

John T. Lysaker

White Dawns, Black Noons, Twilit Days: Charles Simic's Poems Before Poetry

"The problem with true history and great literature is that they wallow in ambiguities, unresolved issues, nuances, and baffling contradictions. Let's not kid ourselves."

Charles Simic, *The Unemployed Fortune Teller*
(Simic, 1994:38–39)

IT IS 1907. A POEM OPENING THE SECOND PART OF RILKE'S *New Poems*, concludes: "*Du mußt dein Leben ändern*," that is, "You must change your life." And yet it is not Rilke who speaks this line, nor a solitary aesthete marveling beneath an archaic torso of Apollo, nor the torso itself, mysteriously animate. Rather, the imperative arises when the speaker engages a torso which ". . . *glüht*

noch wie Kandelaber, /in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt, /sich hält und glänzt," which ". . . glows like a candelabra, /in which its gazing, just twisted back, holds fast and shines." Engaged, the speaker is struck, even lit: ". . . denn da ist keine Stelle, /die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern," or one could say: ". . . for there is no point, /which does not see you. You must change your life" (Rilke, 1955-66:577, lines 3-5 & 13-14).

It is 1989, practically yesterday compared to the distance which separates us from a day in 1907, a day itself some two thousand and five hundred days away from the onset of World War One. Charles Simic writes, introducing the poetry of Aleksander Ristic:

At times one comes across a poet who strikes one as being absolutely original. There's something genuinely different about him or her, a something that one has never quite encountered in all the poets one has read before. 'I will never look at the world in quite the same way,' one realizes at once, and that's what happens. From that day on, one feels deeply and fatefully changed by the experience of that reading (Simic, 1990c:113).

Simic's tale resonates with Rilke's and countless others. Struck while engaging a work of art, one proceeds differently. One comports oneself differently. One has changed one's life.

In directing us towards the radically transformative power of the work of art, Rilke and Simic enter a field of belief shared by Heidegger who insists that a work of art can:

. . . transport us out of the realm of the ordinary. To submit to this displacement means: to transform accustomed relations to world and earth and henceforth bring an end to all familiar activities and assessing, knowing and looking, in order to linger within the truth occurring in the work (Heidegger, 1950:52-3).

A remarkable event, one we cannot do justice to here. For the moment, suffice it to say that occasionally works of art retune us such that accustomed habits of action and belief prove idle, appear inappropriate to the truth which has emerged in the work. And thus we begin to change our lives.

Around the work of art, or more specifically, around the poem, a

group of names is gathering: Heidegger, Rilke, Simic. To what end? In the least, I want to explain why Heidegger insists: "Poetry—not game; a relationship with it—not some playful, forgetful, self-improving diversion, but an awakening and pulling together of the most proper essence of the exceptional and solitary through which a human being goes back into the ground of its existence" (Heidegger, 1980:8).¹ I want to explore why Joseph Brodsky seems so right to claim, introducing Aleksander Kushner: "Yet I do consider it my duty to warn you that an encounter with poetry in its pure form is pregnant with far reaching consequences, that this volume is not where it will all end for you" (Kushner, 1991:ix). Again, a work of art, it is proposed, can permeate us such that, perhaps slowly, it redirects our lives. But why should we think this? Why should Heidegger say of Hölderlin's work: "This poetry demands a metamorphosis in our manner of thinking and experiencing, one regarding the whole of being" (Heidegger, 1984:205). Perhaps this is what poetry seeks. Perhaps poems offer truths, and thus demand, if only implicitly, that we live accordingly. Perhaps Celan is right to suggest, responding in 1958 to a prize from the city of Bremen: "The poem may be, because it is a manifestation of language and thus dialogical by nature, a letter in a bottle sent with the faith—certainly not always full of hope—that it might sometime and somewhere wash ashore, perhaps on the land of the heart" (Celan, 1986:196). If so, what does it mean to wash ashore the land of the heart? What does it mean to take the poem to heart, to allow it to change one's life?²

And yet, I have begun with strokes broad beyond my wishes, for my concern is less with poetry *überhaupt* than with a remarkable contemporary: Charles Simic. To be more precise, my hope is not only to convince you that poetry can change your life, nor simply to explain what one welcomes when one allows poetry to do so, but to explore the work of Charles Simic, to show how his poetry would change your life if you were to guide it ashore, welcoming it into the land of your heart. And to that end, I must initially employ the ear of Martin Heidegger, for his way with poems makes evident, I shall argue, how deeply the fingers of poetry are able to dig, how far reaching their import is for one able to listen well.³

Heidegger and Simic? They strike me as natural interlocutors, although little has been written on their ties.⁴ Given their preoccupation with the poetic word, Heidegger's texts open paths into a variety of authors and traditions, including those lying outside the German circles he read within.⁵ And given his preoccupation with Heidegger, Simic's texts ask to be read along Heideggerian lines by readers able to re-trace Heidegger's hermeneutic path.⁶ In what follows, I will read Simic's texts in a Heideggerian manner, and argue that his work embodies a threefold attunement. First, his work draws us to the utmost ontological limits of whatever sense can be had by mortal beings. Second, he nevertheless manages to take seriously the force of history in the labor of human production, particularly when it assumes totalitarian forms. And third, he never loses sight of the way in which these overarching dramas impact upon individual plights, that is, his work is able to remind us that on ontological and historical stages, creatures still feed, fight, flee, fuck, and die. Such attunements are not mere glosses on the human condition, however. Rather, or so I will argue, they come to us from originary regions, and thus have the power, at least potentially, to orient the full range of our comportment towards ourselves, one another, the world, even being itself.

POETIC DWELLING

*"They arrive inside
The object at evening.
There's no one to meet them."*

—Charles Simic, "Explorers" (Simic, 1971:66, lines 1–3)

Among Heidegger's claims on behalf of poetry, these are among the starkest.

Poetry is founding, the effectual grounding of what endures. The poet is the grounder of being. What we call the real in the everyday is, in the end, unreal (Heidegger, 1980:33).

Poetry is founding through the word and within the word. What is founded so? What endures. But can what endures be founded? Is it not always already what is present at hand? No! Even what endures must be brought to stand against what would tear it away;

the simple must be wrested from entanglement, the measure must be set before the measureless. That which carries and reigns through beings as a whole must come into the open. Being must be thrown open so that a being appears (Heidegger, 1971:41).

The saying of the poet is a founding not only in the sense of a free giving, but also, and at the same time, in the sense of the firm grounding of human existence . . . (Heidegger, 1971:41).

Several points are at play. First, poetry is a founding. Second, this founding grounds Being. Third, grounding Being brings it into the open which, and this is the fourth point, allows beings to appear. Fifth, poetry works “. . . through the word and within the word.” Sixth, the grounding which poetry effects takes precedence over the so-called ‘real.’ And seventh, poetic founding provides human beings with a ground.

While we cannot work our way through every tangle in this thicket, certain points can be clarified. At base, poetic founding, in terms of its relationship with Being and humanity, concerns a measure.

. . . Poetry is the founding naming of being and the founding naming of the essence of all things—not any old saying, but that through which everything, what we discuss and debate in common language, first steps into the open. Therefore poetry never takes up language as some raw material ready at hand, but rather, poetry itself first enables language. Poetry is the originary language (*Ursprache*) . . . (Heidegger, 1971:41).

According to this passage, the measure which poetry provides assumes the form of an *Ursprache*, that “through which everything . . . first steps into the open.” But what is an *Ursprache*? Initially, one can read it along the lines of Kant’s notion of *Sinnlichkeit*, “sensibility.” For Kant, time and space are not themselves things in the world, but the condition of the possibility of things appearing either in consciousness or in the world, that is, they are, respectively, the *forms* of inner and outer sense. They thus provide a skeletal horizon or arena of disclosure within which thoughts and things appear. Analogously, Heidegger’s *Ursprache* involves tropes,

which mark and overdetermine all beings in the moment of their disclosure.⁷ In order for some thing to be present, the argument runs, it must appear in relation to the *Ursprache*, just as with Kant, thoughts and things become sensible only against the horizontal backdrop of time and space.

At this point, an example might help. In the 1950s, Heidegger often invokes "the fourfold," *das Geviert*, a figure comprised of Hölderlinian tropes.⁸ At its root, the fourfold demarcates a horizon of disclosure, that is, beings are disclosed upon the earth, beneath the sky, among mortals, and in the wake of divine presence or absence. It thus provides a frame of reference within which beings come to presence such that they are open to determination.⁹ For examples, Heidegger often appeals to pastoral figures such as a jug, a bridge, and a hut, showing how the place they inhabit itself belongs to beings as a whole, and how they and the whole to which they belong bear the impress of the fourfold.¹⁰ One never encounters just a jug, bridge, or hut in the later essays, but jugs, bridges, and huts within the play of the four: earth, sky, divinities, and mortals.

In order to fathom poetic measures, we need not rely on Heidegger's noble-peasant imagery, however, for Heidegger is referring to all instances of "building" in these contexts.¹¹ Take an office park. It is commonplace to speak of how the office park establishes certain relationships among employees, employers, and members of the community as well as between the business conducted there and the surrounding "developed" and "undeveloped" environs. In short, the office park opens something of a small "world" in and around the physical and social spaces it occupies. Such a "world" does not emerge *ex nihilo*, however, but arises within a network of relations it both adopts and refracts. Now, an *Ursprache* engages and determines the *Wesen* or essence of beings (i.e., how they enter into and persist through disclosure), and thus it involves the furthest reaches of significance, a final network of relations surrounding the emergence of all "worlds."¹² Thus while an office park does establish various relations, these relations are themselves suffused with meta-relations concerning the nature of the earth, human

being, the sacred and profane, etc. And an *Ursprache* like the fourfold is, according to Heidegger, a source of these suffusions.¹³

By tying poetic founding to an *Ursprache*, we can see how it is the founding naming of the “essence” of all things. In rewriting Kant’s transcendental aesthetic, the *Ursprache* contextualizes how each being comes to be the particular being it is, e.g., as a house upon the earth, a coyote beneath the sky, a poet among mortals, etc. If this analogy is helpful, it means that the *Ursprache* does not name things one by one. Rather, it figures how things come to be the beings they are. One might say, it finds how a world worlds, not the particularities of that world. As Heidegger writes, the figurative authority of the *Ursprache* “. . . never means that language, in any old meaning picked up at will, immediately and definitively supplies us with the transparent essence of the matter like some object ready to be used” (Heidegger, 1954:184). Instead, again recalling the fourfold, it overdetermines with an earthliness and mortality particular beings.¹⁴

Given the nearly limitless range of its determinations, one can see how an *Ursprache* takes priority over the language of the everyday and even enables it in a certain sense. Rather than giving each word a meaning, an *Ursprache* determines the nature of language in an almost metatheoretical fashion. Insofar as words, sentences, and even grammars are written, spoken, or thought, they are events that take place within a constellation of forces. Keeping to our example of the fourfold, even if we believe that language is primarily a product of human subjectivity (something Heidegger denies), we are still setting language within the range of mortals who dwell upon the earth and beneath the sky. With regard to any language as *a language*, therefore, one can and in fact must speak of some *Ursprache* that determines the nature of the syntactical and semantic events which characterize it.

Understanding the *Ursprache* as something of a metalanguage, or better, as a language of essence, one establishing a horizon of significance for all disclosures, also allows us to see why Heidegger believes that poetry can be a “. . . grounding of human existence.” Put concisely, an *Ursprache* provides human beings with their fur-

these points of reference. As we live our lives, an *Ursprache* allows us to find a place within the whole, e.g., as mortals (hence not gods) upon the earth and beneath the sky. Or, if some other *Ursprache* were to hold sway, say Trakl's instead of Hölderlin's, we might view ourselves, in the most fundamental way, as strangers irreversibly cast along a leprous path of slow destruction and madness. Or, to appeal to Rilke, we might see ourselves as erotically obsessed lovers who need to release ourselves into an open through the non-desirous productions of beautiful particulars. In short, an *Ursprache*, Heidegger believes, can provide us with some sense for our place within and alongside beings as a whole.

