are important in his process, often acting as the impetus for his work, but they are also frequent sites of ontological and metaphysical inquiry in his poems. His explorations of objects are, in fact, defining features of a poetics that is entirely his own; Simic works within the tradition of the immanentist aesthetics of presence while also investigating the silence of the beyond.

Simic's fascination with objects is significant, then, not only because it comprises such a considerable part of his poetics, but also for the ways in which his work may call into question the extent to which critics have tended to separate those literatures focusing on the transcendent from those dwelling in the "here and now." That he does this while bearing witness to the atrocities that have marked the twentieth century makes Simic one of the most powerful and accomplished political poets of our time as well.
Simic is not the first to write poems in which objects play a central role, of course. One need only recall Stein's *Tender Buttons* or Williams' rain-slicked wheel barrow to recognize that the object poem comprises a rich part of the poetic tradition. The prose poem, in particular, enjoys a history filled with a curious tendency toward objects. That a poet like Simic, who once disclosed that the word "it" was to him "the most interesting word in the language" (NLH 218), has turned his attention in recent years to the genre of the prose poem is both significant and somehow inevitable.

Michael Delville, in his groundbreaking study *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*, points out in the book's introduction that object poems are "emblematic of the preoccupation with objects that characterizes the work of a number of major representatives of the contemporary prose poem, such as Gertrude Stein and Francis Ponge" (16). He is, however, cautious about making claims for this hybrid genre, pointing out that any claims made for the prose poem could also adhere to contemporaneous claims about poetry or prose as well. Further, Delville points out that since Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* appeared in 1869 – often considered the first representative of the form in the Western canon – the proliferation of practitioners of the form and almost as many trends make "any attempt at a single, monolithic definition of the genre ... doomed to failure" (1).

Nonetheless, the prose poem, which is still seen by many as an illegitimate form of literary expression,\(^2\) has experienced a resurgence in recent years. As Delville himself points out, this resurgence has been primarily a creative one; the critical response has

\(^2\) A few examples of recent debates over the legitimacy of the prose poem include the controversy over Simic's collection of prose poems winning the Pulitzer (see Buckley), as well as the recent spate of articles by Joan Houlihan in the *Boston Comment*. 

been slow to follow. His book, in fact, marks the first attempt to chart the history of the American prose poem, and though a scant eleven pages are devoted to Simic's work, the chapter stands as the only critical text to situate Simic within this particular historical context, positioning him as an influential practitioner of the American prose poem.

This study, then, proceeds with a double errand: to investigate Simic's poetics, paying particular attention to the ontological and metaphysical inquiries at work in his use of objects, and to lend this study a clear focus by concentrating on Simic's 1989 book of prose poems, *The World Doesn't End*. This prize-winning collection is perhaps Simic's most successful work to date in terms of integrating many of his preoccupations, and does so within a text that makes its primary source of interpretive meaning the book as a whole. While it is outside the scope of this project to make claims concerning the prose poem or engage in genre theory, it is my hope that turning a critical lens toward this text, a vital contribution to the form, will add in some way to the critical discussion surrounding a genre whose history is still being written.

In order to ground my understanding of Simic's poetry and its investigations into objects, I will be drawing on diverse critical and philosophical texts, including interviews with and critical essays by Simic, the broad array of criticism surrounding his work, Charles Altieri's writings on American postmodern poetry, essays from Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*, and other relevant texts. While the particular focus of my inquiry necessitates a critical approach that may lean on the more than fifty years of criticism surrounding the poet's work, much of this study will rely on close readings, through which other critical models may emerge. The use of autobiographical information and a consideration of the historical context of Simic's work must be an
integral part of this study and any other work of scholarship on this writer, since the materials of Simic's poems often stem from his experiences as a child in Yugoslavia during World War II; his formative experiences with war and poverty, and his subsequent life as an exile and immigrant, inform his poetics in profound ways, and therefore must be taken into account. Simic's work engages these personal and historical realities, in part, through the very objects that populate his poems, making for a distinctive immanentist poetics that is also a poetics of witness. What is more, his poems ask about the beyond, and in so doing engage in what he himself grants is a complex and Dickinsonian metaphysical paradox: the faith in both the presence and the absence of a God. It is a testament to Simic's genius that he has developed a poetics that is at once political, immanentist, and metaphysical. His work, while grounded in the objects and history of the here and now, points paradoxically to the beyond, pushing his poems toward an encounter with silence that may, in fact, be at the heart of his poetics.
CHAPTER 1
SITUATING SIMIC IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Biographical Context

*My immigrant experience protected me from any quick embrace of a literary and political outlook.... The impulse of every young artist and writer to stake everything on a single view and develop a recognizable style was, of course, attractive, but at the same time I knew myself to be pulled in different directions. I loved Whitman and I loved the surrealists. The more widely I read, the less I wanted to restrict myself to a single aesthetic and literary position. I was already many things, so why shouldn't I be the same way in poetry? (OF 14)*

Situating Charles Simic within a poetic tradition is a difficult task. And pinning him down to a coherent set of influences near impossible. But part of what makes Charles Simic distinctive is his elusiveness, his stylistic hybridity, the very impossibility of pinning him down. Part of the difficulty in locating Simic's poetics within a specific contemporary trajectory lies in the fact that his very biography resists all attempts to make univocal his style or influences.

Simic was born in Yugoslavia in 1938. His first memory is of being thrown from his crib across a room bathed in a blinding light. He was three years old and the building across the street had just been hit by a German bomb. Simic and his family lived through the German bombing of Belgrade in 1941, the Allied bombing in 1944, and the Russian liberation of the city, which was characterized by, among other things, the settling of political scores. His memories from this period are a surreal parade of child's play amidst the backdrop of war: playhouses made from bombed out buildings, an excursion with friends to gather equipment and live ammunition from the bodies of dead soldiers,
learning to play chess while men were being hung from telephone poles a few blocks away.

In the fall of 1945, Simic's mother attempted to cross into Austria in the middle of the night with her two sons. They were caught, sent to prison, and eventually taken back to Belgrade. Meanwhile, Simic's father, who had left just before the war, was in prison in Italy; after his release he made his way to the U.S. In 1953, Simic's mother obtained the necessary passports, and after a year in Paris, in which the three slept in a small hotel and attended free night classes in order to learn English, they received their visas and traveled to the United States. They reached New York in August of 1954, where the family was reunited with Simic's father. The following year, the family moved to the Chicago area, where they found a small apartment in the relatively affluent suburb of Oak Park. In his memoir, *A Fly in the Soup*, Simic describes the family's relief at finding an apartment in a safe neighborhood with tree-lined streets, but recalls that in his parents' impatience to find a place, they had failed to notice that the railroad tracks ran just outside their back windows. "All the trains leaving Union Station for points west roared by, rattling our pots and pans and just about everything else. We were so close to the trains we could see people in the dining car being served by black waiters. We could almost make out what they had on their plates. It didn't occur to my parents to move. I guess they were sick and tired of moving" (77).

Simic attended high school in Oak Park, where his teachers never failed to remind him that Hemingway had been a student there. It was here that he first began writing poetry, spurred on at first by a few of his friends who had written poems, which Simic thought poor attempts. He embarked on a few of his own in order to show his friends how
it was done, but was amazed to discover that it was much more difficult than he had thought. Almost fifty years later, he's still wrestling with the page.

His high school friends all departed for private colleges in the east, but Simic knew that if he wanted an education he was going to have to work for it. He got a job at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, first as a copy boy and then as a proofreader for the classified section. At night, he took classes at the University of Chicago. He was painting, writing poetry, and meeting other writers in the neighborhood bars who introduced him to poets like Stevens, Pound, Lowell, and Jarrell. On nights when he didn't attend classes, he went to the Newberry Library and read the French Surrealists and literary magazines. Simic remembers running into the novelist Nelson Algren at a party, who took one look at the volume of Robert Lowell tucked under his arm and said, "Forget that.... A kid like you, just off the boat ... Go read Whitman, read Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay" (FIS 82). Simic took his advice, and that of the many others in the literary community whose suggestions opened up a world of new writers to Simic. Of those years in Chicago, he writes: "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" (FIS 85).

He remembers wanting to blend in, but also feeling constantly aware – and being made aware by others – of his immigrant status. In Chicago, this had a positive effect on his work. The literary community, which at the time was filled with immigrants and the children of immigrants, encouraged Simic to read broadly but not buy in to the eastern literary establishment. His friends told him that if he didn't watch out, he'd end up writing sonnets about Greek gods when he should be writing poems about the old immigrant
women who swept the downtown offices at night. "Thanks to them," says Simic, "I failed in my overwhelming desire to become a phony" (FIS 83).

In 1958, Simic moved to New York, where he worked odd jobs, continued to paint and write poetry, and spent countless hours haunting bookstores and the New York Public Library reading everything he could get his hands on – Emily Dickinson, Borges and Neruda, Williams, Eliot, folk tales, writings from obscure religious sects, Theodore Roethke, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Yugoslav poets Vasko Popa and Ivan Lalic (both of whom he would later translate into English), Sappho, Robert Bly, Isaac Babel. And this is only a partial list. When asked in interviews which writers he considers influential to his work, Simic is as likely to say Heidegger or the writings of the Christian mystics as he is to finger William Carlos Williams. He also frequently cites influences outside the realm of literature. He credits jazz music as having had an enormous impact on his work, and lists the painters, specifically the abstract expressionists, as having had more to say to him about poetry in the fifties and sixties than did the literary magazines of the time. He even names the city itself as an important influence on his work. "My greatest teachers, in both art and literature," he says, "were the streets I roamed" (FIS 80).

The itinerant nature of Simic's experience as a displaced person and then as an immigrant, played a decisive role in his developing poetics, which remained open to a multiplicity of influences. He was well aware of the built-in hybridity of his immigrant experience and the ways in which it precluded him from embracing a singular aesthetic. When the notion of a stable self is so fractured by the forces of history, one knows enough not to hang one's hat on any one thing. Simic says it best in his memoir, with his characteristic grim irony:
Immigration, exile, being uprooted and made a pariah, may be yet the most effective way devised to impress on an individual the arbitrary nature of his or her own existence.... Being rattled around in freight trains, open trucks, and ratty ocean liners, we ended up being a puzzle even to ourselves. At first, that was hard to take; then we got used to the idea. We began to savor it, to enjoy it. (FIS 4)

One anecdote from around this time perfectly illustrates Simic's immigrant experience in all its difficulties and absurdities, as well as points to why these concerns had to find their way into his work. He was eating with his uncle Boris at a restaurant in New York when a nice, silver-haired old lady leaned over from the next table and asked where they were from. She didn't recognize the language they were speaking. Simic's uncle told the woman that they were the last two remaining members of a white African tribe speaking a now nearly extinct language. The woman, utterly confused, muttered something about not knowing there were native white African tribes. "'The best-kept secret in the world,' Boris whispered to her and nodded solemnly, while she rushed back to tell her friends." Simic remarks that this kind of event was par for the course. "It was part of being an immigrant and living in many worlds at the same time, some of which were imaginary. After what we had been through, the wildest lies seemed plausible. The poems that I was going to write had to take that into account" (FIS 117).

