

CHARLES SIMIC'S "THE WORLD DOESN'T END": PROSE POEMS

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Resumo: Charles Simic saiu da Iugoslávia para os Estados Unidos aos dezesseis anos de idade. Desde os 21 é um autor e tradutor conceituado. Em 1990, ganhou o *Pulitzer Prize for Poetry*, pelo livro *The World Doesn't End*. Este ano foi aclamado com o título de Poeta Laureado dos Estados Unidos. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar alguns dos poemas em prosa de Simic, no intuito de verificar de que maneira ele justapõe eventos históricos, imagens surreais, mitos e folclore para descrever sua experiência na Europa, durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial.

Palavras-Chave: Charles Simic, História, Poesia, Poema em prosa.

Abstract: Charles Simic emigrated to the United States from Yugoslavia when he was sixteen. He is a prolific author and translator. In 1990, he won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his volume "The World Doesn't End". In 2007 he was appointed Poet Laureate of the United States. This article aims to analyze some of Simic's prose-poems, in order to verify how he uses historical accounts, surreal images, myths and folktale narratives to describe his realistic experience of growing up in Europe during World War II.

Key Words: Charles Simic, History, Poetry, Prose poem.

The prose poem is a fabulous beast like the sphinx. A monster made up of prose and poetry (Charles Simic).

Although dozens of French writers experimented with prose poems in the 18th century, it was not until Charles Baudelaire's work appeared in 1855 that the prose poem gained wide recognition. This literary genre with an oxymoron for a name was first introduced to the English-speaking public in Stuart Merrill's *Pastels in Prose*, a collection of French prose poems in English translation published in New York, in 1890. In the years that followed, the prose poem began to arouse the interest of a whole generation of writers, such as James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, and T. S. Eliot. Among contemporary best-known representatives of the prose poem are Russell Edson, Robert Bly, Charles Simic, and the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood.

Basically, the prose poem is a type of poetry characterized by its lack of line breaks. Although the prose poem resembles a short piece of prose, its allegiance to poetry can be seen in the use of rhythms, figures of speech, rhyme, assonance, consonance and images. The length of prose poems varies, but they usually range from half of a page to three or four pages. The entry on

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the prose poem in the *Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms* covers three pages and points out, mainly, that it is a historic form that employs essential elements of poetry. In addition to that, the editors Jack Myers and Michael Simms stress that rhythm is an important element of the prose poem:

a form of poetry in prose format that contains the devices and modes of perception of lined-out poetry. The real roots of the prose poem go back as far as the origins of poetry itself since the line break is a relatively recent invention – neither the ancient Greeks nor Anglo-Saxons in their original manuscripts employed line endings. But the earliest forms of prose poem, as a separate genre, appear in the Old Testament, early folk tales, fables, and parables, which used allusion, symbol, and imagery in a less diluted form than is usually found in prose [...]. There is a great deal of internal rhythmical and syntactical movement in the poem which takes up the slackness in formal tension that is the inevitable result of not using line endings [...] there is sometimes the repetition and counter-point that we usually associate with poetry. But if a steady and predictable rhythm were to be used in a prose poem, the natural fluidity of the form would be stultified and the work would seem wooden (MYERS and SIMMS qt in WEIGL, p. 97).

Russell Edson, in “Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man,” compares the prose poem to a “cast-iron aeroplane that can actually fly, mainly because its pilot does not care if it does or not.” He says,

Nevertheless, this heavier-than-air prose monstrosity, this cast-iron toy will be seen to be floating over the trees. It’s all done from the cockpit. The joy stick is made of flesh. The pilot sits on an old kitchen chair before a table covered with an oilcloth. The coffee cups and spoons seem to be the controls. But the pilot is asleep. You are right; this aeroplane seems to fly because its pilot dreams [...] (EDSON, qt. in HALL, 1982, p. 98).

Edson’s metaphor is attractive to poets because he defends the unconscious and the release of imagination from literary conventions, as he states, “We want to write free of debt or obligation to literary form or idea; free even from ourselves, free from our own expectations [...] there is more truth in the act of writing that in what is written [...]” (EDSON, qt. in HALL, 1982, p. 98).

In comparison between prose poetry and more traditional verse, Edson sees the act of writing a prose poem as an experience that is qualified as the experience of the artist, not the aesthetic result that is superior:

The spirit or approach, which is represented in the prose poem, is not specifically literary [...]. The writing of a prose poem is more of an experience than a labor toward a product. If the finished prose poem is considered a piece of literature, this is quite incidental to the writing (EDSON, qt. in HALL, 1982, p.103).