But how does an *Ursprache* "throw-open" Being? Our answer to this question hinges upon how we understand poetic naming. In later texts, Heidegger treats the production of an *Ursprache* as an instance of building. (Heidegger, 1954:183) The question concerning poetic naming can be taken, therefore, to concern how poetic building comes to pass, and thus an analysis of poetic building will clarify how poetic naming, "through and within the word," 'throws open' being.

In order to come to terms with poetic building, we also need to understand Heidegger's notion of dwelling, for each determination invokes the other. In "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," Heidegger asserts that dwelling marks the fundamental character of human beings, it is ". . . the way in which mortals are upon the earth." (Heidegger, 1954:142) Also: "Dwelling . . . is the fundamental relation of being according to which mortals are." (Heidegger, 1954:155) In short, "dwelling" names the way in which human beings undergo relations with themselves, the world, as well as being itself. It names our fundamental relation to the horizon of disclosure wherein beings appear, are determined, match or contradict our beliefs about them, etc. Dwelling is thus a matter of our *Wesen*, of how we come to be the beings we are.

Why is dwelling essential to the production of poetic names? For all its originality and power, an *Ursprache* is still an event within language. If it works "through and within the word," an *Ursprache* must come to word. One thus has to ask about the conditions of its emergence, and that brings us back to the question of the dwelling-

site within which poetic determinations first arise. Is this to suggest then that the question of poetic building is really a question of how poets dwell, of how they come to be the beings they are? No, for it is not as if we could speak of dwelling apart from building. The two are essentially reciprocal events. On the one hand, dwelling involves our standing within a horizon of disclosure, what Heidegger at one point terms the "dimension" (Heidegger, 1954:189). And yet, disclosures take place only when the dimension has been "measured" or "surveyed" (ibid). We could say, the dimension unfolds only in virtue of its being measured, that is, we dwell only in relation to some measure.¹⁵ But then, there can be no measuring-building unless there already is dwelling, unless a horizon of disclosure were already there to be built upon and within. The two are thus equiprimordial. Said otherwise, no dimension is pure, but always already measured-out. And yet, neither is there an instance of Ur-building apart from the opening of some dimension. Such projects would lack a site in and upon which to build.

Tracking the play between building and dwelling unlocks poetry's relationship to Being. Note first that the equiprimordiality of poetic measures and the dimensions they survey recalls a similarly intimate pair from "The Origin of the Work of Art." While explaining how truth takes place in the *work* of art, i.e., how beings and Being are unconcealed in the *work* of art, Heidegger claims that disclosure only occurs through a double event which shares a single essence: the event of a *Lichtung der Offenheit* and an *Einrichtung in das Offene*, a "clearing of openness" and an "arranging across the open" (Heidegger, 1950:48). While an open of disclosure must have been cleared in order for arrangements to be made, one cannot speak of an open of disclosure except in relation to arrangements which figure that open. As with building and dwelling, one requires the other.

If we set the measuring of the *Ursprache* into the play of *Lichtung* and *Einrichtung*, clearing and arranging, we access the way in which Being is "thrown open" in an *Ursprache*. It isn't that originary poetic names attach some name to "Being," e.g., Cosmos, Brahman, Emptiness, etc. Rather, they allow Being to come to presence as the clearing of an open, that is, they allow the "truth of being,"

the clearing, to be manifest. Recall that Heidegger believes that the *Ursprache* is “. . . that through which everything first steps into the open” (Heidegger, 1971:43). What we are claiming now is that the *Ursprache* is also that through which the opening of the open is disclosed, even “thrown open.” Why “thrown open”? As the event which enables presence, the clearing of the open lags behind what comes to presence and falls away into concealment. In an *Ursprache*, however, the event of clearing, what withdraws behind that which comes to presence, is admitted into the open, that is, the lid of presence is “thrown open” so that the event of presencing also appears, albeit as what withdraws in the event of presencing.

One would like to know, of course, how poetry manages to allow the clearing of the open to presence, and how this disclosure contributes to the work of poetic founding. Let us begin with a *via negativa*. An *Ursprache* cannot name, straight-away, the event of clearing, thus bringing it within our reach. Proceeding in this way would conceal the clearing which enables that very figuration or “arranging,” thus robbing the *Ursprache* of its originariness. And yet, an *Ursprache* must nevertheless account for the clearing-arranging event of disclosure which marks its own origins. Otherwise, the dwelling space it purportedly opens and arranges would be circumscribed by whatever forces open and arrange its own coming into being. In other words, it would no longer be a founding event. Therefore, if a body of poetry is to provide an *Ursprache*, it must do so alongside of and through an Ur-poem, a self-figuring poem of poetry.¹⁶ In other words, as it opens and arranges a world or dimension wherein humans might dwell, it must also open and arrange the world of its own dwelling.

Now one might think it preposterous that a poem's self-relation could address questions concerning the very meaning of human existence. But suppose that what we are calling an Ur-poem, were read as a dramatization of the birth of sense or meaning itself? What if the Ur-poem portrayed, even performed, the emergence of the abundance of sense which makes up our world? Would it not then figure for us the very sense of what is? Not, of course, one being at a time, but in coming to terms with how sense itself

emerges, it would enable us to hear and see and think in each and every sense or meaning a genesis tale, a poem of origins to accompany every experience, every memory, even every flash of presence. And if an Ur-poetry provided us with such a far reaching sensibility, would it not then change our lives, and most dramatically? Would it not overdetermine whatever could be said to be, whether it *was* an index finger, a chestnut, starlight, or a poem? But let us not continue to consider this matter so abstractly. Rather, we should engage the matter within the context of a particular *Ursprache*, Charles Simic's.¹⁷

THE WHITES OF ALL EYES

"My lifelong subject, despite appearances to the contrary, was always an unknown woman who made me forget my name every time we bumped into one another on the street."

—Charles Simic, *Orphan Factory* (Simic, 1997:115)

Before beginning our engagement with Simic, it bears notice that his work explicitly engages Heidegger. As he explains in an interview from 1978:

I've always felt that inside each of us there is a profound anonymity. Sometimes I think that when you go deep inside, you meet everyone else on a sort of common ground—or you meet nobody. But whatever you meet, it is not yours though you enclose it. We are the container, and this nothingness is what we enclose. This is where Heidegger is very interesting to me (Simic, 1985:62).

And in another interview from 1991:

Already Hölderlin asked the question: "And what are poets good for in a destitute time?" And Heidegger replies: "In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced by those who reach into the abyss." I continue to believe that poetry says more about the psychic life of an age than any other art. Poetry is a place where all the fundamental questions are asked about the human condition (Weigel, 1996:210).

One is thus not unduly violent in bringing Heideggerian themes

into Simic's work. But where to begin? Because it recoils into the origins of sense, Simic's long poem *White*, an elusive lyric sequence consisting of three parts and totaling 245 lines holds the key to his *Ursprache*.¹⁸ When all is counted, one sees that the first two parts of *White* are comprised of ten segments, each involving five, two-line pairs. The last, entitled "What the White had to Say," contains two twenty-line soliloquies. More interesting, however, is the fact that *White* opens with a speaker preparing to begin again, and without presuppositions, even virginally.

*Out of poverty
To begin again
With the color of the bride
And that of blindness, (lines 1-4)*

But he is unsure of how to proceed, and thus seeks to:

*Touch what I can
Of the quick,
Speak and then wait,
As if this light
Will continue to linger
On the threshold. (lines 5-10)*

Note how empty this beginning is. As the next line proclaims:

*All that is near,
I know longer give it a name. (lines 11-12)*

White thus begins by not beginning, opening instead with paralysis.

This paralyzing poverty is peculiar. First, it appears self-imposed, stemming from a refusal to name what is near, most familiar. Second, it is tied to a desire to begin again, freshly, as if existing names had failed or dimmed. I take it, therefore, that the speaker's poverty ultimately concerns his poetizing, his ability to name what surrounds him, even what is near, and that includes the work of poetry itself. If this is right, then *White* opens by confessing that its poetizing has floundered, that as poetry, it no longer knows how to

conduct itself or even what it is. The fact that it continues on for several hundred lines is thus odd. Are these lines “poetry”? Perhaps they involve something prior to what we would normally call “poetry,” something less certain, a kind of Ur-poetry which seeks less the essence or even flash of things than the rim of poetry itself, the site from which “poetry” commences.¹⁹ That is how I hear *White*, as an Ur-poetry struggling to find itself at its origin, carrying out the task Simic announces in “Composition.” “In the beginning, always, a myth of origins of the poetic act. A longing to lower oneself one notch below language, to touch the bottom—that place of ‘original action and desire,’ to recover our mute existence, to recreate what is unspoken and enduring in words of the poem . . .” (Simic, 1985:110).²⁰

What remains of part one is a journey, a pilgrimage towards a place from which to begin, again. More precisely, the speaker seeks a bride who might enable him to visit the stars.

*Enough glow to kneel by and ask
To be tied to its tail
When it goes marrying
Its cousins the stars. (lines 17–20)*

And one finds the same thought in the fifth segment of the first part.

*That your gaze
Be merciful,
Sister, bride
Of my first hopeless insomnia.
Kind nurse, show me
The place of salves.
Teach me the song
That makes a man raise
His glass at dusk
Until a star dances in it. (lines 41–50)*

What is occurring here? How might we regard the betrothed, the

honeymoon stars? Since the speaker hopes that the bride will bring song, she seems muselike, a giver of words which aim to bring stars to the glass of whomever sings them. This is thus a bride whose dowry includes the poetic word.²¹

But what of the stars that the speaker would summon and journey towards on the wings of his bride? In "Reading Philosophy at Night," Simic claims:

Both poetry and philosophy, for instance, are concerned with Being. What is a lyric poem, one might say, but the recreation of the experience of Being. In both cases, that need to get it down to its essentials, to say the unsayable and let the truth of Being shine through (Simic, 1990c:60).

And in "Assembly Required," he asserts:

Every poetic image asks why is there something rather than nothing, as it renews our astonishment that things exist (Simic, 1997:96).

Finally, in "Poetry is the Present," he suggests:

The poets, so we believe, remind the philosophers, again and again, of the world's baffling presence (Simic, 1994:55).

In other words, I take the shimmering stars to be the shimmering of Being, of the world in its presencing, of all that is there and not nothing, for that is what poetry seeks, according to Simic—to reach into the heavens and sing the "baffling presence of the world" within a raised glass or word.

But the speaker's journey results in naught. Along the way, he remarks:

*There are words I need.
They are not near men.
I went searching.
Is this a deathmarch?
You bend me, bend me
Oh toward what flower!*

*Little known vowel,
Noose big for us all.* (lines 53–60)

Despair strikes. He fears that this “O,” perhaps the “O” of a mouth opening to speak, will prove his hangman. And things do not improve as the first part ends. When he presses his fingertips against the white page, he hears only a “holy nothing” “blindfolding itself.” (line 93) The speaker thus finds himself back at the beginning with his poverty, hoping to ‘begin again with the color of the bride and that of blindness.’

In part two, the speaker redirects his search. No longer an itinerant pilgrim, he turns inward, ascetically, and prepares for the White should she arrive. In a mocking self-interrogation the speaker describes how he will prepare himself as a sacrificial meal, offering to “. . . roast on my heart’s dark side” until “. . . the half-moons on my fingernails set,” that is, until the death after death when our finger nails finally cease growing (lines 102&108).²²

The next segment makes evident, however, that this is far from a labor of self-mastery, underscoring the poverty of the speaker’s situation.

*Well, you can’t call me a wrestler
If my own dead weight has me pinned down.
Well, you can’t call me a cook
If the pot’s got me under cover.* (lines 111–114)

Nor are the efforts at self-sacrifice entirely successful.

*Nor can you call me a saint,
If I didn’t err, there wouldn’t be these smudges.* (lines 119–120)

In other words, the speaker’s ascetic self-erasure is incomplete—smudges remain, darkening the White.