That Simic lived, and continues to live, in these many worlds simultaneously, that he knows himself to be "already many things," makes the critical task of situating him within contemporary poetics a complex one. Here is a writer with a genealogy of influence that defies categorization, who calls himself and is regarded as an American poet, yet whose formative experiences are of wartime Eastern Europe. The inherent complexities of discussing Simic's poetry have translated into few extended studies of his
work, though the critical reception has generally been positive since the appearance of his first collection over thirty-five years ago.

What the Critics Say

When Simic's first books of poetry appeared in the late 1960's, critics weren't sure what to make of this new and distinctive voice. Diane Wakoski, in a brief review for *Poetry* magazine, said this of his second collection, *Somewhere Among Us a Stone Is Taking Notes*, published by Kayak Press in 1969:

I have not yet decided whether Charles Simic is America's greatest living surrealist poet, a children's writer, a religious writer, or simple-minded. My decision in this matter is irrelevant actually because, whatever he is, his poetry is cryptic and fascinating. (14)

Simic's early work, which critics now describe as the period of his "object poems," garnered attention for its originality, but like Wakoski, many critics weren't sure of how to situate his work or even how to articulate their responses to poems such as "Fork," from the 1969 collection:

This strange thing must have crept
Right out of hell.
It resembles a bird's foot
Worn around the cannibal's neck.

As you hold it in your hand,
As you stab with it into a piece of meat,
It is possible to imagine the rest of the bird:
Its head which like your fist
Is large, bald, beakless and blind. (SP 34)
Critic Robert Shaw, writing in the mid-1970's for the *New Republic*, remarks that describing these early poems "is about as easy as picking up blobs of mercury with mittens on" (142). The early poems, with their unrelenting insistence on often singular images and the making strange of such familiar objects as forks and shoes, eventually earned Simic the label of surrealist. His work in the sixties and seventies was discussed largely in this vein, but as Simic continued to publish new volumes and as critics grew more attuned to his developing poetic project, articles and reviews surrounding his work began to take into account other elements that would come to be enduring preoccupations for Simic: silence, uncertainty, religious searching, and distance. Victor Contoski, in an article appearing in *Modern Poetry Studies*, gives a perceptive reading of the title poem (reproduced below) from Simic's 1971 collection *Dismantling the Silence*.

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

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

It is now completely dark.
Slowly and with patience
Feel its heart. You will need to haul
A heavy chest of drawers
Into its emptiness
To make it creak
On its wheel. (SP 31)
"The reader, having dismantled the silence," writes Contoski, "gets to the heart of the mystery – but he or she finds emptiness, almost. He is left with the problem of mortal man trying to understand immortal things" (17). Not only does Contoski articulate the poem's engagement with the absolute and the uncertainty with which the poem leaves its readers, but he also tackles the question of the ostensibly speakerless scene. "The speaker of the poems seems to stand far off ... as if he were not only not of this world but not of this universe. Can such a speaker really see the same things we do when he looks at our lives? Moreover ... looking at life through such a distance (of time as well as space), ignores many of the usual requirements of poetry" (17). It is this distance, Contoski argues, that gives rise to Simic's spare style – the concentration of language, the lack of transitions to help the reader along, a music he describes as "a dull, thumping rhythm" characterized by "direct declarative sentences, the way one talks to a foreigner who understands little English" (19). Simic's poetry, says Contoski, "is a poetry of bricks, not putty" (17).

The stripped-down style of Simic's work has been a focus for other critics as well. Some have called him a minimalist while others point to the short declarative sentences as evidence of Simic's debt to folklore and fable. Christopher Buckley, in his study of The World Doesn't End, goes so far as to assert Simic's "essential poetic roots" as "the European or Eastern European folk tale" (96).

Bruce Weigl, who in 1996 put together the first and only collection of critical essays surrounding Simic's work, remarks with some incredulity in his introduction that
there are virtually no extended studies of the poet's work to date, but suggests that Simic's style may have something to do with this.

Simic is one of our most popular American poets, whose growing body of work continues to attract new readers, yet critics have shied away from his poetry. The reasons for this reluctance are not so mysterious. Those who try to teach or write about Simic's poetry quickly realize that they must first deal with a language that has been pared to a primal minimum. (1)

It is ironic, then, and a testament to Simic's stylistic hybridity, that when a new version of *White* appeared in 1980, his work was described as Whitmanesque. Critic Peter Schmidt, who calls *White* "the book in which [Simic] most determinedly considers his American poetic origins" (23), sees the book-length sequence as Simic's way of "returning to a powerful earlier influence, Walt Whitman" (23). The sustained nature of the inquiry and the invocatory aspect of the poems do, in fact, reveal a debt to Whitman and, further, to the lyric project itself. Schmidt calls the book an ur-lyric, that is, a sequence "about the painful birth of the lyric" (48), a point perhaps most apparent in the following poem from that collection:

```
We haven't gone far...
Fear lives there too.

Five ears of my fingertips
Against the white page.

What do you hear?
We hear holy nothing

Blindfolding itself.
It touched you once, twice,

And tore like a stitch
Out of a new wound. (SP 93)
```
The invocations to silence that characterize *White* find further articulation, and in a way that invites a more human presence into the work, with the integration of mythic personae, found in the poems of *Charon's Cosmology*. Whether mythic or actual, Simic's work in the 1970's and 80's came to admit human beings into the poems, a change that critic Robert Shaw described as "a healthy development" (145). This shift gave Simic's work a more recognizable political dimension, as the people who came to inhabit his poems were those on whom the 20th century, in all its atrocities, had left an indelible mark: widows, orphans, lunatics, beggars, and refugees. Simic's engagement with historical and autobiographical material – always an element in his work but more tangible in the poems of the last fifteen years – seems to have helped critics recontextualize the role of surrealism in his poetry. Benjamin Paloff, in a recent issue of the *Boston Review*, said this in his review of Simic's most recent collected poems, *The Voice at 3:00 A.M.*:

...like so many writers of his caliber, Simic has accumulated a set of journalistic clichés that attempt to assimilate his work. Words like "inimitable," "surreal," and "nightmarish" have followed him around in countless reviews and articles, and the first thing that *The Voice at 3:00 A.M.* reveals to us – if we look to these milestone collections to show us an arc that their constituent volumes cannot – is that only the last of these terms, "nightmarish," really continues to hold true for Simic's poems. This observation is quite a bit more unsettling than it initially may seem: the world delineated in Simic's poems is nightmarish, but it is not surreal – it is our own world brought to ruin by our bizarrely human whims. If our world seems unfamiliar in his writing, it may be because most American readers cannot easily relate to the experiences that have shaped Simic's vision. (56)

Simic's work has not let go of its surrealist practices, but Paloff and other critics have softened their terms (some now call him a semi-surrealist) because they recognize that these elements in Simic's poetry are not put into practice for surrealist aims but rather in service to realism. Thomas Lux, for instance, describes the voice of Simic's more recent
work as "characterized by, among other things, almost relentless concrete imagery and metaphor" (114) but does not, like earlier critics, suggest that this makes him a surrealist. Lux posits that the imagery, though relentless and often surreal, is "less wrenched, less arbitrary than [in] hard-core surrealism" (114). Helen Vendler, who has closely followed Simic's career, is perhaps the most perspicacious of all the critics in her assessment of his poetics. She calls Simic a "master of the mixed style" (120), alluding to the many poetic worlds that he inhabits, while also identifying him as "the best political poet ... on the American scene" (132), and finally, pointing to the essentially religious or metaphysical nature of his poetry.

Resituating Simic in Contemporary Poetics

How then to contextualize a writer with such a multiplicity of influences and variety of stylistic modes, and whose body of work critics have tended to shy away from as a subject of sustained engagement? Listening to Charles Simic's own words on the matter is a useful way to begin.

Simic considers himself an American poet and his poetry American-born. While his artistic sensibility may owe much to his Eastern European roots and his experiences in Yugoslavia, the fact remains that Simic came to poetry within the English language and while living in this country. He routinely reminds interviewers, when they ask what his poetry may owe to his native Serbian language, that his first poems were in fact written in English. "I was never at any point capable of writing a poem in Serbian. By the time I started writing poetry in high school all my serious reading had been in English and
American literature" (UC 72). As for being labeled an American poet, Simic had this to say in a 1972 interview with Crazyhorse: "Shall I be labeled 'American'? I don't see how it could be avoided. I proceed from a particular experience in this time and place. My landlord bugs me and I tell him to go and fuck himself – in English" (UC 8).

If we follow Simic's lead in considering his particular experience "in this time and place," we encounter a writer emerging onto the American literary scene in the 1960's and 70's, at the same time writers like Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov were publishing work and coming into prominence. By virtue of time and place, then, as well as in keeping with the poet's own thoughts on the matter, Simic can be contextualized as an American postmodern poet working within the dynamic set of concerns that were shaping the new directions of poetry at that time.

A useful critical text through which to discuss Simic's work in this way is Charles Altieri's seminal work on American postmodern poetry, Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960's. Altieri sets out to explain the logic and implications of the "aesthetics of presence that dominates much of the self-consciously postmodern poetry written in the 1960's" (9), arguing that anthologies of the time placed undue emphasis on the avant-garde. Taking a broader approach to the poetry of that time, Altieri maps the project of the postmodern poets to "invent a coherent philosophical poetics able to stand as an alternative to the high Modernism of Yeats and Eliot" (16). Studying individual poets emerging onto the American scene in the 1960's, Altieri traces the movement of poetic rebellion through its aversion to using mythic materials, the development of the personal and confessional voice, attempts to capture "direct" speech, and characterizes the movement as a whole as "above all ... denying the authority of
tradition and the balancing meditative mind while exploring directly sacramental aspects of secular experience" (15).

Interestingly, Altieri locates his discussion within the larger context of English Romanticism, setting up the opposition between Modernist and Postmodern poetry as a corollary to the conflict between Coleridge's essentially symbolist poetic and Wordsworth's immanentist poetic. In short, Altieri describes Coleridge's project, and by extension that of the Modernists, as having a central commitment to an "ideal human order," while Wordsworth and the postmoderns share a poetics more concerned with the discovering and recovering of "numinous relationships within nature" in order to invigorate the mind (17). Thus, Altieri gives American postmodern poetics and its immanentist aesthetic an essentially Wordsworthian genealogy.