In Edson’s view, the modern prose poem has to be considered as an approach, but not a form. He writes,

The fat man comes to this: That the artifice of the novel is impossible for him; he has not enough faith to build a cathedral. He must work toward bits and pieces formed from memory [...]. And yet, experience remains hidden and less important than the inscape it has formed. To find a prose free of the self-consciousness of poetry; a prose more compact than the storyteller's; a prose removed from the formalities of *literature* [...] (EDSON, qt. in HALL, 1982, p. 98).

It is true that as an oxymoron the prose poem declares war on genre, and Charles Simic also recognizes the prose poem as a transformation or combination of earlier genres, as he declares in "Ales Debeljak,"

In a lyric poem everything and everyone come together. The prose poem is the most outrageous example of this. Fable, legend, creation myth, bedtime story, travel journal, epistle, diary, dream are just some of its ingredients. The prose poem reads like a narrative but works like a lyric, since it relies on juxtaposition of images and unexpected turns of phrase. An interrupted narrative, it insists that it has to be read over and over again until its words and images radiate their full mystery (SIMIC, 1994, p. 118).

In his essay "The Poetry of Village Idiots," Simic compares the prose poem to a "fly in a dark room," and captures both the spontaneity and the frustration involved in writing it:

Writing a prose poem is a bit like trying to catch a fly in a dark room. The fly probably isn't even there, the fly is inside your head, still, you keep tripping over and bumping into things in hot pursuit. The prose poem is a burst of language following a collision with a large piece of furniture (SIMIC, 1994, p. 46).

Charles Simic's *The World Doesn't End* (1989) is one of the most recent, and also one of the most accomplished representatives of contemporary American prose poems. Michel Deville argues that, even though Simic's collection of prose poems shares some of the features of the fabulist prose poem, "including a taste for black humor and tragicomical absurdities," their most important feature is an ability to create "a successful blending of lyric, philosophical and critical material".

Since the Pulitzer Prize was awarded for Simic's 1989 *The World Doesn't End*, a renewal of attention by writers and critics to the prose poem has been noticed. Most significantly, the number of prose-poem collections published by some of America's most distinguished poets has increased exponentially — "a publishing explosion which has taught us that the prose is not one thing but many, a hydra-headed beast that in continuing to give pleasure will continue to elude definition" (LORBERER). Such allusion is perfect because, as the ancient Greek creature with many heads that grew again when cut off, the prose poem remains a difficult problem that keeps returning.

According to Christopher Buckley's "Sounds That Have Been Singing: Charles Simic's *The World Doesn't End*," the most essential elements of poetry, such as rhythm, imagery, essential subject, and vision, are everywhere in Simic's book. He delineates an outline of Simic's book of prose poems, saying that,

Part 1 presents views from the perspective of childhood, a personal history of sorts, but one without the usual autobiography detail and chronological progression. Part 2 includes poems spoken by a slightly more mature speaker; more politics, philosophy, a mythical material enter the book through these poems. Part 3 provides an absurdist history of the world, more current, more introspective than the first two parts (BUCKLEY qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 102).

Buckley argues that, having a quotation from Fats Waller as an epigraph that says, "Let's Waltz the Rumba," is a clear signal of how Simic wants us to read his prose poems. According to Buckley, he is saying, 'Let's do it a little different now, jazz it up, change the face a bit, show some different moves; let's adjust the look and feel, the texture; let's explore this artifice, but let's keep the rhythm, the soul, the nostalgia and imagination — so better to reveal the world — but nevertheless, let's dance' (BUCKLEY qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 96).

Buckley points out that all of Simic's prose poems contain "the somewhat surreal observations of an incredible world," and explain them as a form chosen to give more credibility to his vision of history. He says,

Simic has chosen a form that best works as a coefficient of his subject and vision [...] The form, like the folk tale, gives the illusion of reporting — witnessing something strange and wondrous; it thus accommodates Simic's observation of the world, a witnessing of incidents from his childhood and his past that are incredible, even surreal, by everyday standards (BUCKLEY, qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 98).

Considered as one of our oldest forms of literature that has been passed down in the speech, the folk tale is defined by Simms and Myers as "a verse of prose narrative celebrating a historical event, hero, belief or mode or behavior" (qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 99). Both the tale and the prose poem have always had the mythical element, the heroic, the unexpectedly present, and "offer dramatic closure — something happens in a sequence of actions that will resolve or conclude the tension set forth in character, action or the witnessing of the speaker" (MYERS and SIMMS qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 99).

In his essay "Serbian Heroic Ballads," Simic recounts how he grew up reading folk tales. He says that in those ballads the mythical is always present, but so is the real. Simic remembers that the "Kosovo Cycle" sings the Serbian adventures and the heroic defeat during the Turkish occupation. Simic says,

Serbs are possibly unique among peoples in that in their national epic poetry they celebrate defeat. Other people sing their triumphs of their conquering he-

roes while the Serbs sing of the tragic sense of life [...] The poet of the Kosovo Cycle rebels against the very idea of historical triumph. Defeat, he appears to be saying, is wiser than victory. The great antiheroes of these poems experience a moment of tragic consciousness. They see the alternatives with all their moral implications (SIMIC, 1997, 110-1).