Amid this intensifying poverty, some insights do seem to flash, however. Segment four opens with discovery. “This is breath, only breath” (line 131). “This”? Poetizing itself is implied, for song and speech are, in a sense, only breath. The nature of breath eludes the speaker, however, who confesses:

*But when I shout,
Its true name sticks in my throat. (lines 135-136)*

But things couldn't be otherwise, for one cannot speak the name of breath, only presuppose it. What then?

*White—let me step aside
So that the future may see you,
For when this sheet is blown away.
What else is left
But to set the food on the table
To cut oneself as slice of bread? (lines 145-150)*

The White, with its poetic word, appears to have forsaken the speaker at his altar of self-abnegation, and thus he pursues this abnegation to an extreme, renouncing even his desire for the White, opting instead for the banality of a life without a White upon which to name the world in its baffling presence.

But perhaps this was what was required all along, for in the wake of his apostasy, fate strikes in segment six (lines 151-160). A "true-blue Orphan" encounters an "obscure widow" in the "unknown year" of an "algebraic century" on an "indeterminate street corner." Note the radical indeterminacy here. Given the speaker's poverty, his world is nearly formless, his century one of variables awaiting determination. But fate pushes through this limbo, and the orphaned speaker is given:

*A tiny sugar cube
In the hand so wizened
All the lines said: fate. (lines 158-160)*

While sugar is sweet, the widow's hand is sweeter, initiating the wedding ceremony that is segment seven.

*Do you take this line
Stretching to infinity?
I take this chipped tooth
On which to cut it in half.*

*Do you take this circle
Bounded by a single curved line?
I take this breath
That it cannot capture.
Then you may kiss the spot
Where her bridal train last rustled. (lines 161-170)*

Note that the speaker does not simply accept the vows. Twice he is offered the hand of infinity, what I take to be the infinite lines of fate which converge in the wizened hand of the "obscure widow." The first time he responds with a chipped tooth, cutting in half the fateful line. He later refuses the infinite and perfect loop of the circle (i.e., the wedding ring) in favor of breath, recalling the breath of speech and song uncovered in segment four. What does this suggest? In each instance, I find an affirmation of mortality over and against whatever the infinite would offer. If you recall the spinning Fates of Greek mythology (Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos), you'll also recall that a snip of their lines results in death, and this seems to be what the speaker embraces in place of the infinite line being offered (with its implicit promises of "lineage" and "destiny"). Likewise, he elects to remain with the breath that he breathes and which carries whatever song he, as a mortal human being, might sing, whatever name he might shout. But such a choice renders this an odd marriage. While it is implied that the couple has been pronounced "married," the speaker is only invited to ". . . kiss the spot/Where her bridal train last rustled," that is, insofar as he remains mortal, he remains wedded to the wake of the White's gait, grasping after her sublime hem.

Despite the irony which consummates his nuptials, the speaker achieves some repose. Recalling Stevens's "The Snow Man," he welcomes Winter and the way in which it turns our planet into a grave.²³

*Winter can come now,
The earth narrow to a ditch—(lines 171-172)*

And the poetic word is granted, albeit in a form appropriate to one who has refused to renounce mortality.

*The snow can fall . . .
What other perennials would you plant,
. . . For those remote, finely honed bees
The December stars? (lines 175–180)*

It would seem, then, that the speaker receives the poetic word, thus abating his poverty. But if this is so, it is only for a moment. The snow of this breath which he refused to abandon will melt, disappear.

And yet, despite this repose, the journey has taken its toll. The ninth segment opens with an odd line: "Had to get through me elsewhere" (line 181). Syntactically, the subject is ambiguous. Who or what 'had to get through'? In the self-effacing efforts of the earlier segments, was the speaker trying to work through himself such that he might finally leave himself behind and engage the White? Such is the logic of asceticism. Perhaps the subject is thus "I." But then, lines of fate also run through us on their way to elsewhere. By definition, fate scorns our autonomy, leaving us at the mercy of its motions. Is the subject then "It" or "They"? But a choice seems artificial. After segment six, the speaker is so thoroughly in the grasp of fate that "fate" no longer lies outside him. Regardless, whatever pushes through moves relentlessly, ant-like: "Gravedigger ants," "Village-idiot ants" (lines 189–90). He thus moans:

*Woe to the bone
That stood in their way. (lines 182–183)*

But "woe" is not his only affliction. In fact, the repose of the eighth segment wanes in segment ten, which begins, "This is the last summoning," as if the speaker seeks more than the ". . . the spot/ Where her bridal train last rustled," as if words of snow, despite their evident and unique, crystalline whiteness were insufficient. Moreover, the speaker invokes the dead letter office of his fear, confesses his doubt, bemoans his insomnia (lines 192, 195, 196, 199).²⁴ Part two then finishes "Solitude—as in the beginning," perhaps annulling whatever had been brought together in the nuptials of segment seven (line 192).

But *White* is not yet at a close. A third part remains, entitled "What the White Had to Say." One might think that this marks the final desperate summons "successful," and the former efforts, the opening pilgrimage and the labor of ascetic self-effacement, failures. But the *White* bears curious tidings of her ways and days. First, she asserts her radical anteriority to whatever demands might be made upon her, claiming that she has ". . . gone through everyone already" and ". . . thought of you before you thought of me" (lines 206–07). Moreover, she insists, most radically, ". . . I am nearer to you than your breath" (215). In other words, whatever articulations we might employ to name or represent the *White*, she stands before them, enabling breath, thinking us before we think her. Open your mouth, exhale, let words sound forth—the *White* is already there. Note how this recoils on the notion of a summons; the breath which calls out has overlooked the fact that what it seeks is always already there.

Though always already there, the *White* is far from placid. It runs through us, like a bullet:

*Because I am the bullet
That has baptized each of your senses,
Poems are made of our lusty wedding nights,
The joy of words as they are written.* (lines 225–228)

Speeding like a bullet, the *White* has already come and gone by the time poems are born, by the time words are written. Moreover, the *White* is already there baptizing by the time one's senses feel the impress of *aisthesis*—the emptiness of a sky, the age of an oak, the mute life of a mannequin, the unnerving independence of a numb finger. One is always too late for the *White*. But words are nevertheless written, poems nevertheless born. And yet, one should not expect to write with the *White* in tow. Rather, the birth of poems testifies to her having already been there, to consummated vows, as does the presence of what is. But this coition eludes our gaze, precedes our voice. By the time we turn to express our affection, all that remains is ". . . the spot/Where her bridal train last rustled" (lines 169–70).

Through "What the White had to Say," we are realizing that the speaker is not given insight into the grounds of his voice despite the fact that the White appears to address him. That bed remains unfathomable. All one apprehends are searing joys of inspiration, the impress of presence.

*Each one of you still keeps a blood-stained handkerchief
In which to swaddle me, but it stays empty
And even the wind won't remain in it long.
Cleverly you've invented name after name for me,
Mixed the riddles, garbled the proverbs,
Shook your loaded dice in a tin cup,
But I do not answer to your curses . . . (lines 208-214)*

Note again her insistent anteriority: she is quicker than the wind which is already too quick for our hankies. How then capture her? We can't: ". . . the most beautiful riddle has no answer" (line 231). Instead, one is left with and in the wake of her train, with traces of blood, poems, stark presences.

To insist upon the anteriority of the White is not to substantialize it, however, as if it hovered above poets and things as a transcendental ground or condition of the possibility of meaning, poetry, or sense. The White, like Heidegger's clearing, locates herself in the everyday.

*One sun shines on us both through a crack in the roof.
A spoon brings me through the window at dawn.
A plate shows me off to the four walls . . . (lines 216-218)*

In other words, the White moves in the shine of things, that is, they carry it, testify to its having been there. As one lifts a spoon or sets a plate, the White, flying through the roots of all commerce, is reflected around and about. And ubiquitously:

*Steadily, patiently I lift your arms.
I arrange them in the posture of someone drowning,
And yet the sea in which you are sinking,
And even this night above it, is myself. (lines 221-224)*

In still other words, the White moves through the fabric of sense which animates all things.

Anterior, searing, ubiquitous, mundane, the White reminds the speaker of her fatedness.

Take a letter: From cloud to onion.

Say: There was never any real choice. (lines 235–36)

But then there couldn't be, for choices come too late within this drama. Choices move with breath and the White moves just prior to those inhalations, leaving the whole marvel of sense suspended in emptiness.

*I am the emptiness that tucks you in like a mockingbird's
nest,*

The fingernail that scratched on your sleep's blackboard.
(lines 232–234)

Again, ubiquity. White provides an empty nest for our squawks, and, given the ambiguity of "sleep's blackboard," it seems to both spell out our dreams (or poems) and call us into the waking world. And Simic's use of "emptiness" underscores that here lies the "most beautiful riddle [that] has no answer." Out of the emptiness comes the poetic word, like scratches in the night. Push past those scratches, however, and only emptiness remains. As Simic says in 1972:

Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience behind them. We are always at the beginning, eternal apprentices, thrown back again and again into that condition. (Simic, 1985:5)

White's speaker was right, therefore, to muse: "A zero burped by a bigger zero—" (line 193).²⁵

As a poem of poetry, an Ur-poem, *White* unveils a stark drama. Poetic words come like scratches in the night, but if one seeks the chicken foot dragging down sleep's blackboard, one will only find a riddled emptiness. I take it that this is why the poem closes with the White saying:

. . . *That milk tooth*

You left under the pillow, it's grinning. (lines 244-45)

It's grinning because one cannot summon this muse like the tooth fairy; she remains anterior to such antics. I suppose it is also grinning because in the end, the tooth remains 'white,' and thus the summoner has overlooked the fact that the White was already there, whispering: "I thought of you long before you thought of [or summoned] me." But these ironies may elude the speaker, and thus the White worries at the close of her second soliloquy that the speaker has yet to really understand her ubiquity, her mundaneness, and above all, her anteriority.

Street-organ full of blue notes,

I am the monkey dancing to you grinding—

And still you are afraid—and so,

It's as if we had not budged from the beginning. (lines 239-242)

What a wonderfully helpless conclusion. One cannot summon the poetic word from its ground; it comes when it will, like fate, and refuses to attest to its origin, even though the blood we find come morning lets us know that our wedding night was lusty indeed. And yet, Simic refuses to render the White otherworldly. Instead, it is there among and alongside every letter and thing, elusive, riddlesome.²⁶

For all its self-conscious concern with poetry, I think we do *White* a disservice if we limit the range of its Ur-musings to that field of meaning we have come to call "poetry," even given poetry's manifold forms and voices. While *White* no doubt pursues the origin of the poetic word and even poetic inspiration and imagination, it also engages much broader questions concerning the birth of sense per se. I find this to be most poignantly evident in the following lines from "What the White had to Say."

Because I am the bullet

That has baptized each one of your senses,

Poems are made of our lusty wedding nights. (lines 225-27)

Here the "bullet" testifies to the ways in which events of disclosure rip through our senses. After all, we do not summon experience, it

washes over us, or rather, strikes us, laying claim to our attention. And I have already suggested that this passage sets the anteriority of the White before the *aisthesis* which initiates the experience of the poet and inspires the poet's work, e.g., in the guise of a startling vista, an event of love or loss, the ring of two consonants, the patter of a marvelous phrase. But we can push farther than this and claim that the White is here asserting her ability to wash over each of the senses, i.e., taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing. And yet, neither reading captures the radical sense lurking in the White's claim on "each one of your [or even our] senses."

Etymologically, to "baptize" means 'to dip,' from the Greek *baptizein*. Into what does the White dip "each one of your senses"? Into the ". . . emptiness that tucks you in like a mockingbird's/nest" (lines 323–33). That is, the White baptizes "each one of your senses" into the "profound anonymity" and "nothingness" that Simic senses inside us, what he regards as our "common ground" to recall some lines from the interview with Rick Jackson and Michael Panori (Simic, 1985:62). But note that Simic does not limit this anonymity to the ground of poetic inspiration or language, but marks it as the "common ground" that lurks "inside each of us." One thus has reason to believe that the White lays claim to more than the sense of the poem, although most certainly to the sense of the poem. Second, as a "ground," common or otherwise, this "profound anonymity" lies at our root, and thus is tethered to the full range of our foliage, that is, to "each one of [our] senses," hearing in "sense" the very figure of sense itself. In other words, I hear in the White's claim to "each one of our senses" a claim upon whatever we might suppose to have sense, to be-there before us, to be present, to be disclosed as something *that is* rather than nothing.