But the Romantic framework that Altieri sets up serves a further purpose as well. The Romantics, he explains, created the very possibility of a poetic revolution by making truth claims for poetry, making "poetics inseparable from questions of epistemology and of value" (29). This paves the way for the essentially philosophical questionings at work in American postmodern poetics, and in fact, Altieri argues, the poetry of that time might be viewed as "central [to] an understanding of the spiritual history of the age, if one recognizes its affinities with changes in the philosophical climate taking place during the 50's and 60's" (21). Altieri draws parallels, for instance, between the attitudes the postmodern poets were taking toward immanence and the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein. These attitudes toward immanence Altieri groups into three basic categories: the poetics of radical presence, in which Bly's Deep Image poetry, the syntactical play and objectivist aims of Olson's work, and O'Hara's "impure poetry" are
grouped; what Altieri calls the "religious conscience" of the poetry of that time, evidenced by Snyder and Duncan's dwelling in the Edenic possibilities of the postmodern imagination; and the attempts to find more secular states of mind where "analogues to the religious vision is possible" (19), which, in the work W.S. Merwin and Robert Creeley, push the poetry into a struggle with absence.

Though Simic's work is nowhere discussed in the book, it certainly could have formed the basis of a chapter in Altieri's study. That he is left out of the study is not surprising, given critics' tendencies to label Simic a surrealist in the early going (and thus locating him within the avant-garde that Altieri is quick to point out may have masked some of the other important developments of 1960's postmodern poetry). But Simic, to my mind, represents a distinct place on the map that Altieri charts of the various routes that the aesthetics of presence and immanence took and would come to take. I would argue that Simic works, as much as any of the other poets do, within the context of the immanentist tradition. His focus on the here and now, and on the world of objects, puts him in conversation with Bly's deep image poems and within the framework of the aesthetics of presence that mark all the writers in Altieri's study. But Simic's particular poetic project limns its own territory. His engagement with the world of objects and his particular brand of metaphysical inquiry allow us to resituate his work as forming a unique branch of the immanentist tradition within American postmodern poetics. While Bly's approach toward immanence and the image has left some critics unable to buy into a poetic that requires constant moments of "privileged experience" on the part of a rather "strident speaker" (Altieri 91), Simic's brand of the "here and now" often contains a skeptical voice, distance on the part of the speaker, and moments of the surreal and
fantastical that make his approach to immanence distinctive, and as a result has kept the
criticism that has followed Bly's work at bay. At the same time, Simic's work engages in
metaphysical inquiries that push his work toward encounters with absence reminiscent of
Merwin and Creeley, but again, Simic charts his own territory here. His brand of
metaphysics is characterized by what I call an "affirmative absence," that longing for the
absolute undeterred, and in a strange way made hopeful, by the silence found on the other
end. Simic, in fact, often locates his metaphysical inquiries within the objects of the here
and now, while imbuing those same objects with the weight of history and personal
experience as well. Simic's distinctive poetics thus complicates the traditional split
between an immanentist aesthetic and a symbolist or transcendent aesthetic.

Walter Pater, in criticizing the "romantic elements" of Coleridge's poems, wrote
that "one day, perhaps, we may come to forget the distant horizon, with full knowledge of
the situation, to be content with 'what is here and now'" (cited in Murphin 353). Pater
would be pleased that Williams, along with a host of others, fulfilled this wish. Simic, it
seems, has his eye trained on both horizons in a way that is entirely his own. His
investigations into the mundane objects of everyday life point paradoxically to the
beyond, linking him with the romantic tradition of the lyric even as they situate him
firmly within the framework of an immanentist American postmodern poetics.
CHAPTER 2
THE IMMANENT BEYOND: OBJECTS IN THE WORLD DOESN'T END

To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy.
– Martin Heidegger ("What Are Poets For?" 94)

A Formal Invitation

Simic begins his 1989 collection The World Doesn't End with the following epigraph from jazz great Fats Waller: "Let's waltz the rumba." This opening text may remind us that Simic is influenced by jazz music, but it also alerts readers that the world they are about to enter is one of disjunction, juxtapositions, humor, and an uncertain and shifting relationship between reality and the imagination.

The epigraph also serves, however, as a formal invitation; that is, an invitation to the book's very form, the prose poem. Christopher Buckley makes note of this in his essay on the book:

... the line from Waller is purposeful. Simic is signalizing us how he intends this book of poems to be read; he is describing the texture and technique for this collection.... He's saying, 'Let's do it a little differently now, jazz it up, change the face a bit, show some different moves; let's adjust the look and feel, the texture; let's explore this artifice, but let's keep the rhythm, the soul, the nostalgia and imagination – so better to reveal the world – but nevertheless, let's dance. (96)

The seeming impossibility of performing one type of dance to a different type of music is indeed a fitting metaphor for the literary equivalent of writing poetry within the form of prose. It is this inherent modal duplicity of the prose poem that Simic is both signaling
and celebrating with the Waller epigraph. Buckley's riff on what Simic may be "saying" with the opening text seems apt, and perhaps the list would have room for one more item that I think Simic means, through the epigraph, to tell his readers: "Let's prose the poetry."

The opening word "let's" enhances the feeling of readerly invitation through its use of the hortatory imperative, a playful but nonetheless invocatory mode, and the placing — through the understood "us" — of the writer and reader in a similar position, or perhaps even as partners for the dance. Thus, Simic can be seen as beginning his text by invoking the reader to quite literally join with the author in the creation of the upcoming verbal dance that will be the poems. That Simic's poems are often hermetic or cryptic, leaving questions unanswered, makes this invocation to the reader especially significant. He may, in fact, be asking the reader to become as much of a partner in the meaning-making of the poems as the author himself is. The "let's" also calls to mind the opening line of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which begins, "Let us go then, you and I," a memorable invocation that Eliot repeats throughout the first stanza in order to draw his reader into relationship with the poem and its speaker. It is fitting here that the readers of The World Doesn't End enter the text as part of an "us"; careful readers will appreciate that Simic begins here, as the book very quickly moves into territories in which it is quite easy to feel very alone.
First Poem & Lasting Ideas

*The World Doesn't End* represents, to my mind, a successful marriage of many of Simic's lifelong poetic preoccupations: history, metaphysics, objects, absence, and silence. Critics have characterized the text as Simic's most autobiographical to date, and I would concur. The book is divided into three parts, with most of the poems untitled. The few poems that do contain titles tend to fall at the close of each section, forming a coda of sorts for each part of the text. In the first part of the book, Simic confronts the real and imagined landscapes of his childhood experiences in Yugoslavia and his family's subsequent immigration to the U.S., all inextricably tied to the realities of the Second World War. Parts II and III maintain the interest and engagement with history, but from a more distant perspective. The poems in these latter sections include a more philosophical strain as well, and accordingly take up the larger question(s) of identity.

Simic's investigations into objects, which comprise such a significant part of his poetics, are in evidence in this text as in all the others, and it is a testament to the development of his talents that this preoccupation is now worked so seamlessly into and within his other areas of sustained inquiry that any discussion of one necessitates an engagement with the entire matrix of concerns that shape his poetic vision. Before delving into an extended discussion of these issues as they emerge in *The World Doesn't End* — and this chapter will concern itself with the two vectors of most interest to this study: the immanent and transcendent aspects of Simic's objects — it is useful to begin

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3 This titling scheme is not a hard and fast rule within the book. Part I contains the titled poem "I Played in the Smallest Theatres," which appears six poems before the ending (titled) poem of the section; Part III also contains one additional titled poem, "M.," which opens the last section of the book.
with the first poem, in which Simic does much to set the tone, invite his readers into the
text, and lay out many of the crucial ideas that will develop during the course of the book.

The poem that opens *The World Doesn't End* is characteristic of other pieces in
the collection in many regards — its use of surreal images, its reportorial and "objective"
tone, and its short, declarative sentences. But *The World Doesn't End* is more than an
assemblage of compositions with shared characteristics. Rather, it is a text that opens
itself to interpretation as a whole. Thus, the very first poem serves as the reader's
initiation into the materials that will come to be crucial to the book.

My mother was a braid of black smoke.
She bore me swaddled over the burning cities.
The sky was a vast and windy place for a child to play.
We met many others who were just like us.
They were trying to put on their overcoats with arms made of smoke.
The high heavens were full of little shrunken deaf ears instead of stars. (3)

Simic's engagement with history — both the personal and the political — that characterizes
the book as a whole is in evidence in the first line of this poem, where the reader is asked
to envision the speaker's mother as "a braid of black smoke." This memorable image
suggests the intertwining of lives within a family, the ineffable and unreachable quality of
someone as close as one's own mother, and at the same time calls to mind the horrors of
the war — the black smoke of burning cities and the ashes rising into the sky from the
crematoriums. This juxtaposition of the sweet and familial imagery of the braid with the
dark connotations of the black smoke recalls the "black milk of daybreak" in Paul Celan's
"Death Fugue," a poem that goes on to quite explicitly deal with the horrors of the
Holocaust. History looms large in Simic's work as well, as evidenced here in the poem's
first line and in the piece as a whole, with its references to burning cities and the "many
others" in exile (the inherent wandering and transient quality of smoke lending itself to this reading as well), but nowhere in this poem or in countless others in *The World Doesn't End* are the specifics of World War II directly referenced; Simic instead approaches this material obliquely. This is classic Simic, giving us a poetics of witness – and the entire text speaks eloquently of those killed or displaced by World War II – that through abstraction of the particulars and the making surreal of imagery reads less like confession than a kind of mythic or universal tale.

I think it is especially clear in this first poem, too, that the imaginative and surreal qualities of Simic's work function in order to communicate a greater emotional realism. It could be argued that the ghostly image of those killed or displaced "trying to put on their overcoats with arms made of smoke" provides a witness of more emotional accuracy than a "strict" or what would more readily be called "confessional" account would. Further, Simic's foregrounding of imagination and vision in his poems serves as a testament to the powers of the imagination and the endurance of the human spirit in the face of atrocity. Simic's poetics then, on a number of levels, engage and foreground the imaginative not as a way of escaping reality, but rather as a way of expressing a more subtle and memorable version of the real.