On my reading, then, *White's* Ur-poem poetizes not only the origin of the poem, but the origin of whatever can be said to be, to have sense, and in a remarkably reflexive way, that is, through poetizing what comes to pass before its own emergence into sense. As an Ur-poem, *White* is thus also an *Ursprache*, dramatizing how beings come to presence. But recall, an *Ursprache* does not name beings one by one. Rather, it baptizes their sense in its sense of

sense, thus recasting whatever can be said to be there within the ranges it opens. One can thus see how *White* reaches into the 'abyss of the world' that Simic seeks, following Heidegger. It reaches beyond what is present and fingers the rim of presencing itself. And this is how *White*, to recall Heidegger himself, ". . . demands a metamorphosis in our manner of thinking and experiencing, one regarding the whole of being" (Heidegger, 1984:205). Rather than effecting transformations at the level of particular things, say poetry, *White* transforms our sense of sense, thus bearing upon 'the whole of being.' It is thus with good reason that I began this engagement of Simic's work with a long reading of *White*, for in dramatizing the originary moments of sense itself, its silences punctuate all of Simic's work, that is, to hear a Simic poem is also to hear the *White* out of which it has emerged and upon which it has been written. In a very real way, then, *White* is part and parcel of every Simic poem, and any attempt to engage his *Ursprache* must trace out the journeys it enacts.

For all the radicality at play in *White*, Simic routinely invokes the philosophy of (un)consciousness in his prose accounts of the origins of poetry, at times sounding more Husserlian than Heideggerian.²⁷ Particularly in interviews and essays from the 1970s, he writes as if the origin of the poetic word lay within the poet's psyche, buried beneath the structures and temporality of consciousness. If this were so, then the origin of poetry would not be, as *White* seems to suggest, a radical, fateful silence, but the hidden percolation of human subjectivity. True, unconscious or preconscious eruptions may be mysterious, but they are not truly "orphans of silence." Instead, their silences are mere lacunae within a much theorized and explored discourse of the psyche, one common to surrealism and psychoanalysis.

In his conversation with Rick Jackson and Michael Panori, Simic says in response to their questions concerning 'the poem's space':

I'm one of those who believes that there is something that precedes language. The usual view is that there is some kind of equivalence between thought and language, that if you can't verbalize it you can't think it. I've always felt that there is a *state*

that precedes verbalization, a complexity of *experience* that consists of things not yet brought to consciousness, not yet existing as language, but as some sort of inner pressure. Any verbal act includes a selection, a conceptualization, a narrowing down (Simic, 1985:61—emphases added).²⁸

Likewise, in “The Partial Explanation,” he writes:

This is, indeed, the crucial event. The instant when that slumbering, almost anonymous content [here a phrase which initiated a poem—“a long time since the waiter took my order”—JTL] becomes audible, when its *privacy* is abolished and it translates itself into language (Simic, 1985:102—emphasis added).

Simic here refers his explanations, partial as they might be, to three fundamental tropes of subjectivity: experience, states, and privacy. And one can understand why. The language of the poem is in some sense written by the poet and not any old bystander. Likewise, poets have to work on that language, refine it, revise it, and thus it is in some sense their affair. Intuitively, then, one can understand why Simic would believe that the language of the poem appears mysteriously within the receptive confines of consciousness.

Despite its intuitive appeal, Heidegger resists locating the origin of poetry within subjective orbits. In his 1941–42 course on Hölderlin’s *Andenken*, he states: “The poetizing word names that which comes over the poet and transposes him into an affiliation which he has not created but can only follow” (Heidegger, 1982:7). And in the 1942 course on *Der Ister*: “The poetic is never conceived through the poet, but conversely, the poet is to be conceived *only* out of the *Wesen*/essence of poetry” (Heidegger, 1984:149). Finally, in “Das Gedicht,” from 1968: “The poet has not invented that which is his poetry’s ownmost. It is allotted him. He joins himself to [its] direction and follows [its] call” (Heidegger, 1971:183).

At stake in Heidegger’s remarks, and Simic’s apparent distance from them, is the question of the origin of poetry and ultimately, of “sense” itself. Heidegger is driven away from subjective tropes

because he finds them insufficiently originary. As he argues in an early Marburg lecture from 1925, a phenomenology which focuses upon acts of consciousness (and here it matters not if they are conscious, unconscious, or preconscious), forgoes any interrogation of the being or sense of those cognitive events.²⁹ Instead, they are taken as primitives, thus foreclosing questions concerning their own coming to be. Second, a poetry which delimits its figurations within such theoretical tropes forgoes all claims to the originary and allows its musing to be circumscribed by the conceptual frame instituted by the adopted theory, hence the appearance of terms like privacy, experience, state, and consciousness in Simic's prose. Simic's reliance on the tropes of subjectivity thus counteracts the logic of his belief that: "The poem is the place where origins are allowed to think" (Simic, 1985:112). In assuming that something like the human subject lurks at the origin of the poem, Simic precludes his poetry from thinking the origin at all.³⁰ Instead, his thought, at least in his prose reflections, is forced by its initial assumptions to return again and again to the supposed originariness of the pre-linguistic, simple psyche. I would thus prefer that he follow Heidegger here, and leave Husserl's subjectivism behind.³¹

Simic might be loathe to forego the philosophy of consciousness, however. Repeatedly, he insists that lyric poetry has political import precisely because it expresses the view of one over and against the reign of many. As he writes in "The Minotaur Loves His Labyrinth": "The individual is the measurer, the world is what is measured, and the language of poetry is the measure. There! Now you can hang me by my tongue" (Simic, 1994:107). And in "The Flute Player in the Pit": "Lyric poets perpetuate the oldest values on earth. They assert the individual's experience against that of the tribe" (Simic, 1994:4). But one need not invoke the philosophy of consciousness in order to claim that lyric poetry defends the singularity of presencing. By keeping to the phenomenological orientation invoked above, lyric poetry, simply by attending to things as they show themselves from themselves, remains opposed to totalizing tribal schemes. In other words, even as an orphan of radical silence, lyric poetry could remain a defender of the mortal singularity of presencing, and refuse, with the speaker of *White*, to marry

into an infinite line.³² In fact, by making evident the silence that underwrites presence itself, an *Ursprache* like Simic's would underscore that presence is not the consequence of some metaphysical ground, not an instance of a universal type, but a singular sense born out of apparent, even readily apparent, nothingness.³³

SLAUGHTER-BENCHES AND WRITERS' TABLES

*"The street of many concealed felonies
So pretty in the morning sunlight."*

—Charles Simic, "The Big Coverup"

For all its force, *White* does not exhaust Simic's *Ursprache*. In "Fried Sausage," we find:

This is how I see it. There are three ways to think about the world. You can think about the Cosmos (as the Greeks did), you can think about History (as the Hebrews did), and since the eighteenth century you can think about Nature. . . . I myself fancy the cosmic angle. The brain-chilling infinities and silences of modern astronomy and Pascalian thought impress me deeply, except that I'm also a child of History. I've seen tanks, piles of corpses, and people strung from lampposts with my own eyes. (Simic, 1994:20)³⁴

The mouth of Simic's Ur-poetry is thus at least two sided. On the one hand, Simic can write in response to Joseph Cornell's eerie boxes: "Cosmogenies are soap bubbles. . . . A soap bubble has no content. After it has burst, there's nothing left of it" (Simic, 1992:54). And with the other, he can insist, as he does while introducing the work of Ale? Debeljak: "The poet who is not sensitive to the enormity and complexity of our historical and intellectual predicament is not worth reading" (Simic, 1994:119).

But how does a poem testify to the force of history? And how does Simic's work understand the history it has inherited? Consider "Empire of Dreams" from *Classic Ballroom Dances* (Simic, 1980:17).

*On the first page of my dreambook
It's always evening*

*In an occupied country.
Hour before the curfew.
A small provincial city.
The houses all dark.
The store-fronts gutted.
I am on a street corner
Where I shouldn't be.
Alone and coatless
I have gone out to look
For a black dog who answers to my whistle.
I have a kind of halloween mask
Which I am afraid to put on.*

"Empire of Dreams," like *White*, opens before the moment of writing, or rather, it doubles back upon its own inscriptions and asks: what is already there? This is thus another originary poem, one which explores the moment before poetry is written. Here, however, the speaker encounters something more than an elusive *White*. Instead of a dimly lit threshold, the speaker finds on the first page of a dreambook, the "dream" a classic image of the poem, an occupied country, a pending curfew, and a city in ruins.

In its recoil, "Empire of Dreams" returns to a point before the poem's commencement and finds a history already in play. More specifically, the speaker finds a fiercely authoritarian setting. The curfew suggests that soon the allotted time for dreaming and poetizing will end, that is, forces have come to regulate what a poet might write. That such a fate is not simply the stuff of nightmares should go without saying. Not only are poets killed (e.g., Lorca, Mandelstam), imprisoned, and exiled, but the lines of totalitarianism can be found right on the page, as is evident in the second part Akhmatova's *Poem Without A Hero*. Stanza ten begins with three lines of ellipses followed by: "And the decades file by,/Tortures, exiles and deaths . . . I can't sing/In the midst of this horror" (Akhmatova, 1992:569). Stanzas Eleven and Twelve follow, composed only of ellipses, which maintain the graphic form of the previous stanzas. How are we to regard this "can't," this inability? The ellipses signify elisions, for Akhmatova did not believe that she

would be permitted to publicly address the atrocities of the show trials and purges. Completed stanzas do exist, however, and thus we know what Akhmatova wanted to sing. Stanza Eleven, for example, speaks of "How we lived in unconscious fear,/How we raised children for the executioner,/For the prison and for the torture chamber" (Akhmatova, 1992:582). But such a song had no place in the public text of *Poem Without A Hero*. Instead, one had to make do with the punctuated presence of totalitarian rule.

But then, I think that "Empire of Dreams" imagines a fate more sinister than censorship. Its dreambook is open, but before a word is even written occupation is there. As the short, clipped sentences suggest, these are hushed tones, remarks hurried by fear. Why all this stealth? This open page is a street corner where the speaker shouldn't be, that is, to open the dreambook is already to brook insubordination. In this empire, even to broach the possibility of poetry is to violate existing rules. Moreover, it is to expose oneself, 'alone and coatless' in an evening of occupation. But the speaker has risked these violations and gone out. To write? Not yet. First, s/he seeks a ". . . a black dog who answers to my whistle." The image is cryptic, but suggests a few things. On the one hand, the dog may offer protection on these streets, as though one is less likely to suffer harm with a quasi-familiar at one's side. On the other hand, the dog, more accustomed to skulking about after hours, may be able to lead the less adept speaker through the mazes of road blocks and guard posts, thus enabling him or her to record with greater precision what remains of the life of this city.³⁵ Under occupation, perhaps the best muse is a street wise cur.

The poem closes with an unnerving image. Whistling for a black dog, alone and coatless, curfew time drawing in, the speaker carries a Halloween mask. Not yet writing, the speaker holds a mask in his or her hand. Why? To elude detection? To participate in a secret festival of the dead? We cannot be sure. What is more palpable, however, is the speaker's fear. Why is s/he afraid? Before a word has even been written, can one don a mask? If so, what will one write? According to Simic, ". . . the poet is driven to tell the truth" (Simic, 1994:2). Under times of occupation, and the present is anything but a time of autonomy, poetic or otherwise, must

the writer risk the distortion of a mask in order to pass through the censors of the day? If so, can the truth be told, whether it concerns 'the world's baffling presence' or the slings and arrows of a fate, which does more than 'scratch on sleep's blackboard'? From out of the darkness that surrounds "Empire of Dreams," a question emerges. To what degree is poetry, a poetry, which would tell the truth, presently possible? Might not the weight of historical forces overpower the poem at the outset, before words can be written on the first page of a dream book, its page no doubt white?