From this first poem, one of the book's enduring concerns – the weight of history on individual experience – is already clear. This concern with historical realities joined with Simic's visionary imagery gives his work a kind of heft that works in tension with the apparently simplistic grammar and spare diction. The opening poem, like many others in the collection, works on one level as a compressed narrative, a story told in simple straightforward sentences, while on another level it maintains a lyric intensity and
movement through the use of imagery. It is this tension between lyric and narrative that
the prose poem is so uniquely positioned to enact, and which Simic uses in his work to
full effect.

The poem’s closing line is emblematic of one of the most important tropes of the
book, one that will serve as a focus for this study: the longing for something of the
absolute and an encounter, through objects, with a kind of affirmative absence. The "high
heavens" in which Simic leaves his readers at the close of this first poem signal a longing
on the part of the speaker for the beyond, but what the speaker encounters is far from
what one would expect. In the world of Simic's poems, the longing for the absolute often
leads to an encounter with objects, and in turn these objects lead the speaker into an
encounter with silence and absence, which I would nonetheless characterize as
affirmative.

Simic's "high heavens" are filled with the surprising and surprisingly moving
image of "little shrunken deaf ears instead of stars," things that through diminishment,
disfigurement, displacement, and distance cannot hear our human call, but which
nonetheless seem to have or have had the capacity to do so. The ears may be too small,
deaf, and far away to hear us, but there is a kind of hope in Simic's very choice of the
word "ears," in the very longing to find something rather than nothing; for as much as
this poem and many others seem to posit the death of God, there is also an affirmation
that the absence is not a complete one, that there is a listener, even if the calls go
unanswered or even unheard.
The Immanence of Objects

Like all of Simic's oeuvre, *The World Doesn't End* is marked by an attention to objects, making evident the poet's immanentist poetics. Simic says of his own writing process that "everything begins with the rock-bottom reality, which is the reality in front of my nose. The table, the teacup – for me, writing always has to begin with something concrete – and ideas come out of that later" (Ratiner 83). *The World Doesn't End* is, in fact, populated by the concrete world: teacups, stones, shoes, glass paperweights, countless windows, and broken toys all share the stage, and in fact often upstage, the human presences that attend the poems.

The nature of the objects that inhabit the book as well as the level of focus with which they are addressed varies greatly. There are poems possessed by singular images or objects, such as "History Lesson," which ends Part I:

> The roaches look like
> Comic rustics
> In serious dramas. (21)

Other poems maintain the exclusive object focus, but allow more than one object into the field of the poem, thus highlighting the inter-object interactions, as in, "I Played in the Smallest Theatres":

> Bits of infernal gravel
> On the window sill
> Surrounding a solitary
> White bread crumb. (16)

Numerous poems in the collection that take as their focus a singular object also contain human presence, dialogue, and other narrative elements, which complicate and expand the object's role in the poem. "It's a Store..." centers around antique porcelain, "Police
Dogs..." is ostensibly a tableau about dogs dressed as children, and in "Everybody knows the..." readers are offered as the object of focus a pair of black shoes (10).

Not every poem in the book takes the world of objects as its primary focus, however. While many of the aforementioned poems could be characterized in some sense as "object poems," Simic's mixed style and eclectic poetics, in _The World Doesn't End_, disallows such easy classification. The book includes poems that take on a strong meditative tone, explicitly addressing metaphysical questions, as well as poems that read more like aphoristic vignettes than anything else. But even in the pieces that seem to break from a primary attention to the physical world, objects often play a crucial role; as I will discuss later in this chapter, the recurrence of windows throughout the book provides a narrative of sorts to the metaphysical concerns of the text as a whole. The poem "Lover of endless...," for instance, does not rest its gaze on a single object in the way that the above poems do, but its depiction of a train station master's window will come to play an important role in our understanding of the metaphysical inquiries that inhere within the text.

**Objects of Poverty & The Poverty of Objects**

Simic's objects do not often come to us whole. Like the "little shrunken deaf ears" that appear in the book's opening poem, the objects in _The World Doesn't End_ are often marked by diminishment, disfigurement, displacement, and distance. Instead of boulders, stones appear as "bits of infernal gravel" (16). Food appears as "a solitary/White bread crumb" (16), "a pigfoot which isn't there" (4), a breakfast of "eye-fooling painted grapes"
(70), or a "still empty" plate set before the speaker (72). Clothing, too, is marked by these conditions; shirts on clotheslines raise their "empty sleeves" (12), Hermes appears in a mailman's coat that is "in tatters," wearing a hat shot through with "bullet holes" (14), and a little girl on a New York rooftop has "a hole in her black stocking, big toe showing" (32). Hermes' stick that closes the eyes of the dying appears in the book "look[ing] gnawed" (14).

Unpacking the characteristics of the objects within Simic's poems is often complicated by the ways in which one condition will often inform or lead to another. For instance, in "I Played in the Smallest Theatres," the bits of infernal gravel, which already give readers a sense of displacement and diminishment, cause the solitary bread crumb its displacement by surrounding it on a windowsill. In many of the poems in The World Doesn't End, all the aforementioned elements can be found, as in this poem that opens Part II of the book. Here, all the elements are visible within a single object:

The hundred-year-old china doll's head the sea washes up on its gray beach. One would like to know the story. One would like to make it up, make up many stories. It's been so long in the sea, the eyes and nose have been erased, its faint smile is even fainter. With the night coming, one would like to see oneself walking the empty beach and bending down to it. (25)

The doll's head, which remains the ostensible focus throughout the entire poem, is recognizably diminished and displaced on its very first reference – diminished in that it lacks the rest of the doll, and displaced in that, having washed up on a beach, it is divorced from its original use and place. The sense of dislocation is furthered by the fact that the doll's head is one-hundred years old and has been in the sea for a long, if undisclosed, period of time. As the poem continues, the object is further shown to be diminished and disfigured, as the features of the face are described: the eyes and nose
erased, and a faint smile that has become even fainter. Finally, the object takes on a certain distance in that the speaker "would like to know the story" but seems to lack access to even the imagination's ability to provide one ("one would like to ... make up many stories"). The object remains at a physical distance from the speaker as well. The doll's head, which is so carefully described throughout the poem, is never made consummate by touch. The poem closes with the speaker, a distant if not fully absent "one," hypothetically walking the beach and "bending down to it," an action which takes the distance created by the grammar even further by suggesting that the speaker may not ever try to physically touch or even reach toward the object.

Why Simic's objects come to us in this condition raises the deepest questions about his poetics, metaphysics, and personal history, and help to define the unique place that his poetry carves within the immanentist tradition. One interpretation, and one that Simic himself posits, is that the objects in his poems are ones of experience, and as such, are objects of poverty and war.

Just as the people who inhabit Simic's poems are those on whom the atrocities of the 20th century left their mark – and *The World Doesn't End* is peopled by widows, blind men, people on crutches, and "solitary men and women floating above the dark tree tops" (12) – the objects in Simic's poems, by engaging the very personal materials of his wartime experiences, provide a kind of witness in and of themselves. Objects too can take on the marks of history, the toys broken or improvised, food and clothing scarce or nonexistent.⁴

⁴ That Simic's objects may emerge on the page from acts of memory make them no less immanentist; as Maurice-Jean LeFèbre points out in his "L'Image Fascinante et Le Surreal," the image is never a present reality, but the making present in the mind of what is absent in perception; it is this condition, he argues, that makes images so fascinating to readers and enables
For Simic, these were some of his primary experiences with the world of objects, and as his memoir *A Fly in the Soup* attests, by the time Simic experienced certain objects as a child, they were already disfigured or otherwise scarred by war. He recounts this memory of the building across the street, which was hit by a German bomb when he was just three years old:

Our wartime equivalent of jungle gyms, slides, tree houses, forts, and mazes were to be found in that ruin across the street. There was a part of the staircase left. We would climb up between the debris, and all of a sudden there would be the sky! One small boy fell on his head and was never the same again. Our mothers forbade us to go near that ruin; they threatened us, tried to explain the many perils awaiting us, and still we went. (FIS 9, 10)

And in a recent interview, Simic recounts this early experience with toys:

You might have a few banged up toys, but nobody's buying you toys in wartime. So whatever is there.... There's a cup - I remember, as a little kid, going [he makes an engine noise as he moves his teacup across the table]. Turn it on its side, it becomes a tank.... You're constantly looking for something to play with, an old crack on the table, in the wood, and you say, 'It looks like this or that.' ... So everything becomes transformed in your mind into a toy. (Ratiner 84)

The ability of the mind to transform one object into another was also a requirement of survival during the war. Simic recalls that in 1948, his family bartered their possessions for food. "You could get a chicken for a good pair of men's shoes. Our clocks, silverware, crystal vases, and fancy china were exchanged for bacon, lard, sausages, and such things. Once an old Gypsy wanted my father's top hat. It didn't even fit him. With that hat way down over his eyes, he handed over a live duck" (FIS 5). It wasn't just the adults that employed the barter system within the shattered Yugoslavian economy. Simic recalls that he and the other children from the neighborhood "had stashes them to "project an infinite mystery" (cited in Altieri 91); in a different vein, see Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* for a creative exegesis of the limitations of language for providing definitive representations of objects.
of ammunition, which we collected during the street fighting.... We traded gunpowder for old comic books, toys, cans of food, and God knows what else" (FIS 21).

Objects in Simic's poems can often be traced to these kinds of wartime experiences, sometimes with an eerie specificity. The following pieces provide such an example; the first is an account in Simic's memoir of his recollections of the bombing of Belgrade; the poem is from Simic's 1977 collection, Charon's Cosmology.

For days on end I did nothing but stay in my room playing. I remember lying on the floor eye to eye with one of my toy soldiers or watching flies walk across the ceiling. Except for these few scattered images, I have no idea what I thought, what I felt. (FIS 16)

"A Wall"

That's the only image
That turns up.

A wall all by itself,
Poorly lit, beckoning,
But no sense of the room,
Not even a hint
Of why it is I remember
So little and so clearly:

The fly I was watching,
The details of its wings
Glowing like turquoise.
Its feet, to my amusement
Following a minute crack –
An eternity
Around that simple event.

And nothing else, and nowhere
To go back to;
And no one else
As far as I know to verify. (CC 28)
The poetics of experience and witness that Simic offers us through these objects, are to critic Daniel Morris' mind, also reenactments of what must have been Simic's attempts as a child to "resist trauma through displacement" (346). Seen in this light, Simic's use of objects in his poems may, in some sense, represent recuperative acts, attempts to reenact those scenes from childhood in which war and poverty were unavoidable, in order to reinscribe them with meaning and form, made possible by Simic's current position of relative safety. Morris asserts that Simic's attention as a child to a limited number of objects represented for the young Simic a "theater of self-preservation" (347).

This reading, which expands our notion of the ways in which objects may play a role in Simic's work, allows us to locate in Simic's poems a celebration of the powers of imagination, and adds depth to poems such as "Everyone knows the..." in which "my grandfather" and Dr. Freud are coveting the same pair of shoes. Even Freud, the poem suggests, would be subject to the same covetous emotional displacements onto objects, if left to walk the streets of war-torn Belgrade.

Morris' reading, published in 1998, is given further credence by Simic himself, in an interview conducted in 2002. Critics have tended not to ask Simic about objects as a topic of his sustained engagement, and thus this quote, in which he explicitly theorizes his use of objects within poems, is to my knowledge, the only one of its kind. During the course of a discussion in which Simic asserts that his poetry is, in fact, concerned with and generated from experience, he goes on to say:

5 Morris makes this assertion in an article addressing a particular poem from Dime-Store Alchemy, but it is one of the few critical texts that theorizes Simic's more current attention to objects and is therefore relevant within this context.
I think of my family – my mother, my brother, and I – and our experience during the war. When you're being bombed and you live in a place where there's not much to eat, one lives in a kind of solitary confinement. You run across the street, buy some bread, run back, looking over your shoulder. Inside your room, there's not much. You keep seeing the same things over and over – the same walls, the same chair. It's a kind of minimalist art. In wartime, there is still a further reduction. Everybody sleeps in the same room. It's cold, so you keep your overcoats on all the time. You've got your little corner, your little nook. That's the only explanation that's occurred to me over the years as a cause for my predisposition, my attention to physical objects and space. (Ratiner 84)

This limited range of objects, these "reduction[s]" as Simic calls them, open up a further avenue of interpretation into Simic's use of objects. The "things" in Simic's poems may come from experiences of poverty and war, thus representing objects of poverty, but Simic's ascetic style in which a limited number of images and objects recur across poems may enact a kind of poverty within the poems themselves. Critics have made much of Simic's stripped-down style throughout his career, the spare diction and simple syntax, but the objects that inhabit his poems are of a similar limited range, giving readers a world of deprivation and scarcity, a poverty of objects.

Critic Helen Vendler makes note of what she calls Simic's circumscribed view in her reading of his book *Hotel Insomnia*, and suggests, in keeping with both Morris' reading and that of the poet himself, that Simic's fundamental experience of the war made him "destined to immortalize himself by finding a form that reproduced it exactly" (121). Vendler sees Simic's poems in that book as chess games in which a limited number of objects are moved into various configurations. These "stylistic arrangements of experience," she argues, suggest that Simic's "tragic memory has at least found its appropriate architectural form" (128).
That Simic's poems revisit and recast certain images or objects time and again produces a richness of its own. Vendler admits that after reading the sixty-six pages of *Hotel Insomnia*, in which words are heard "chiming with and against each other, one has a comprehensive picture of the mind in which they keep tolling" (127). A similar statement could be made of *The World Doesn't End*, in which windows, clouds, and sky, for example, recur with astonishing frequency. Vendler's interest in Simic's circumscribed poetic world leads her to go so far as to create an "epistemological master list" of the poet's most repeated words, which at the very least confirms Simic's sustained interest in a limited range of objects.\(^6\)

Marked as they are by this double poverty and by the poet's telltale signs—distance, diminishment, disfigurement, and displacement—Simic's objects map an aesthetics of presence that we can read as having deep historical and psychological roots, which speak to personal experience at the same time as they engage larger historical realities. And Simic makes certain that his poetics of witness does not fall prey to solipsism, but rather engages in personal materials in order to illuminate larger stories. His poem "Frightening Toys," for instance, begins: "History practicing its scissor-clips/In the dark,/So everything comes out in the end/Missing an arm or a leg" (TVA 33).

That Simic is able to work within a poetics of immanence in which the very materials of the poems engage questions of history, establishes a new location on the map that Altieri draws of significant postmodern poets working within the immanentist

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\(^6\) Vendler's list, upon close examination, strikes me as oddly random for one purporting to group words epistemologically. For instance, "afternoon" falls into her category of "closure" while "morning" is listed under "nature." The "sub-human" category only contains animals, while objects like "toy," "door," "mirror," and "coat" fall under the category of "home." As interesting as it is to map these recurring words into some kind of master list, I think Vendler fails to interrogate her own interpretive strategies for devising the epistemological headings under which the words are grouped, and the list is thus an only nominally useful tool for interpretation.
aesthetic. Altieri bemoans the fact that although postmodern poetry seems eminently capable of taking up philosophical questions, it "fails so miserably in handling social or ethical issues" (226). He points out that Levertov, for instance, attempts to join an immanentist aesthetic with a social ethic, but that her poetry ultimately lacks authority, becomes programmatic, overly discursive, and leads to a kind of "quiescent passivity" (237) in the face of historical and social forces. Simic seems to have found a unique way to do what Levertov couldn't – taking the political into the work in the poem's very materials without allowing the poetry to become didactic. The crumbs, the broken and frightening toys, and the tattered overcoats in Simic's poems, speak to us, albeit quietly and with a curious kind of witness, about the realities and the effects of war. It is Vendler who most fully recognizes the import of Simic's engagement with history. "[Simic] is certainly the best political poet, in a large sense, on the American scene; his written emblems outclass, in their stylishness, the heavy-handedness of most social poetry, while remaining more terrifying in their human implications than explicit political documentation" (132).

Absolute Paradox: Simic and Metaphysics

It is paradoxical that Simic's attention to objects, which situate his work within an aesthetics of presence, are also frequent sites of inquiry into absence, distance, and the silence of the beyond. While Simic often begins his poems planted in the "rock-bottom reality," as he says, of the here and now, the objects in Simic's work often function as sites for ontological and metaphysical inquiry, linking his immanentist aesthetics of
Simic has voiced his enduring interest in philosophy and metaphysics both in interviews and sometimes even within poems themselves (The World Doesn't End is home to brief appearances by Nietzsche, Socrates, and the new Chaldeans). But when asked whether or not philosophy is a generative force for his poems, Simic has this to say:

I don't trust thinking that has no basis in some particular reality. In that respect, I'm an heir to that empirical tradition in American poetry that goes back to Emerson and which includes such dissimilar poets as Frost, Stevens, and W.C. Williams. My readings in philosophy come down to being alert to ideas lurking within a given experience. Once I have my foot in something concrete, I have no objection to speculating about its ramifications. (Hulse 58)

The objects of the concrete world in which Simic's poems are firmly planted frequently become the speculative sites within which these ramifications are considered, and in Simic's poetics, the questions that adhere to objects are often paradoxically questions about the beyond.

For many poets working within the immanentist tradition, the work that results from an attentiveness to the here and now often gives resonance to the Heideggerean claim that poetry is able to take up sites in which Being discloses itself to the attentive mind. Despite Simic's lifelong interest in Heideggerean thought, these moments, while clearly important to Simic's work, are not often emphasized in the final product of the poems themselves. One has the sense in reading Simic's oeuvre, that these moments in which, as Altieri puts it, "Being manifests itself in the concrete moment" (42), have either occurred just before the poem's occasion or in, as Michael Delville says in another

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context, within the thick "margins of pensive silence" (172) surrounding Simic's poems.

"I Played in the Smallest Theatres," is an apt example:

Bits of infernal gravel  
On the window sill  
Surrounding a solitary  
White bread crumb. (16)

as is this poem, entitled "Shirt," from Simic's 1980 collection Classic Ballroom Dances:

To get into it  
As it lies  
Crumpled on the floor  
Without disturbing a single crease

Respectful  
Of the way I threw it down  
Last night  
The way it happened to land

Almost managing  
The impossible contortions  
Doubling back now  
Through a knotted sleeve. (SP 143)

In the first poem, one has the sense that the miniature scene on the window sill has "presenced" for the speaker, who is, while absent on the page, so attentive to the moment playing itself out on the sill that the objects there have come to take on a resonance and significance, that the attentive mind has made of the moment a miniature theater in which the things seen reveal what Heidegger would call their "thingness." In the poem "Shirt," the speaker's attitude toward the quotidian – a shirt on the floor and the simple act of putting it on – is, as the poem itself discloses, "respectful." This poem comes closest, perhaps, of any in Simic's body of work, to the "secular sacred" aesthetic Altieri maps as one of the trajectories of postmodern immanentist poetics.
But more often than not in Simic's work, these moments of awakened presence in which, as Heidegger memorably puts it, "the thing things" (174), are moved through with such alacrity that the ontological underpinnings are made near-invisible and become interpretive work that the reader must do for oneself. For Simic, the moment of awakened experience that characterizes so many immanentist poetic projects, is not an end in itself, but rather, an arrival at further metaphysical questionings.

"The Stone Is," from Part I of The World Doesn't End, elucidates this aspect of Simic's poetics and demonstrates the ways in which these distinctive lines of inquiry can be put to stunning poetic effect:

The stone is a mirror which works poorly. Nothing in it but dimness. Your dimness or its dimness, who's to say? In the hush your heart sounds like a black cricket. (17)

Simic begins with a stone, grounding the poem in the concrete world. The level of inquiry then deepens immediately in the very next few words "is a mirror," and the stone's "thinging" has happened so swiftly, perhaps even off the page, and at an initial level of depth for the speaker, that we as readers have to work quickly to catch up.

The description of the stone as a dim mirror seems initially to question the efficacy of trying to find one's own likeness in the natural or object world. But the next two sentences, "Nothing in it but dimness. Your dimness or its dimness, who's to say?" reverses and complicates this question, asking whether the dimness, a kind of silence and absence found in the stone, may in fact be our own. Whether we are projecting this silence onto the stone, or it upon us, becomes an infinite question by the poem's last line, "In the hush your heart sounds like a black cricket." This silence, this hush, which has by now begun to take on a more metaphysical tenor, contains no one and no thing positioned
to answer the questions posed. Further, the line, "who's to say?" reveals Simic's distrust of ideological systems or even metaphysical certainties that could provide such answers. The reader and the strangely absent speaker are left with the disturbing thrum of a black cricket that sounds like a human heart, a kind of synthesis between the natural and human world that the poem has been seeking since its first line, but that, once found, provides little comfort and even fewer certainties.

This beautiful and complex poem from *The World Doesn't End* is one in a long line of poems about stones that Simic has written over the course of his career. The following passage from his memoir, *A Fly in the Soup*, may point to why this particular object has remained a recurring one in Simic's poems:

I remember lying in a ditch and staring at some pebbles while German bombers were flying over our heads. That was long ago. I don't remember the face of my mother nor the faces of the people who were there with us, but I still see those perfectly ordinary pebbles.