At stake in this question concerning history's force in the language of the poem is the originary power Heidegger attributes to poetry. Does poetry always have the power to fashion an *Ursprache* and bathe presence itself in its sense of sense? In "Poem Without A Title," from *Dismantling the Silence*, a poem which again calls to mind Akhmatova's *Poem Without A Hero*, Simic best addresses this question.

*I say to the lead
Why did you let yourself
Be cast into a bullet?
Have you forgotten the alchemists?
Have you given up hope
Of turning into gold?
Nobody answers.
Lead. Bullet. With names
Such as these
The sleep is deep and long. (Simic, 1971:62)*

This is a startling poem. First, it too begins at the beginning, addressing the lead of a pencil, what enables a poem to be written upon the white pages of a dreambook. Second, it struggles with the history that lead has led—war, assassination, domestic tragedy, and the shame ridden glory of defense. And it interrogates, presses, tries to awaken promises now dormant. But it fails. "Nobody answers." Instead, lead has become the bullet, and it cannot be reminded of times when its future was less certain, less grim, when it could lay upon an alchemist's table and dream of being gold. Hence, this is a "Poem Without a Title," for it never becomes a

poem. The speaker fails to take the lead of the pencil into the region of the poem where the possibility of new names is somehow preserved, where the possibility of new figurations lurks.

According to Simic, then, poetry can fail, and the outset.³⁶ It can find its Ur-pretensions rebuffed by the weight of historical forces. What does this tell us about the pretensions of an *Ursprache*? I think the claim must be that poetry is always a site of contestation among historical forces, that just atop the silence located and exhibited in *White* a din rattles and rages such that Ur-poetry not only must reflexively return to its origins, but engage its historical inheritance as well, and win from it the right to speak with its own voice.³⁷ If this is so, then an *Ursprache*, if it is to be truly originary, must always address at least two facets of its nature: its ontological rims and the historical fabric out of which it tries to cut itself.³⁸

But one should beware of taking "history" too abstractly, for Simic is more specifically concerned with the force of particular histories, totalitarianism first of all. And yet, despite its palpability, Simic's fear of authoritarian rule is hauntingly elusive. What forms will the censor take? How will the poem police find their way into the first pages of our dream books? I think we might gain better access to Simic's understanding of totalitarianism if we return to his insistence that the singularity of lyric poetry is staunchly political. In "Elegy in A Spider's Web," he writes: "The lyric poet is almost by definition a traitor to his own people. He is the stranger who speaks the harsh truth that only individual lives are unique and therefore sacred" (Simic, 1994b:38). Now, this declaration that individual lives are sacred describes any who would willingly sacrifice individuals to some systemic religious, political, or philosophical end. But this cannot be all, for "Empire of Dreams" claims that the secret police not only can compel conscription in some (un)holy war, but that they have the power to work their way into our thoughts and dreams, such that, without our knowing it, our first person might not be ours. If this is so, then the war that lyric poetry fights against totalitarianism involves more than affirmations and defenses of the value of individuals.

Two questions are in play. First, what understanding of totalitarianism is appropriate to the fears which manifest themselves in

poems like "Empire of Dreams"? Second, how does Simic's work confront those fears, that is, how does it resist totalitarianism? In order to appreciate the depths of Simic's fear, we need to come to terms with the kind of totalitarianism that moves across the pages of dream books with the speed of neural transmissions. To this end, consider Jean-Luc Nancy's and Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe's analyses of "new totalitarianism."³⁹ In contrast to "classical totalitarianism," which seeks to subordinate particularities to some transcendental end, e.g., the drive of reason in history or the destiny of a *Volk*, new totalitarianism obliterates transcendence altogether, and subjects every moment of presencing to a coercive logic always already attempting to totalize the range of its extension. The difference is decisive. Whereas appeals to transcendence in classical totalitarianism allow one, if only formally, to test their legitimacy, thus opening regimes to normative spheres which lie outside the naked power they wield, new totalitarianism denies the existence of an "outside" (or of alterity) altogether.

According to Arendt:

The fundamental reason for the superiority of totalitarian propaganda over the propaganda of other parties and movements is that its content, for the members of the movement at any rate, is no longer an objective issue about which people may have opinions, but has become as real and untouchable an element in their lives as the rules of arithmetic. The organization of the entire texture of life according to an ideology can be fully carried out only under a totalitarian regime. In Nazi Germany, questioning the validity of racism and anti-Semitism when nothing mattered but race origin . . . was like questioning the existence of the world. (Arendt, 1958:363)

On the surface, this kind of self-evidence, one which protected Nazi racial theories from scrutiny, gives us an example of new totalitarianism at work. But certain facets of Arendt's account suggest that Nazism, at least on this analysis, failed to employ the wholesale immanence of new totalitarian politics. First, new totalitarian proclamations are not "propaganda." "Propaganda" connotes "lying," and this is precisely what does not occur under the conditions of

new totalitarianism. Whereas Stalin routinely rewrote Russian history to suit his needs, new totalitarianism, under the supposed rigors of neo-positivist methodologies, purports to traffic in the real. In fact, I would even hesitate to refer to new totalitarian ideologies as "theories." "Theory" suggests a qualification at odds with the kind of purported necessity that organizes new totalitarian regimes. Established along positivist lines, they trade in facts, ever committed to a no-nonsense realism. As such, their "theories" are limited to inductive predications and thus, as the positivists would have it, they are practically devoid of theoretical content, content one might call into question or, in either a dialectical or deconstructive fashion, explore as the trace of an unacknowledged origin. As Adorno and Horkheimer would say: "Factuality is confirmed, cognition is restricted to its repetition, thought proceeds towards empty tautology. The more that this thought-machinery subjects a being to itself, the more blindly it contents itself with its reproduction" (Horkheimer, 1987:49).

Second, there is an ambiguity in Arendt's account. It isn't clear whether Germans refrained from questioning National Socialist racism because they took it to be true or considered it idle to oppose it. If the latter was the case, then what remained self-evident was not the truth of Nazi ideology but the fact that disagreement was pointless. Under conditions of new totalitarianism, however, reigning ideologies do not appeal to a cynical reality principle, stick in hand, but present themselves as reality itself. One has to reason to suppose, therefore, that forces like the secret police might prove anachronistic in a new totalitarian regime. In the face of what we take to be reality, we would police ourselves.

Because they speak from the standpoint of reality itself, new totalitarian regimes not only are able to perpetrate their occlusions and oppressions outside the official channels of recognition, but they are able to reduce Simic's dreambook to just that: mere dream, mere fancy. They are thus able to deny that poetry has access to what Simic insists the lyric can articulate: the truth in its singularity and radical indeterminacy, i.e., the world in its baffling presence. Under conditions of new totalitarianism, nothing is baffling, only inconvenient, only a set back for the prediction of the

day. One is thus denied even a peek past the walls erected as the demands of reality itself, although one can always daydream.

If it is proper to read Simic through analyses of "new totalitarianism," then poems like *White* assume political significance. Where new totalitarianism would erect walls of a *real* governed by necessity, those attentive to the *White* which underwrites all articulations hear only the winds of contingency. In other words, *White* makes plain that no system is ever compete unto itself, for those who attend to the origins of the sense it pretends to make, or rather, represent, will always find beneath totalitarian ground cover a white tooth grinning. To live in a world figured by Simic's *Ursprache* is thus to live in a world opposed to totalitarianism from the "ground" up. This may be why totalitarian regimes would keep us from the street corners where poems and poets convene. The threat is not simply posed by poems of agitation and protest, though so-called "committed" work may offer some measure of resistance. Rather, the challenge issues forth from that originary corner itself, its whiteness barely visible beneath the yellowing rubble. As the poet opens the white pages of his or her dreambook, thus exposing the indeterminate, silent origin lying at the bounds and grounds of sense, the closing dome of totalitarian rule is punctured, its claims to necessity thwarted by a sense of sense which refuses to render itself transparent to those who would transcribe the laws of the real. On the corner where poet and poetry meet, therefore, in that dream, *possibility*, in its most originary sense, is both preserved and exposed.

Besides interrupting the totalizing pretensions of totalitarian rule, Simic's *Ursprache* also returns us to the bursts of presence flailing beneath the thick canopies of what purports to be real. That is, it not only spans silent, white reaches of irrepressible possibility, but receives along those reaches whatever sense flashes: thumb, fern, lover, fir, and all that has yet to be named. Simic's *Ursprache*, beginning with *White*, thus cuts against the grain of totalitarianism in two ways: 1) by belying the totalizing pretensions of all tribal systems, and 2) by awakening us to the utter singularity of what the tribe would normalize, streamline, spit polish, and douse with its no-nonsense realism.⁴⁰

Now, one should not exaggerate the import of an Ur-poetry's power to almost formally expose and thus transgress the limits of totalitarian systems of signification and incarceration. After all, rigorous, determinate negations of totalitarian rhetoric will neither topple walls nor halt the cruel swiftness of unconverted lead. But I would caution against underestimating the force of an event in language which can claim to address each and every instance of sense. True, the weave of Ur-poetry is not kevlar. Moreover, and this was apparent in *White*, the street corner where poem and poet meet can often point towards exile, that is, the possibilities which stir curbside may remain promissory, almost empty. One should know, then, that the street corner where poem and poet meet may lie on "Dream Avenue."

*Monumental, millennial decrepitude,
As tragedy requires. A broad
Avenue with trash unswept,
A few solitary speck-sized figures
Going about their business
In a world already smudged by a schoolboy's eraser.
You've no idea what city this is,
What country? It could be a dream,
But is it yours? You're nothing
But a vague sense of loss,
A piercing, heart wrenching dread
On an avenue with no name
With a few figures conveniently small
And blurred who in any case
Have their backs to you
As they look elsewhere, beyond
The long row of gray buildings and their many windows,
Some of which appear broken. (Simic, 1994b:7)*

Through its richness, a richness I will not treat with due respect, a central line runs through this poem. There are times when "All that is near . . ." (to recall *White*), disperses, leaving only a ". . . vague sense of loss . . ." along a *via negativa* of diminution, decay,

abandonment, etc. To reach beyond what reigns as the *real* is therefore neither without risk nor a universal catalyst for reconstruction. In fact, one may grow bewildered, lose one's way, and in turning around and around, find only ". . . a few figures conveniently small/And blurred in any case/. . . their backs to you/As they look elsewhere . . ."

And yet, recall Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" from the second volume of his *New Poems*. It closes: ". . . for there is no point,/ which does not see you. You must change your life." My claim is that an *Ursprache* has that power. There is no nook or seam of sense in which to elude its reach. It lays claim, as Heidegger says, to the breadth of being. And if that claim insistently draws its readers back behind the ever thickening curtain of new totalitarianism, as is the case with Simic's *Ursprache*, then it will do so wherever its sense of sense washes ashore. Now, one may doubt others' ability to receive or engage such a claim, but one will have similar doubts with regard to any event in language. Such a risk is unavoidable for those who stuff letters into bottles and hurl them towards the shorelines of the heart. However, if one's letter has the power to reach the ends of the cosmos, and in the most thorough way, I do not think that one can even begin to calculate where "it will all end" with Ur-poetry, even along "Dream Avenue."

Through questions concerning the force of history in the language of the poem, including the threats of totalitarianism, we are thickening Simic's *Ursprache*. Beside fateful, bursts of presence that fly out of a silent whiteness eluding signification, one finds historically bound, socio-political forces threatening to normalize or silence those bursts of presence. And yet, even as his work follows out these supervening narratives, fingering their limits, uncovering their seams, white threads frayed, Simic's corpus also accompanies those singular beings which bound through the cosmos and its histories. More precisely, Simic's poetry remains attuned to the fragility and even pain of what I called bursts of sense or events of presence, although I also could have termed them "lives."

Consider "History," from *Unending Blues*:⁴¹

Men and women with kick-me signs on their
backs.

Let's suppose he was sad and she was upset.
 They got over it. The spring day bore a semblance
 to what they hoped.
 Then came History. He was arrested and shot.
 Do they speak in heroic couplets as he's dragged
 away looking over his shoulder?
 A few words for that park statue with pigeons
 on it?
 More likely she wipes her eyes and nose with a
 sleeve,
 Asks for a stiff drink, takes her place in the
 headline.
 Then the children die of hunger, one by one.
 Of course, there are too many cases for
 anyone to be underlining them with a red
 pencil.
 Plus, the propensity of widows to flaunt their
 widowhood:
 Coarse pubic hair, much bitten breasts.
 History loves to see women cry, she whispers.
 Their death makes Art, he shouts, naked.
 How pretty are the coffins and instruments of
 torture
 In the Museum on the day of free admission to
 the public! (Simic, 1986:15)

In order to gauge the force of this facet of Simic's *Ursprache*, we need to work our way into this scene. A couple quarrels. Perhaps he is drifting, incommunicado. The indulgence of it may be what angers her. But they "get over it." And between their own desires and the budding eroticism of Spring, what is and what is hoped for seem closer to one another. Something rare, no doubt, a time when time present is not only bound by the weight of time past, but, clock hand to our cheek, it pushes us towards a budding future.

Particularly in his more recent works, Simic draws our attention to moments when eros propels us towards something more than we had thought possible, or, more humbly, into moments of intense,

ecstatic respite.⁴² I want to consider one such poem, "Crazy About Her Shrimp," from *A Wedding in Hell* in order to see what might be at stake in these opening lines of "History." As I do so, keep in mind, however, that an Ur-poem plays over an entire corpus, and thus as we read "Crazy About Her Shrimp" into "History," so too must we read "History" back into "Crazy About Her Shrimp," that is, do not believe, for a minute, that the lovers of "Crazy About Her Shrimp" are somehow exempt from the fate unfolding in "History."

"Crazy About Her Shrimp" reads:

*We don't even take time
To come up for air.
We keep our mouths full and busy
Eating bread and cheese
And smooching in between.*

*No sooner have we made love
Than we are back in the kitchen.
While I chop the hot peppers,
She wiggles her ass
And stirs the shrimp on the stove.*

*How good the wine tastes
That has run red
Out of a laughing mouth!
Down her chin
And onto her naked tits.*

*"I'm getting fat," she says,
Turning this way and that way
Before the mirror.*

*"I'm crazy about her shrimp!"
I shout to the gods above. (Simic, 1994b:40)*

The drive of the poem is hard and plain: love, sex, they breed play, drive the everyday away, set us dancing in a kitchen, naked, and compel our voices (at least we males) to testify towards a heaven we might otherwise think sealed, deaf, uncaring.⁴³ As "History" opens, then, we should see eros assembling a day into something which bears a semblance to what we hope for: nakedness, laughter,

pulls of pleasure, or even just the knowledge that this moment is one well shared. But: "Then came History." The man, nameless, is arrested, dragged away, shot. The children die, one by one. No one takes special notice. There have been so many, after all. And the wife? The mother? Also nameless, she 'flaunts her widowhood' as widows are wont to do, her "Coarse pubic hair, much bitten breasts"—the marks of one forced to barter with all that history has left her.

"Then came History." One might regard this as a personification: "History as ghastly visitor." But the poem does not present us with some character or figure named "History." Instead, the poem attends to the foreground and wake of History's arrival: mending love, promise, disaster. This poem thus refuses to turn history into an object and "History" into an instance of speculative inquiry. The refusal is instructive, for it suggests that one encounters "History," the ostensible subject of this poem, by turning one's gaze, with acumen and courage, into the paths it cuts through lives and hearts and hands. In contradistinction to Hegel's philosophical history, it thus seems that Simic is unwilling to find in this ". . . slaughter bench upon which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals are sacrificed . . ." any supervening narrative, dialectical or otherwise (Hegel, 1988:24).

"Then came history." What is so unnerving about this line is its sudden arrival within a narrative just beginning to show promise. It is as if, like coastal weather, history can gather and strike without warning. And yet, this suddenness is accompanied by a matter of fact tone, suggesting that history may be unpredictable in its movements, but reliable with regard to the fact that it will arrive. When history strikes, therefore, we both have and do not have the right to be surprised. "A silent killer will come," we are told, "and no one will be prepared, and yet, one should have known. Such things happen all that time, after all. History is always in the wings." Benjamin has suggested that: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight" (Benjamin, 1968:257). On my reading, Simic's *Ursprache* contributes to such a conception, and in

an ordinary way, that is, it sets the threat of historical violence right at the rim of the White out of which all sense emerges.

But note how Simic also drapes the cruelty of history in dark comic plays of slapstick and sarcasm. "Men and women with kick-me signs on their/back." There I am, there you are, loosening knots, stirring with Spring. "Then came History," sneaking up behind us. Does the crowd giggle? Perhaps I say, turning into my fate—Oh History . . . you're killing me, baby, just killing me. I read Simic's comic insistence in two ways. First, the apparent senselessness of history (and sense itself), seems to constantly farce whatever narratives we wrap ourselves in.⁴⁴ As we account for ourselves and our fates, History sneaks up behind us, and as the sign requests, kicks. In other words, the arrival of sense is often marked with a wicked sense of timing—just killing me, baby. Second, humor defines in part what Heidegger would call the *Grundstimmung* of Simic's *Ursprache*, that is, the "fundamental attunement" characteristic of a poem's comportment towards what it poetizes.⁴⁵ Knowing there is no answering the question "why me?" Simic's poetry quiets that desperation with a paradoxically knowing laugh of incredulity: ". . . she wipes her eyes and nose with a/sleeve/Asks for a stiff drink, takes her place in the/breadline."

One shouldn't overplay the stoic elements of Simic's comic bent, however. If it softens the blows of fate, it does without denying that fate nonetheless rains blows upon us, blows which sting, pulverize, even annihilate. Simic's humor is thus far from jolly. Rather, it is cold, leathered, and profoundly sorrowful. I am thus tempted to say of Simic what Benjamin has written of Proust: "His style is comedy, not humor; his laughter does not toss the world up but flings it down—at the risk that it will be smashed to pieces, which will then make him burst into tears" (Benjamin, 1968:207). And my temptation is only strengthened when I read Simic telling Stanley Plumly and Wayne Dodd in 1972:

Humor. Why humor? I guess when you think of classical comedy, humor seems to be a temporary interruption of harmony. The audience knows better. I think in the twentieth century humor has become ontological. It's a permanent disruption, it's a world view, a philosophy of life" (Simic, 1985:19).

Simic's humor is thus not only not simply stoic, but its contrary, bent on undermining the utter matter of factness with which history's goon squads patrol our lives. As he writes in the more recent "Cut the Comedy." "It is impossible to imagine a Christian or fascist theory of humor. Like poetry, humor is subversive" (Simic, 1997:41).

Another aspect of "History" bears notice at this juncture. Beneath its humor, or rather, resounding along with it, a confession unfolds. Art cannot rescue those broken in and by history. Heroic couplets cannot accompany those who have been dragged off to die, or if they do, they will die all the same. And if history loves to see women cry, the realization fails to bring solace. In this instance, no amount of truth will set you free. And these limits apply to those who, like myself, risk aesthetizing disaster by engaging those works which document it. "How pretty are the coffins . . ." In other words, "History" denies that any narrative logic can account for the lost. Thus Simic's *Ursprache* not only presses one into history's wake, attesting to all that is lost within the ways and days of singular beings, but it also attempts to present misfortune in the integrity of its unredeemability, if one can speak of such a thing.

The farcical, often crippling force of historical fate so apparent in Simic's work doubles the silence documented in *White*. There, a white tooth grins, ironically, at a speaker who had sought what has always already arrived and persists only in traces. Within the folds of history, however, the grinning white tooth mocks those who ask: 'Why?' The point is not lost on Simic, whose *The World Doesn't End* begins precisely in that realization.

*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 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. (Simic, 1989:3)*

Note how far away this poem is from the stars sought and praised in *White*. Here they have turned into "little shrunken deaf ears." When the poet raises a glass, therefore, a poetic word in which to capture the shimmering stars, it may be that only an awful silence rings in its crystal bowl as coffins are arranged in the wake of yet another air-raid.⁴⁶

IV. REPRISE

*For asking, why is there something
Rather than nothing?
The schoolmaster sends the little punk
To see the Principal.*

—Charles Simic, "The Childhood of Parmenides"
(Simic, 1982:18, lines 1-4)

Simic writes of Aleš Debeljak's work: "My sense while reading Debeljak is that this is what pondering one's life feels like in this waning century" (Simic, 1994:119). This is the sense I have reading Simic as I ponder the sense of sense. I find there an *Ursprache* that overdetermines the world around us, drawing it into registers well attuned to the fates and violences that swirl through the mundane and extraordinary alike. Again, the force of an *Ursprache* is not the force of a summoning. Its power is not one which fathoms the essential traits of things. Rather, it figures the "sense" of what can be said to be-there, of what is disclosed as something and not nothing. And with Simic, sense is figured in a threefold way.

On the one hand, Simic's *Ursprache* pushes us to the rim of sense itself, to the white limit upon which sense is scratched, fatefully, so that it shimmers around us, peering out of white shadows. His work pushes us to the white limit, which has always already baptized all our senses. "Take a letter: From cloud to onion," or from the sensible to sense itself, and "Say: There never was any choice." To move within Simic's *Ursprache* is thus to see shining in all things, e.g., thoughts, sentences, poems, twigs, trees, and seas, the emptiness of this *White* which cradles even as it sears us with bullet-like swiftiness. To move within Simic's *Ursprache* is thus move ever towards a silent origin that cannot be cracked. As he writes at the end of *The World Doesn't End*:

MY SECRET IDENTITY IS

*The room is empty,
And the window open. (Simic, 1989:74)*

Push inside us, inside sense itself, and regardless of one's reflexivity, one will find, ad infinitum, an empty room leading elsewhere. The origin of sense cannot be apprehended, although its traces are everywhere.

But Simic's *Ursprache* bears the marks of another hand as well, one callused and burned. That is, this *Ursprache* is far from univocal, but twists back and forth among registers. If Simic hears empty wind in his sleep, he also hears soldiers pounding at doors, nooses tightening, boots marching, and men and women turning their backs on other men and women being carted away. Simic's *Ursprache* thus not only drags each moment of presence back to the White out of which it was burped, a zero following another zero, but it also pulls back the sleeves of things, including the implements of writing itself, and calls our attention to the scars and scrapes that history has left upon them, to the threats which loom under tables and behind doors. It thus reminds us that those presences which hearken towards the White are not simple instantiations of some cosmological drama, traces lighting up the sky, fireworks gleaming. Rather, those fireworks are friends, neighbors, and enemies too, and when they burn, they burn. As Simic writes in "War," a poem from *Hotel Insomnia*:

*The trembling finger of a woman
Goes down the list of casualties
On the evening of the first snow.
The house is cold and the list is long.
All our names are included. (Simic, 1992b:26)*

I cannot help but hear in "first snow" the White of the origin, although here I find an additional thought: as one wakes to ice paned windows, recall that casualties, including ourselves, have been etched there.

But the point isn't only that mortal things die on White days and nights, often unjustly, even without reason. Rather, the point

is also that mortal beings, as orphans of silence, are born into seemingly endless contestations. Consider the revised version of "Spoon" (Simic, 1990b:35).

*An old spoon,
Chewed,
Licked clean,
Polished back
To its evil-eyed
Glow,
Eying you now
From the table,
Ready to scratch
Today's date
And your name
On the bare wall.*

First, note how human fragility is underscored. One (the poem addresses "you," the reader) finds oneself thrown into a barren situation: a table, a spoon. Now, a spoon is a tool, but this one looks back, evil-eyed.⁴⁷ In this house, then, surrounded by alien presences, we are far from masters. More concretely, the alien spoon is old, ready to scratch. But what? Perhaps it knows the day of our death, a day which may come soon given history's habit of stopping by unannounced. Or perhaps the spoon might scratch "On the bare wall" some forgotten lesson, some runes once legible upon its now worn surface.⁴⁸ Or perhaps this readiness to scratch simply attests to the way in which an exile or prisoner (the earlier version notes a "prison wall," not just a "bare wall"), must make sense of his or her sentence with whatever is at hand, even though instruments may have, as this spoon does, a life of their own, and a malevolent one at that.