"It's not 'how' things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists," says Wittgenstein. I felt precisely that. Time had stopped. I was watching myself watch the pebbles and trembling with fear. Then time moved on, and the experience was over.

The pebbles stayed in their otherness, stayed forever in my memory. Can language do justice to such moments of heightened consciousness? Speech is always less. When it comes to conveying what it means to be truly conscious, one approximates, one fails miserably.

Wittgenstein puts it this way: "What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses 'itself' in language, we cannot express by means of language." This has been my experience many times. Words are impoverishments, splendid poverties. (177)

In addition to these ways in which stones may figure into Simic's personal history, and may, as mentioned earlier, signify recuperative acts on the poet's part, it is this unreachable "otherness," this imperturbable self-containment, that I suspect continues to

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draw Simic's attention to stones as subjects of poetic inquiry. As such, stones in Simic's work, which seem always to serve as ambassadors of silence, frequently pose questions about the deepest of silences, that apophatic realm of the absolute. Simic tells us in his memoir:

It has always seemed obvious to me that we are alone in the universe. I love metaphysics and its speculations, but the suspicion at the core of my being is that we are whistling in the dark. (FIS 166)

Nonetheless, Simic acknowledges in this telling passage, the essentially religious impulse that he believes gives rise to his, and all, poems:

"Every poem, knowingly or unknowingly, is addressed to God," the poet Frank Samperi told me long ago. I remember being surprised, objecting, mentioning some awful contemporary poems. We were filling subscription cards in the stockroom of a photography magazine and having long philosophical conversations on the subject of poetry. Frank had been reading a lot of Dante, so I figured, that's it. He is stuck in fourteenth-century Italy.

No more. Today I think as he did then. It makes absolutely no difference whether gods or devils exist or not. The secret ambition of every true poem is to ask about them even as it acknowledges their absence. (FIS 169)

The above quotes articulate a central paradox of Simic's metaphysics that comes to bear on his poetics: on the one hand, the belief that we are whistling in the dark, giving

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7 Why stones, in particular, emerge as an apophatic trope in Simic's work may find its theoretical kin in Heidegger's writings in "The Origin of the Work of Art," in which Heidegger attempts to distinguish among "types" of things. "We hesitate even to call the deer in the forest clearing, the beetle in the grass, the blade of grass a thing. We would sooner think of a hammer as a thing, or a shoe, or an ax, or a clock. But even these are not mere things. Only a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood are for us such mere things.... It is mere things, excluding even use-objects that count as things in the strict sense" (21, 22). These mere things, Heidegger suggests later in the essay, are the things that most evade thought, giving a theoretical underpinning to Simic's encounter of silence in stones. The following passage from the same essay points to a possible ethic at work in Simic's poems; that is, Simic's understanding of the self-containedness and unknowability of mere things may allow him to recognize these "things in themselves" more fully, without, as Heidegger says, assaulting the thing. "The unpretentious thing evades thought most stubbornly. Or can it be that this self-refusal of the mere thing, this self-contained independence, belongs precisely to the nature of the thing? Must not the strange uncommunicative feature of the nature of the thing become intimately familiar to thought that tries to think the thing? If so, we should not force our way to its thingly character." (31) And, "To determine the thing's thingness ... we must aim at the thing's belonging to the earth" (69).
rise to a poetics of absence and apophasis; on the other hand, the desire to ask about the
presence of a God, which, when we look more deeply into the poems themselves, often
reveals Simic's penchant for finding traces of presence. Readers are not often left with
pure absence or silence, even within Simic's metaphysics of uncertainty, but with what
Victor Contoski, in an early piece of criticism referred to as "emptiness, almost" (17), a
poetics I will provisionally call one of "affirmative absence."

Here is Simic's first published poem about a stone, entitled "Stone," from his 1967
collection, What the Grass Says:

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

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

I have seen sparks fly out
When two stones are rubbed,
So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;
Perhaps there is a moon shining
From somewhere, as though behind a hill –
Just enough light to make out
The strange writings, the star-charts
On the inner walls. (WGS "Stone")

What the speaker finds inside the stone in this poem is, at first, silence. He speculates that
inside the object "it must be cool and quiet"; despite the world's assaults, the stone
remains "unperturbed." It is this impenetrability and otherness that seems to hold the
A poem's attention initially. But Simic rarely leaves his poems, or his readers for that matter, in a place of total absence. By the last stanza, the speaker, after considering the silence of the stone, has determined that "perhaps it is not dark inside after all," that "perhaps there is a moon shining/From somewhere." And this moon gives off just enough light to make out the "star-charts," an image that suggests the beyond.

Stones in Simic's poems seem always to be places of the deepest kind of silence, but the silence nonetheless eventually breaks open into these moments of presence, or at the very least, into traces of presence. In the above poem, there is perhaps a moon that will illuminate the inside of the stone, and in the previous poem, we are left not in the dim mirror of the stone but in the company of that black cricket. The stone poems are, in fact, emblematic of the ongoing dialogues with silence that have characterized Simic's career. Even in his 1971 book-length sequence *White*, the poet's most extended invocation to silence, the last of the three sections—titled What the White Had to Say—gives silence itself the chance to speak.

What allows questions of metaphysics to adhere to critical interpretations of poems such as "Stone" (above) and many others in Simic's body of work, involves an understanding of the ways in which questions about the beyond have been articulated throughout Simic's poetic career. His early work is instructive in this regard, as the metaphysical elements and inquiries into objects often gained expression through explicit religious language; though the concerns in his work have largely remained the same, as Simic's style has grown more sophisticated, these elements have become less transparent and thus, less critically secure. In addition to the poem "Stone," in which a meditation on a concrete object opens into arguably metaphysical inquiry, *What the Grass Says* also
contains many overt examples. A poem about meat, in which a dying pig is hung from a hook, leads the speaker to claim "I am baptized in this sight" (WGS "Meat"); the speaker of another poem holds in his palm a dead sparrow "The way God holds mine/In the grip of the earth" (WGS "Sparrow"); elsewhere, knives "glitter like altars" ("Butcher Shop") and Mass and Easter Sunday are referenced. In his poem "My Shoes," Simic not only meditates upon an object and calls upon religious tropes, but makes of his own asceticism and poverty of objects a kind of religion:

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

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

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

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

Ascetic and maternal, you endure:
Kin to oxen, to Saints, to condemned men,
With your mute patience, forming
The only true likeness to myself. (WGS "My Shoes")

Though the explicit Christian references are diluted with competing references from philosophy and other disciplines in Simic's later work, the mixture of the sacred and the profane, the oxen alongside the saints, has remained; Vendler notes the way in which this
aspect of Simic's poetics gives his work an essentially religious nature. His work forces us to cohabit with pigs and angels, she says, and "Simic cannot do without the presence of the angel" (120). It is this desire within Simic's poems to search until that angel or some trace of presence is found that continues to characterize his present work.

In *The World Doesn't End*, police dogs ultimately engender questions about the soul (56), a glass paperweight from Coney Island gives way to conjectures about the peace and calm found in goldfish heaven (62), and a poem about an absent guardian angel seems to find something akin to an angel in the "sleepy little girl with glasses" by the poem's end (39). This poetics of affirmative absence is especially evident within *The World Doesn't End* in Simic's portrayal of windows, which recur with regularity throughout the book. As Vendler notes, within Simic's circumscribed poetic world, it is possible to gain a "comprehensive picture of the mind in which [recurring images] keep tolling" (127). As the windows "toll" throughout *The World Doesn't End*, we as readers are provided a glimpse into Simic's distinctive metaphysics.

The first time we are introduced to a window in *The World Doesn't End* is in the eighth poem, at the shoe store in front of which Freud and the speaker's grandfather glare at each other over a coveted pair of black shoes. Here is that poem in full:

"Everybody knows the story about me and Dr. Freud," says my grandfather.
"We were in love with the same pair of black shoes in the window of the same shoe store. The store, unfortunately, was always closed. There'd be a sign: DEATH IN THE FAMILY or

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8 It is perhaps erroneous to say "the speaker's grandfather," as there is some doubt in this poem as to who is speaking. See the concluding section of this chapter, "Longing Nonetheless: Simic's Absent Speakers" for a fuller discussion of the speaker's role in this and other of Simic's poems from *The World Doesn't End*. 

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BACK AFTER LUNCH, but no matter how long I waited, no one would come to open."

"Once I caught Dr. Freud there shamelessly admiring the shoes. We glared at each other before going our separate ways, never to meet again." (10)

The initial information that the store is always closed gathers force as the grandfather relates that no matter how long he waited, "no one would come to open." In Simic's poetic world, the encounters with the absolute take place within the mundane – during evening art classes (57), from inside a pot on the kitchen stove (69), standing in front of a shoe store. It is, of course, possible to read this poem without a purely metaphysical interpretation of the closed store, but taken within the context of Simic's body of work, it is nearly impossible not to read the closed store, at least in part, as a corollary to our access to the absolute.® In this poem, the window is always closed and we are endlessly waiting.

But as one of Simic's poems later in the book tells us, "things were not as black as somebody painted them" (41). The owner of the store has left traces of his presence. The poem tells us that although the store was always closed, "There'd be a sign: DEATH IN THE FAMILY or BACK AFTER LUNCH..." The store owner must at some time have been present (how else would the shoes have gotten there?) and the signs, which change periodically, also suggesting a presence, indicate at least an intention to return.

These questions are taken up in a similar way in the poem "Lover of Endless ...":

Lover of endless disappointments with your collection of old postcards, I'm coming! I'm coming! You want to show me a train station with its clock stopped at five past five. We can't see

® For more examples of Simic's preoccupation with closed windows and stores (and the attendant connection to the beyond) see, for starters, "Butcher Shop" in What the Grass Says, "The Betrothal" in The Book of Gods and Devils and "Emily's Theme" in Walking the Black Cat.

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inside the station master's window because of the grime. We don't even know if there's a train waiting on the platform, much less if a woman in black is hurrying through the front door. There are no other people in sight, so it must be a quiet station. Some small town so effaced by time it has only one veiled widow left, and now she too is leaving with her secret. (19)

This poem, which ostensibly takes place in a train station, though the opening address of the poem suggests the speakers may be looking together at a postcard depicting a train station, puts up similar obstacles for the reader and speakers as in the previous poem. The clock in the station has stopped and the speakers "don't even know if there's a train waiting on the platform." The station master's window is blocked by grime. The obstacle, this time, between the speakers and the other side of the window is time itself, which has left its marks on the glass and blocked the view. The fact of the stopped clock reinforces the ways in which time is evoked as the culprit. And if the speakers are, in fact, gazing at an "old" postcard, time and distance take on a further layer of meaning. In this poem, it is not a coveted object sought on the other side of the window but the station master himself, a figure that can be read as having religious or metaphysical connotations. This station master is impossible to see and may even have absented himself, but his existence, even his possible presence behind the smudged window, is never dismissed as a possibility. Again, within the context of Simic's body of work, and considering his penchant for the metaphysical and for obstacle-ridden objects and windows that we cannot see through, this poem seems to engage deeper metaphysical questions than appear on the surface of the poem.

The windows in *The World Doesn't End* develop this theme even further by becoming places for the text to address – through simple reference, and thus avoiding
didacticism or overt pathos – the absence of an intervening God in the wake of or even in preparation for personal and historical tragedies. A girl on a New York rooftop who will die young is surrounded by skyscrapers having "many blind windows" (32); in one poem in which "the city had fallen," the speaker comes "to the window of a house drawn by a madman" (15), calling to mind the surreal landscapes of rubble created by the bombings of World War II, and leaving open for interpretation who, exactly, is being fingered as the madman (Hitler, those responsible for dropping the bombs, a God that allowed the atrocities to occur?).

Windows, which are referenced many more times throughout the text, provide a kind of narrative arc to the book as a whole. The collection, in fact, ends with the image of an open window. Here is the closing poem:

"My Secret Identity Is"

The room is empty,
And the window is open (74)

This last poem of The World Doesn't End is a minimalist's, and an immanentist's, tour de force. At first glance the poem seems to be a sentence waiting, quite literally, for its predicate object. As readers we look to the two lines of the poem in order to place (or replace, as it were, within the recursive environment of the poem) the word that will come to rest after the "is" of the title. But Simic never deigns to answer the unanswerable, and the closing poem of this book is no exception.

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10 Explicit references to windows occur eleven times within the seventy-one poems that comprise the book; many more implicit references occur in which windows are not named but their presence alluded to.
The search for the grammatical predicate is complicated in the first line by the absence of physical objects in the room, and then delayed, it seems, even further by the open window of the last line. By the end of the poem we realize that Simic never intended to complete the sentence of the title in the way we had expected. Instead of that irritable reaching after fact and reason, the closing poem, like Keats' negative capability, is content to rest in uncertainty. We are asked by the poem to return to the title "My Secret Identity Is" and read it as Simic had intended all along, that the identity – that we now realize the poem, speaker, and book itself have been searching for – simply is. This simple and unexpected "answer" is, of course, a joke on the reader as well. After the closed and grimy windows, we are finally granted access to the "inside" only to find that the secret still eludes us, leaving the reader and the speaker in an empty room but still searching, a fitting figure for the now recognizably infinite paradox that is Simic's peculiar mark of faith.

The speaker who began the book as a child in that vast and windy place of the sky has traveled a great distance to this final and empty room of the book, eerily uncluttered by the teacups and crumbs and paperweights from the rooms of previous poems. The open window alerts us that the speaker, already made itinerant through exile – and here Simic's biography enhances our reading – is now about to embark upon a further journey. The lack of punctuation in the final line of this last poem is significant, as it is the only one in the collection to lack a closing mark. The speaker of the poem, whom we imagine to be in this empty room, is granted a kind of affirmative and boundless access, unobstructed even by punctuation, to the open and silent field of the page and we imagine too, the sky.
Simic's use of windows throughout the text, due to its repetition, provides a compelling example of the metaphysics and poetics of affirmative absence, but other objects in the book take up this same theme. It could be argued, in fact, that in Simic's very use of objects that are diminished, disfigured, distant, and displaced, a metaphysics of affirmative absence is always already articulated. The "house drawn by a madman," for instance, engages questions of historical and personal experience at the same time as it inquires about the existence and presence of God. It is this conflation of the here and now with the transcendent that makes Simic's work so compelling, and that calls into question the traditional critical delineations between a poetics of immanence and a poetics of transcendence. The myriad ways in which Simic is able to use objects of the concrete world to articulate these questions make his poems distinct within American postmodern poetry.

Michael Hulse is, to my knowledge, the only critic fully observant of this aspect of Simic's poetics. In their 2002 interview, Hulse links Simic's work with those poems of Rilke's in which attempts to experience things so intensely allows "the absolute [to] become apparent in them" (37). He asks Simic, "does the point of such writing finally lie in the attempt to reconcile 'absolute otherness' with 'suspected unity?' This is Simic's reply:

That's very, very good, Michael. That's the cross I'm crucified upon. On the one hand, the suspicion of that otherness in its terrifying remoteness and distance from any meaning, and, on the other hand, the suspicion that all things are connected and we are part of something we cannot name. They can't be both true – or could they be? Which one do I believe in? It depends on what day of the week you happen to ask me. Dickinson could not make up her mind if the universe had a God, or whether it was just infinite and mostly empty space. That's where I feel closest to her. It seems to me that it is important to experience this contradiction fully, rather than to try to resolve it. That paradox is the only absolute I'm sure of. (37)
This absolute paradox of Simic's poetic engagement through objects with both presence and absence, suspected unity and absolute otherness, is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his poem "Explorers," from his 1971 collection *Dismantling the Silence*. The poem can, in fact, be read as a kind of ars poetica, even an ars metaphysica, if you will, that engages the very questions about Simic and objects that this study has attempted to elucidate.

"Explorers"

They arrive inside
The object at evening.
There's no one there to greet them.

The lamps they carry
Cast their shadows
Back into their own minds.

They write in their journals:

The sky and the earth
Are of the same impenetrable color.
If there are rivers and lakes,
They must be under the ground.
Of the marvels we sought, no trace.
Of the strange new stars, nothing.
There's not even wind or dust,
So we must conclude that someone
Passed recently with a broom...

As they write, the new world
Gradually stitches
Its black thread into them.

Eventually nothing is left
Except a low whisper
Which might belong
Either to one of them
Or to someone who came before.
It says: "I'm happy
We are finally all here...

Let's make this our home." (SP 42, 43)

Even when the speakers in Simic's poems come upon what looks to be pure absence and silence, as they do here, they continue their explorations until they find something of presence. Despite a landscape so barren that there are no traces of marvels, no stars, "not even wind or dust," the speakers nonetheless "conclude that someone/Passed recently with a broom..." These traces – and though it is unclear who this "someone" may be, if Simic's oeuvre has taught us how to read his poems, we know that one reading allows this janitor of sorts to stand as a figure of the beyond – can be found in Simic's work again and again, if one remains undaunted by the initial absence found in the poems and is willing to follow the images and objects through to the other side of silence. In this sense, Simic's poems in general, and the poems in The World Doesn't End in particular, do what Heidegger deemed poets should in destitute times: "attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods" (94).

Longing Nonetheless: Simic's Absent Speakers

Simic's sustained engagement with the world of objects and his poetics of affirmative absence extend into the very voices with which his poems are sung. In many of Simic's pieces, the speakers come to us from a distance, and even that distance is often eerily indeterminate. This aspect of Simic's poetics is part of that ineffable quality of voice that makes a writer's work so recognizably distinct. What is of particular interest
about Simic's voicing for this study – and I am referring specifically to the absent quality of Simic's speakers and his use of the apostrophic mode – is the way in which these choices impact the role of objects in the poems and further articulate his paradoxical metaphysics of affirmative absence.

In order to illustrate the ways in which a more absent speaker can affect the object's role within a work, it is perhaps instructive to use as a comparison a poem in which the speaker's role is foregrounded. The two poems below are as follows: Simic's prose poem that opens Part II of The World Doesn't End, and a prose poem of Robert Bly's, "Finding a Salamander on Inverness Ridge."11 Note the differences between the speaker's positioning and the treatment of the image at hand in each poem.

The hundred-year-old china doll's head the sea washes up on its gray beach. One would like to know the story. One would like to make it up, make up many stories. It's been so long in the sea, the eyes and nose have been erased, its faint smile is even fainter. With the night coming, one would like to see oneself walking the empty beach and bending down to it. (25)

Walking. Afternoon. The war still going on, I stoop down to pick up a salamander. He is halfway across the mossy forest path. He is dark brown, fantastically cold in my hand. This one is new to me – the upper part of his eyeball light green ... strange bullfrog eyes. (48)

One-to-one comparisons always run the risk of providing reductive readings, but these poems do seem emblematic of each writer's particular penchant in terms of voicing. In Simic's poem, the speaker is strangely absent, with the word "one" standing in as the lyric voice. This leaves readers in the unsettled position of viewing the doll's head on the

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11 As different in style as these two writers may initially seem, it is important to remember that Simic cites Bly as "an enormous influence" on his early writing (cited in Hulse) and thus Bly's work provides a particularly germane point of comparison.
beach while having no sense that the beach is being "seen" by a speaker whom we can locate. One is reminded of Victor Contoski's suggestion, in an early piece of criticism, that Simic's scenes are in fact "speakerless" and that they are told from a distance so great that the work eschews many of the usual requirements for poetry. What results, however, for the reader of the poem, is that the image of the doll's head rises up in a more resonant way, as our other bearings have been stripped away. Importantly too, touching the object is a hypothetical act within the poem, one that is never brought to fruition. This only increases the resonance of the object, as it is up to the reader at the poem's end to complete the act.\footnote{It is a testament to Simic's talents that he is able to create such resonant images in the reader's mind without caressing his objects and images with language and lyrical descriptions as poets like Neruda, for instance, might do. Simic's objects, which come to us as spare as his diction, nonetheless remain distinct and luminous in the mind's eye.}

Bly's poem, on the other hand, contains the presence of the lyric "I" so strongly that it in fact organizes the entire meaning of the poem. The salamander recedes under the weight of this lyric presence, which takes the reader along on a walk, finds and picks up the salamander, and then gives value to the experience in terms of the speaker — "this one is new to me." In other words, it is the speaker's experience that is foregrounded, not the object's.

Delville calls this Bly's "inward lyricism" (260), and quotes Bly in the notes to his book as acknowledging his failure to "describe an object or a creature without claiming it," explaining that "our desires and disappointments have such hunger that they pull each sturgeon or hollow tree into themselves" (cited in Delville 260). It would be overstating the case to suggest that Simic never pulls an object or creature into himself or that he never foregrounds the speaker's experience, for that matter, but Simic's poetic as a whole...
is less insistent that what is seen is being seen at that moment by the speaker, and thus creates a more realistic value frame for his poems.