Read generally, "Spoon" allegorically presents the fate of those who would record their time, fashion a name for themselves, or even author their own sentence. They must make do with what they have. More importantly, what they have may involve peril, and not just at the level of events to which they must respond. Even the implements of writing may be hostile, instantiating,

therefore, a struggle within a struggle. "Spoon" thus crystallizes another central motif at work within Simic's *Ursprache*. Writing itself, these scratches of a spoon, the poems it might etch, are more than white whistles in the dark, although they are surely that. They are also multi-leveled struggles to make sense in a hostile world. Yes, beings suffer, but as they do, they also fight to scratch sense into the walls of a world lacking just that.

Few risk Simic's triple attunement: a) empty, white heavens, b) contesting histories, totalitarian violence, and c) the struggle of our embers to stay lit between mortal time's closing thumb and forefinger. Perhaps most recoil in the ironies which afflict one so attuned, for it is a strange thing to rage at an empty sky, history's soup preparing to boil:

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

*Otherwise, cloudless calm. The shepherd's
hour. (Simic, 1989:69)*

Whereas the stars are courted in *White*, here, in *The World Doesn't End*, Simic scolds them, and yet, without self-righteousness or the didactic mania of the prophet. Running through Simic's *Ursprache* is thus a perpetual openness to the tensions which coil when one combines ontological sensitivity, historical perspicuity, and moral outrage within the truth telling and world figuring promise of the poetic word. No wonder Simic is forced, at times, to throw up his hands. "What a mess! I believe in images as vehicles of transcendence, but I don't believe in God!" (Simic, 1990c:92).⁴⁹ But then what else is one to do? As Simic notes: "The death of God, you may say, is no big deal if everybody behaves well, but once the slaughter of the innocent starts, how do you catch any sleep at night?" (Simic, 1997:75).

This willingness to venture towards the vanguard of what currently passes for ontological, historical-political, and moral consciousness, and this willingness to embody, without sanctimony, the tensions which arise at the edges of that foreground, that is what marks Simic as the kind of poet Heidegger termed "a poet in a time of need," a title he reserved for Hölderlin. Creeping about

the double silences of a twilight blanketed in white smoke, Simic's *Ursprache* enables us to attend equally to: a) the fateful whiteness of a luck which gives him the poetic word and opens his work (and its readers) to sense itself, b) the black booted march of a history that could easily crush even our passing snowflakes of illumination, and c) cries of desire and despair in the grayness that lies in between. Such power is remarkable beyond my esteem. Where else can one witness being itself, thrown open, such that the presencing of presence, even in its withdrawal, rings whitely through its silences? And where else will one also be drawn back from what truly are the furthest reaches of the cosmos into the realization that poetry is, to turn again to *White*:

*A song in prison
And for prisoners,
Made of what the condemned
Have hidden from their jailers. (lines 141-144)*

And then, where else will the cries of the erotically lit and/or historically broken still echo in the barbed wire mobile swinging above our empty cradle? If it still makes sense to turn to poets in times of need and distress (and I think it does, having tried to outline what such a turn involves), I would have us turn to Simic. Let us hope that no one comes and takes away his spoon.

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Endnotes

- 1 Two years later, Heidegger will repeat his assertion in "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry" (Heidegger, 1971:35). All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.
- 2 I must stress, at the outset, that my question here is not psychological. I am not interested in addressing questions concerning the power of so-called aesthetic experience over the perceptions or personalities of subjects. Rather, I want to explore the nature of what one accepts when one says yes to a work of art which claims "you must change your life."
- 3 This is not to say that Heidegger would be able to appreciate all that comes to pass within Simic's work. But I will forego any detailed discussions of where Simic's work might elude Heidegger's ear in the interest of focusing upon Simic's accomplishments.
- 4 As far as I know, Kevin Hart is the only one who has expressly compared the two. Although more a treatment of Simic's work than a reading of Heidegger's, I found his essay helpful (Hart, 1992).
- 5 Few read Heidegger in this way, exceptions being Véronique Fóti, who reads Heidegger and Celan together, suggesting that Heidegger lacks ears for Celan's poetics of mourning, loss, and response, and Paul Bové, who reads Heideggerian concerns into Whitman, Stevens, and Olson (Bové, 1980; Fóti, 1992:78-110). Perhaps many, like Robert Bernasconi, believe that Heidegger's work with poetry is inextricably bound to his nationalism, as if only German poets could found human dwelling. I am unconvinced, however, that Heidegger's account of poetic building and dwelling *requires* a German poet. True, he treats the trope *Vaterland* as signifying *das Seyn selbst* in 1934 (Heidegger, 1980:121). But as the lecture unfolds, it is unclear whether this renders *Seyn* German or opens '*Vaterland*' to the ungroundable event of its own formation. I think both emphases are at work here, and thus it seems mistaken to seek the 'real' Heidegger. A more fruitful tack involves bringing those elements of Heidegger's thought which escape and even counteract nationalism into new arenas while noting that his dialogue with the poets was in fact infected with the Greco-German mania that Bernasconi documents (Bernasconi, 1993:135-148).
- 6 References to Heidegger can be found throughout Simic's prose, e.g., Simic, 1985:62,118; 1990c:63-66,68,104,106; 1994:102-103; and Weigel, 1996:210. Richard Jackson has employed Heidegger in a review of Simic and Strand, but he does so without seriously engaging Heidegger, invoking, without distinction, thinkers whose differences are as great as their similarities, e.g., Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault (Jackson, 1980:136-145).
- 7 Heidegger would insist that we not equate an *Ursprache* with the contours of transcendental subjectivity, however, and thus the analogy with Kant has its limits. Rather, the *Ursprache* is truly *ursprünglich*, "originary," and thus not the production of some primal Ur-agency.

- 8 That Heidegger takes the fourfold from Hölderlin is evident from the 1951 address, "Poetically Man Dwells," where he draws the figure's four elements from a reading of Hölderlin's late, cryptic poem "In lieblicher Bläue" (Heidegger, 1954:181-198).
- 9 Now, it isn't the case that without the fourfold, significance would be lacking. According to Heidegger, other constellations currently provide alternative *Ursprachen*, most notably, modern technology with its "standing-reserve," a horizon of disclosure which organizes things along elemental and sub-atomic lines, or, more specifically, in terms of constitutive parts believed to be useful.
- 10 These examples are taken from "The Thing," "Poetically Man Dwells," and "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," respectively (Heidegger, 1954:157-180, 181-198, 139-158).
- 11 Shortly, we will explore what Heidegger means by *bauen*, "building." For now, let us not equate building with human production, but regard all instances of human production as parasitic upon building.
- 12 It is important to recall that Heidegger does not understand *Wesen*, "essence," as a series of traits that outline the necessary and sufficient conditions for some *x*, for example, a poem. Instead, Heidegger treats *Wesen* as the substantive form of the verb to be. When Heidegger speaks of essence, therefore, one should think of how a being comes to presence, of those factors that enable its presencing and thus are archaic in an almost literal sense.
- 13 Heidegger thus writes of the fourfold in "Building, Dwelling, Thinking": "From the fourfold, building takes over measures for all traversing and every measuring-out of the spaces that in each case are furnished through the founded sites" (Heidegger, 1954:153). In other words, poetic measures not only wrap the whole in their economies of presence, but overdetermine emergent sites of human activity and belief as well. This is not to say, however, that an *Ursprache* only engages human activities. After all, disclosures of non-human events/things (e.g., roses, three-toed sloths, and asteroids) are themselves bound to economies of presence, for example, the "natural world," "space," etc. They are manifest, therefore, already within an *Ursprache*, or, to use the language of *Being and Time*, they are disclosed already within a world.
- 14 We should add here that Heidegger denies independent existence to the fourfold, as if hovered above beings and granted them shape. Rather, the two are bound to one another. The fourfold presences through beings even while beings presence within the fourfold. We shall have more to say about the reciprocity between an *Ursprache* and the beings it founds.
- 15 When Heidegger claims that dwelling requires building, he has in mind the kind of building which only poetry brings about. "But dwelling happens only if poetizing takes place and comes to pass, and indeed in the way of . . . the measure-taking for all measuring. This measure-taking is itself the most proper, not a bare gauging with ready-made yard-sticks for the preparation of maps. Likewise, poetizing is not building in the sense of raising and fitting buildings. Rather, poetiz-

- ing, as the most proper appraisal of the dimension of dwelling, is inceptual building. Before anything else, poetizing admits the dwelling of human beings into its *Wesen*. Poetizing is the originary allowance-of-dwelling" (Heidegger, 1954:196).
- 16 I think this is why Heidegger insists, when reading Rilke, that a poet in a time of need must poetize the *Wesen*, the essence of poetry, claiming that: "Where that happens, one can assume that there lies a poetic way that sends itself into the fate of the world-age" (Heidegger, 1950:268).
 - 17 For a more thorough reckoning with Heidegger's understanding of how poetic building engages Being, and how that engagement drives poetic dwelling, see my "Heidegger's Absolute Music, or, What Are Poets For When the End of Metaphysics is at Hand?" (*Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. XXX [2000]: 180–210).
 - 18 *White* has a complex editorial history. First published in 1972, adorned by Simic's own illustrations and a handful of typographical errors, it was revised and reissued in 1980 sans artwork (Simic, 1972; Simic, 1980). While the 1980 version was reprinted in *Selected Poems: 1963–1983*, yet a third version has recently appeared in *Selected Early Poems* (Simic, 1990b; Simic, 1999). Because each version is different to the point of having a character all its own, I think that, despite certain repetitions, each should be regarded as an individual poem and not dissolved into a series of textual variants. Presuming the singularity of each, I have decided to focus upon the second *White*, leaving for future labor a careful comparison of the three.
 - 19 As Fred Muratori muses in a review of *White: A New Version*: "Why would this particular poem, already published, continue to obsess its author for so long? Perhaps because *White* confronts . . . the creation of poetry itself . . ." (Muratori, 1984:122).
 - 20 Although he isn't speaking of *White*, I share Richard Howard's appreciation for Simic's 'originality': "When we speak of writing as *original*, as I am bound and determined to do in speaking of Charles Simic's writing . . . , we mean that it has to do with something very old, not something very new—it has to do with origins, beginnings, sources" (Simic, 1971:xii). And it is my respect for this kind of originality which leaves me distraught when a poet of Kenneth Koch's caliber claims, insipidly: "Ordinary language is of course where the language of poetry comes from. It has the words, the usages, the sounds that a poem takes up and makes its own. It constitutes, along with thoughts and feelings, what may be called the raw materials of poetry" (Koch, 1998:45). I take it that tropes like "ordinary language," "thoughts," and "feelings" mark the points from where poets like Simic and philosophers like Heidegger begin to reflect.
 - 21 Later, the speaker repeats his request for words, and even terms the bride a vowel (lines 53&59). And still later, the speaker seeks her again with "Five ears of my fingertips/Against the white page," as if one must first hear her if one is to fill a page with words (lines 93–4).
 - 22 Peter Schmidt claims that the speaker is here engaged in an imaginary dialogue with the *White* (Weigel, 1996:28). Perhaps, but I don't know how we would

- determine whether that were so. What seems certain, however, is that the speaker is preparing himself as a sacrificial meal for his bride to be, hence the mocking use of "sweetheart" and "loverboy" in his questions (lines 103&105).
- 23 Recall that it was in virtue of having a mind of winter, of renunciation, that the listener in Stevens's poem, being "nothing himself," is able to behold "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens, 1971:54, lines 13-15).
 - 24 In poems from *Hotel Insomnia* and *A Wedding in Hell*, insomnia invokes the posture of waiting for a something or someone that may never arrive (Simic, 1992b:2; Simic, 1994b:29). Likewise, "Dead Letter Office" from *Charon's Cosmology* depicts a "Dream penitentiary/Without doors or windows," an impregnable repository for lost greetings, wishes, and solicitations (Simic, 1977:29, lines 5-6).
 - 25 Other, equally vacuous images of the White were thus more appropriate than the speaker had imagined, e.g., the vowel 'O' and the "holy nothing" (lines 59-60 & 96). Incidentally, Simic returns to the idea of writing as "A zero burped by/ Another zero . . ." in "Figuring," from *Weather Forecast for Utopia* (Simic, 1990b:177-78, lines 1-2).
 - 26 Of the riddle, Simic says in reference to the work of Vasko Popa: "In the riddle the word truly becomes *mythos*, becomes the place of origins" (Simic, 1985:94).
 - 27 In "A Clear and Open Place," Simic writes: "The experience of consciousness, however, precedes thinking; thinking derives from it. For Husserl, for example, the living present is the ultimate, universal and absolute form of transcendental experience" (Simic, 1985:109). This is somewhat odd given that Simic elsewhere claims that part of Heidegger's appeal is precisely his attack on subjectivism (Simic, 1990c:63).
 - 28 This view is not limited to the 1970s, however. In a more recent essay, "Poetry and Experience," he writes: "The experience of being eludes language. We need imagination because the presentness of the present moment cannot be worded except through poetic image. Consciousness is mute" (Simic, 1997:39).
 - 29 One can find this critique in the third chapter, §§ 10-13, of the "Preliminary Part" of the lecture course entitled *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs* (Heidegger, 1979).
 - 30 Simic seems better off in an aphorism from *Wonderful World, Silent Truth*: "A metaphysics without a self and without a God! Is that what you want Simic?" (Simic, 1990c:94).
 - 31 Interestingly, I am asking Simic to do precisely the opposite of what Helen Vendler has requested. She is uncomfortable with his references to the spectral and metaphysical, because she views poems as one facet of ordinary human activity. "Poems, like all human fabrications, from straw huts to theology, are made to our measure and by our measure, and are not above or beyond us. We do not need to ascribe more to art than we ascribe to unaided human powers elsewhere" (Weigel, 1996:131). In a certain way, I agree. Poems, like straw huts, emerge out of the scene of human dwelling, and thus partake of all that is in force within that dimension. And yet, Vendler takes the dimension of human dwelling to be some-

thing that “empirical critics,” folks who evidently eschew the metaphysical and spectral, are best suited to explore. With this commitment, I couldn’t agree less, assuming that her empiricism is anything like the empiricism which occasionally recrudesces in philosophical circles. Empiricism routinely appeals to something like “experience” in order to explain matters or settle disputes, e.g., to sensory experience or experience under the controlled conditions of revisionist scientific inquiry. In debates about originary matters, however, (i.e., any matter having to do with the nature of some x), such appeals are specious, for it is precisely the nature of experience which marks the initial point of inquiry, and this has been the case at least since Kant. But then I don’t think Simic needs to be reminded of the limits of empiricism. That “experience” itself is part and parcel of the riddle seems quite evident to him.

- 32 This is not to say that Heidegger himself understood the task of an *Ursprache* to involve a defense of the singularity of presencing. In fact, his persistent invocation of the *Volk*, in “The Origin of the Work of Art” for example, suggests that he was more interested in the singularity of a people than any given person or event of presence (Heidegger, 1950:63). However, there is nothing about the notion of the *Ursprache* which compels us to believe that it addresses itself to a “people.” That seems rather to be the result of Heidegger’s provincial (and Hegelian) obsession with an ethically seamless state. One can thus speak of Simic’s *Ursprache*, release it from the confines of a philosophy of consciousness, and still applaud and account for his concern with singular presencing.
- 33 One finds precisely this line of argument in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, most notably in *The Inoperative Community* and *The Experience of Freedom*. For a discussion of the kind of politics which arises out of this perspective, one which owes much to Heidegger but does not share his affection for the totalized state, see my essay “On What Is to Be Done With What Is Always Already Arriving” (*Studies in Practical Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 1 [1999]: 86–113).
- 34 Simic finds the “Nature” of much contemporary literature too pastoral a trope to take seriously. When he does take Nature seriously, I think he is drawn to its inarticulate stoniness, not its supposed rhapsodic harmonies. In an interview from 1980, he says: “A stone is the uttermost limit; there’s nothing beyond stone. . . . Stone is so alien to us, distant from us, any attempt to speak across that distance is interesting.” (Simic, 1985:52–3) One should also consult “Stone” and “Stone Inside a Stone” from *Dismantling the Silence*, as well as the fifteenth poem of Part 1 in *The World Doesn’t End*. (Simic, 1971:59–61; 1989:17)
- 35 One sees Simic’s concern with this kind of reporting in “The Flute Player in the Pit”: “. . . one wishes to say something about the age in which one lives. Every age has its injustices and immense sufferings, and ours is scarcely an exception. There’s the history of human vileness to contend with and there are fresh instances of it every day to think about. One can think about it all one wants, but making sense of it is another matter” (Simic, 1994:2).
- 36 I would thus suggest that while “Poem Without A Title” does recall Akhmatova’s

relentless poem of witness, *Poem Without A Hero*, it also broaches a fate where poetry is not simply repressed, but almost impossible, that is, unable to twist free of a history and language which conspires to return it, almost immediately, to the fate it would condemn and transform.

- 37 Interestingly, Simic believes that Heidegger fails to appreciate how history contests itself within the language of the poem. In "Notes on Poetry and Philosophy," he writes: "Mallarmé thought there were two kinds of language: *parole brute*, which names things, and *parole essentielle*, which distances us from things. One serves representation and the other the allusive, fictive world of poetry. He's wrong. It's not that clear cut. If anything, it is both. Poetry is impure. I don't think Heidegger understands this either" (Simic, 1990b:68). Some scholars, notably Véronique Fóti, agree with Simic's assessment of Heidegger. In Chapters Four and Seven of her *Heidegger and the Poets*, she argues that Heidegger loses the contestations and singularities of ontic history within his "onto-history," an account of how the West has figured Being since the Greeks. In a way, she is right. For example, Heidegger often hears in Rilke the tropes of Descartes, Pascal, and Nietzsche (Heidegger, 1950:301-02 & 398 and 1982b:235). But this is not to say that Heidegger has no ear for how the language of the poem is a site of historical contestation. Rather, it proves that his readings are very much attuned to such contestations. In the case of Rilke, however, he believes that the history of modernity is too strong for Rilke's language of the heart, open, angels, lovers, Orpheus, etc., that despite Rilke's efforts, his work remains trapped within modernity's orbit. Not that I agree with Heidegger's reading, but it seems wrong to say that he exempts the language of the poem from the wheels of history. In fact, the Epilogue to "The Origin of the Work of Art" takes very seriously the question of art's ability to disclose truth in the present age (Heidegger, 1950:65). Is this to say that Simic and Fóti are wrong to be troubled by Heidegger's sense for the role history plays within the language of the poem? No, but I do think that the issue here concerns a full-flown theory of history, a debate about where and how the real contestations of history take place. And while that is a real debate, and one that Simic's *Ursprache* initiates despite its obvious sympathies with Heidegger, I cannot pursue it here. For Simic's relation to Mallarmé, see his "The Tomb of Stéphane Mallarmé," and Ileana Orlich. "The Poet on a Roll: Charles Simic's 'The Tomb of Stéphane Mallarmé'" (Simic, 1980:61-2 & Orlich, 1992)
- 38 Concerns over historical contestation lie at the heart of Adorno's aesthetics. For discussions of such matters, see my: "Between Impotence and Illusion: Adorno's Art of Theory and Practice," co-authored with Michael Sullivan (*New German Critique*, No. 57, Fall 1992: 87-122), and the forthcoming "Binding the Beautiful: Art as Criticism in Adorno and Dewey" (*Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 [1998]: 233-244).
- 39 One can find a basic analysis of "new totalitarianism" in their "The 'Retreat' of the Political" (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1997:126-28).
- 40 Before long, it will be time to gather, distinguish, and evaluate the various responses

to our century of disaster. Given the range of work associated with the poetics of witness, e.g., Akhmatova, Celan, Forché, Milosz, the various ways in which theoreticians have explored the work of memory, counter-memory, and mourning, e.g., Benjamin, Blanchot, Foucault, and then responses like Simic's which bear witness from the recesses of oblique angels but strike at totalitarianism nevertheless, one should not suppose that a univocal front exists. In fact, significant differences separate several of these figures, differences which may prove incompatible. For example, throughout his Norton Lectures, Milosz maintains a longing for the creation of a "great human family," something unimaginable in the work of Simic or Nancy, whatever their own differences (Milosz, 1983:31&15). A comparative yet argumentative study might prove useful, therefore, for those who would carry this work into the next century. Unfortunately, I cannot take this matter up here.

- 41 Simic has written several poems either entitled "History" or having "History" in the title, for example: Simic, 1982:13; 1983:20; 1992b:42; 1994b:55-6.
- 42 In *Walking the Black Cat*, Simic explicitly sets the power of eros within the historical landscape it no doubt remains oblivious to while passion pulses and pants are cast aside. "Shadow Publishing Company" opens with a couple strolling in a world of their own. It closes: "Lying there, closing one's eyes in revery,/A figment among figments/Living one of their blessed moments/Without recognizing the century,/Only the scent of the lilacs on the pillow" (Simic, 1996: 11-12, lines 26-30).
- 43 The poem is complicated by the fact that the woman is not opened up to heaven by the event, but to a mirror which convicts her of failing to maintain an ideal of sorts, and a sinister one at that. I cannot address this matter here, however.
- 44 These farcical elements are complemented by Simic's often remarked upon debt to surrealism. The images in Simic's poems seem to stare at us from the most unusual places: storefronts, street corners, tree limbs, mannequins, aunts, silverware, etc. But then, this is how history unfolds: through chance meetings, uncanny coincidences, and unfortunate cases of right time right place for disaster. J.D. McClatchy fails to appreciate this in his review of *Classic Ballroom Dances*. He complains of what he calls the ". . . drabbest kind of automatic writing," and hopes that in the future, Simic will pursue "fresher" paths (McClatchy, 1981:235). But this is to suppose that Simic's "surrealism" (McClatchy employs the term), were some abstract technique rather than a formal aspect of his relentless attempt to expose the truth of our cosmological and historical predicament.
- 45 One finds this language of the *Grundstimmung* in the first Hölderlin lecture course (Heidegger, 1980).
- 46 I think one would be hard pressed to find a similar attunement to suffering in the thought of Heidegger, although I cannot argue the point here. In order to pursue the claim, one would have to consider the remarks on *dike* in the Anaximander fragment, the remarks on how to regard a fallen *Geschlecht* in the reading of Trakl, and the rhetoric of "essential sacrifice" in "The Origin of the Work of Art" (Heidegger, 1950:317-168; 1959:37-82; 1950:1-72).

- 47 In the earlier version from *Dismantling the Silence*, the speaker suggests that this spoon has in fact eaten him or her and become a living thing in its own right (Simic, 1971:54, lines 5-9).
- 48 Simic tells a similar tale in "Knife," writing of "crooked letters" and "mysterious writings," signs which lead a "We" under the earth through dimly lit corridors of geological time (Simic, 1990b:36, lines 15&16).
- 49 One can find a similar remark in "Charles the Obscure" (Simic, 1997:19). These disavowals retract Simic's faithful testament in 1972: "But then I don't mind admitting that I believe in God" (Simic, 1985:6).

I would like to thank Garrett Hongo for his comments on an earlier draft, Rebecca Szekely for introducing me to the work of Charles Simic, and the many students with whom I've studied Simic's poems. I would also like to dedicate this essay to Dallas Mayberry in memory of the five years (1991-1996) we spent filling the Nashville airwaves with puns, pranks, and most importantly, poems.