Altieri remarks on this aspect of Bly's work, maintaining that Bly's aesthetics of radical presence suffers from the author's insistence that "the interpenetrations glimpsed and the mystery realized are actually present within experience for one who has learned to see with the vision of the inner man... Very few experiences and an even smaller range of attitudes can consistently occupy this space without pushing the material into either conscious artifice or ironic interplay with an inadequate reality" (92). In other words, Bly creates an unbelievable value frame, positioning the speaker as one who has unrealistic access to the numinous relationships between himself and the world. Delville puts it more pointedly when he refers to Bly's poems, and his object poems in particular, as containing a "self-celebratory neoprimitivism" (168). Simic's poems skirt these kinds of charges by de-privileging the role of the speaker and thus foregrounding the object itself.

Simic uses this "one" in a number of poems within The World Doesn't End in order to absent the speaker or complicate the reader's notion of who may be speaking, but there are other techniques he puts to use as well. In some poems, such as "Ghost Stories Written..." (below), the speaker seems implicitly to be part of the scene but the voice of the poem does not give up its secret as to who and from where the poem is being "narrated."

Ghost stories written as algebraic equations. Little Emily at the blackboard is very frightened. The X's look like a graveyard at night. The teacher wants her to poke among them with a piece of chalk. All the children hold their breath. The white chalk squeaks once among the plus and minus signs, and then it's quiet again. (13)
Other poems seem to occur in a kind of implied dialogue, though the onus is put on the reader to decipher who the speakers may be:

Thousands of old men with pants lowered sleeping in public rest rooms. You're exaggerating! You're raving! Thousands of Marias, of Magdelenas at their feet weeping. (48)

And in the poem mentioned earlier in which Dr. Freud makes an appearance, Simic seems to have found a new way in which to absent the speaker:

"Everybody knows the story about me and Dr. Freud," says my grandfather.
"We were in love with the same pair of black shoes in the window of the same shoe store. The store, unfortunately, was always closed. There'd be a sign: DEATH IN THE FAMILY or BACK AFTER LUNCH, but no matter how long I waited, no one would come to open."
"Once I caught Dr. Freud there shamelessly admiring the shoes. We glared at each other before going our separate ways, never to meet again." (10)

Notice that the entire poem is in dialogue; the only exception is the dialogue tag in the first paragraph, "says my grandfather." This technique gives the piece a paradoxically speakerless feel, as if the poem were not a poem at all, but rather a story overheard or spoken aloud. This begs the question as to the poet's role; is the poet simply performing transcription? Family history? Historical witness? These questions adhere as well to a poem a few pages later in the book in which, toward the closing lines of the piece, a hitherto absent speaker tells us: "Some of it was told to me by a shivering young man who insisted that it's been raining for years, even indoors" (18).

The ways in which Simic absents the speakers of his poems engenders yet another congruity with the poetics of affirmative absence that characterizes his work as a whole. One has the sense that these poems come to us from a great distance, and as such, the
unique and strangely absent voices of Simic's poems take on a kind of pressure and urgency.

The absented speakers also, as mentioned earlier, have the effect of foregrounding the objects of the poems. This results in one of the more curious aspects of Simic's work, the way in which objects come to bear the tone and narrative subjectivity usually considered to be the domain of the speaker. The reader's desire to connect with a voice, to be led through a poem by a speaker, is so strong that when Simic leaves only a trail of objects or images to follow, we as readers search for some grounding of voice within the objects of the poem. And Simic's narrative technique enables objects to take on, in a certain sense, roles akin to that of the speaker.

In the following two poems from The World Doesn't End, note the ways in which the absence of determinate speakers puts an onus onto the clouds (or lack thereof) to provide "witness." Here Simic's de-privileging of the speakers seems to allow the predicaments inherent in the poems to receive the full attention.

The old farmer in overalls hanging from a barn beam. The cows looking sideways. The old woman kneeling under his swaying feet in her Sunday black dress and touching the ground with her forehead like a Mohammedan. Outside the sky is full of sudsy clouds above an endless plowed field with no other landmarks in view. (43)

From inside the pot on the stove someone threatens the stars with a wooden spoon.

Otherwise, cloudless calm. The shepherd's hour. (69)

One particular account from Simic's memoir may give us a fuller understanding of the circumstances and pathos behind such modes of storytelling. He describes visiting a war museum as a young boy as part of a class trip. In the museum were photographs,
and Simic vividly remembers looking at one image in which a man is having his throat cut.

The killer sat on the man's chest with a knife in his hand. He seemed pleased to be photographed. The victim's eyes I don't remember. A few men stood around gawking. There were clouds in the sky.

There were always clouds, blades of grass, tree stumps, bushes, and rocks no one was paying any attention to. In one photograph the earth was covered with snow. (FIS 178)

Within the world of Simic's poems, clouds and teacups often provide strange witness to historical events, lending a subtle and political aspect to the poems that may, at least within the genre of contemporary poetry, form a distinctive signature to Simic's work.¹³

As much as the absenting of the speaker would seem to plant Simic within a postmodern milieu, the apostrophes that run throughout his poems paradoxically link his work with, or at the very least, put his poems in conversation with the romantic lyric tradition.

The apostrophes found within The World Doesn't End make use of the myriad ways in which this trope may function within poems.¹⁴ Simic's use is sometimes ironic.

One poem in Part III begins:

I knew a night owl who dreamed of being a star of country music. O Cruel Fate! O vale of tears! (65)

Other times the apostrophic mode is used as a performative trope in which the poet constitutes a poetic persona, as in this poem's beginning:

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¹³ Simic's technique in this regard may owe a debt to Isaac Babel's short fiction. I am thinking specifically of Babel's Red Cavalry stories, in which the natural world and the world of objects are often called upon to provide a kind of witness to the atrocities of war. This narrative technique is, of course, taken up later by writers like Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien.

O witches! O poverty! The two who with a sidelong glance measured the thinness of my neck through the bars of the birdcage I carried on my shoulder ... (45)

But despite the polyvalent qualities of the apostrophes within *The World Doesn't End*, they seem always to serve in some way as intensifiers, lending a clear sense of voice and pathos to the poems. In this one from Part III, for instance, the apostrophe lends the poem an intensity of longing it would otherwise lack:

A black child wore the mask of comedy on a street of gutted, gray-brick tenements. The mask came from the ruins of the movie palace where it had hung over the proscenium with its companion, tragedy. O child in red sneakers, running.... One expected to see one of the shadowy beauties of the silent screen sleepwalking in your wake. (55)

The invocation to the child who is ostensibly moving away from the speaker intensifies the longing that the apostrophic "O" signifies. Simic's poems never seem to fully believe that the people or things addressed ("O the starched white pinafores!" 56) will be heard, but in keeping with Simic's metaphysics of affirmative absence, this doesn't mean that he will not put out the call. Despite the skepticism that may mark his work, there is longing nonetheless. It is a further and brilliant articulation of Simic's poetics of witness, that the distance and dislocation that mark the objects and speak to the metaphysics at work within his poetic project, are also characteristics taken on by the very voices that inhabit the poems.
CONCLUSION

A poetic that focuses its attention on objects potentially runs the risk of becoming a simply aesthetic project. Altieri makes note of this when he discusses that the pitfalls of "cataloging" in poems is that "without some kind of dialectic with others or with experience, consciousness is left turning each of its objects into unique aesthetic phenomena" (177). Simic's nearly forty-year career has been marked by an attention to the world of objects, and as I have argued here, this attention represents a sustained line of inquiry that has developed over the many years of his career and, in fact, remains an integral part of his poetics today.

But Simic's poems successfully avoid the pitfalls of mere aesthetics. His work engages the world in the deepest sense, and Simic's objects come to the page imbued with the full weight of history, personal experience, and metaphysical inquiry that Simic's talents are able to bring to bear. The objects he chooses for his poems often speak of war and poverty, and the limited range of objects that Simic employs within his work enacts a kind of poverty within the poems themselves. Further, the absence and distance from which Simic's poems are spoken push the objects to do additional work, even causing them to take up roles that are oddly close to those of the speakers themselves. The way that Simic is able to bring the weight of larger historical realities into the very materials of his poems establishes his writing as distinct among American postmodern immanentist poetics and makes his poems especially resonant in today's political climate.
But Simic's aesthetics of presence is made complex by his abiding interest in the transcendent. Simic's objects speak to this element of his poetics as well, often becoming sites for encounters with the absolute and serving as places in Simic's poems where questions about the existence of God and about our ability to know anything of God are raised. At first, Simic's poems seem to encounter a kind of infinite silence when they arrive inside the objects. And often the access to the beyond is blocked or out of our reach. But Simic's poems do not encounter silence and absence as their endpoints. A closer look into Simic's poems reveals to us that on the other side of silence there are traces of the absolute, and at the very least the hope that there is a listener. The uncertainty in which Simic's poems seem to find a resting point, if they ever rest at all, never becomes a poetics of total absence or nihilism. Rather, Simic's poems engage the paradox that – as he himself acknowledged – gives his work an affinity with Emily Dickinson's: on the one hand, the knowledge of "otherness in its terrifying remoteness and distance from any meaning," and on the other, "the suspicion that all things are connected and we are part of something we cannot name" (Hulse 37). Simic does not allow his poems to rest in easy answers and it is this quality, in part, that has engendered a certain amount of reluctance on the part of critics.

This study presents one reading among many possible readings of Simic's enigmatic poems and of the prose poems in *The World Doesn't End* in particular. The fact that Simic's version of the "here and now" is, as critic Benjamin Paloff recently pointed out, "unfamiliar ... because most American readers cannot easily relate to the experiences that have shaped Simic's vision" (56), to my mind makes his poetic no less immanentist, and a study into the objects of his poems reveals that this is so.
Simic's aesthetics of presence marks out a unique place on Altieri's map and would perhaps fit in between the chapter on Merwin, who by focusing on the here and now encounters absence, and the one on Levertov, in which the possibilities of a political immanentist poetics is explored. Merwin's encounters with absence, argues Altieri, speak to a belief in "absence... as the only absolute worth pursuing" (Altieri 211). Simic's poems, on the other hand, engage in a Dickinsonian paradox that lends his work a kind of affirmative quality in its continued longing and search for traces of presence, which makes his poems distinct. Simic is able to bring the political into his poems in the very materials of his work and is able, through his oblique style and the unique positioning of his speakers, to avoid didacticism and heavy-handedness. Simic's attention to objects, in my view, pushes his work into a critical paradox of the most interesting sort. By investing the objects in his poems with the full weight of metaphysical, historical, and personal inquiry, Simic complicates the traditional split between an immanentist aesthetic and an aesthetic focusing on the transcendent. Like the explorers in Simic's poem who arrive inside the object and make it their home, Simic has forged a rich poetics that finds its home within the objects of the concrete world, a world that Simic has reminded us from the very beginning, doesn't end.
Works Cited


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