Writing of his early years during the war, this attitude and perspective can be found in most of Simic's prose poems. He uses the voice of the folk tale to report absurd and astonishing images of a strange world, and blends the heroic and the incredible, "with a voice that reports 'truly' what the speaker has seen and how that might be resolved or has taken place in such a world as ours" (BUCKLEY qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 100).

In the first prose poem in the book, Simic talks in direct declarative sentences to report a scene from his place during the war, and the child's perspective coalesces with the adult's:

My mother was a braid of black smoke.
She bore me swaddled over the burning cities.
The sky was a vast and windy place for a child to play.
We met many others who were just like us.
They were trying to put on their overcoats
with arms made of smoke.
The high heavens were full of little shrunken
deaf ears instead of stars (SIMIC, 1989, p. 3).

The speaker begins the poem describing the figure of his mother as an indistinct figure of black smoke. The child's voice is stressed by this idea of a protecting mother that the poet would retake in other poems, as in "Prodigy": "I remember my mother / blindfolding me a lot. / / She had a way of tucking my head / suddenly under her overcoat" (SIMIC, 1980, p. 20-3).

In the child's perception, they were above the great fire, "over the burning cities," which alludes to the idea of death: The option for going to the sky, which means going to death, sometimes is the only way out during the war.

Other families also mix themselves with the cloud of dust caused by the great holocaust, which means that everybody experiences the war. The poet compares people to the dark smoke from the war in order to establish the scenery of a burnt-down city: "black smoke," "burning cities," "arms made of smoke". The lines in which the poet says that "They are trying to put on their overcoats / with arms made of smoke," may be associated with people who were trying to protect themselves in vain. "[A]rms of smoke" suggests a double meaning: it may refer to mutilated arms, which would imply defenseless people, or it may be a reference to war weapons.

Fabulist images permeate the entire poem, but they are stressed in the last line, when the poet tells us about the sky with no brightness anymore, since it has “little shrunken / deaf ears instead of stars”. These surreal images may suggest that no one is listening to the denunciation of their suffering, or may be associated with deformed people because of bombs and grenades. Besides the idea of mutilation, this line also suggests the atmosphere of fear implicated in that scene.

In order to describe such a chaotic and confused moment, this poem is rich in details, and its images may be related to a plurality of interpretations. Throughout the poem we may notice that the poet plays with the word “smoke”. Besides the already mentioned interpretations, it may also allude to a mythical atmosphere, and to the poet’s memory. In his memoir he declares: “It is dark ages I am describing now, things that happened forty years ago. My memory is so poor that everything looks badly lit and full of shadows” (SIMIC, 1997, p. 20).

According to Buckley, “we have a history, an eyewitness account in declarative sentences in a form that does not call attention to itself that provides a voice that does not then isolate images or ask for pity. In the best sense of the folk tale, it reports that strange and wondrous without fanfare [...]” (BUCKLEY, qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 102).

Different from the previous poem, which makes use of strong images to recall a place of destruction, the following one uses figures of delicate porcelain to talk indirectly about the war:

It’s a store that specializes in antique porcelain. She goes around it with a finger on her lips. Tsss! We must be quiet when we come near the tea cups. Not a breath allowed near the tea cups. Not a breath allowed near the sugar bowls. A teeny grain of dust has fallen on a wafer-thin saucer. She makes an “oh” with her owlet-mouth. On her feet she wears soft, thickly padded slippers around which mice scurry (SIMIC, 1989, p. 6).

The poet reveals a sympathetic memory of a woman (maybe his mother) trying to lead a normal life amid the pressing realities of the war. The quietness of the indoors scene in that repressive atmosphere stands in contrast with the noisy outside, caused by the bombs. The poet is ironical to tell us about the fragility of people: This mother holds her breath not to break the porcelains, whereas there were bombs falling outside.

This poem, like many others, happens in silence, and tension is the prevailing feeling during the whole poem. Silence may be associated to the mother’s experience, since she is protecting her family. But, the same silence reflects the repressive order caused by the war.

The “mice scurry” is the only direct reference to the war and its contradiction: From behind that scene of neatness and sophistication, there is much rottenness and filth, if we consider hundreds of people maimed and killed. There is also the idea of people side by side with the *rats*.

In the next poem, the poet tells us about the precariousness of the domestic environment as well as his people’s attempt to keep the domestic routine and to survive the horrors of that time:

She’s pressing me gently with a hot steam iron, or she slips her hand inside me as if I was a sock that needed mending. The thread she uses is like the trickle of my blood, but the needle’s sharpness is all her own.

“You will ruin your eyes, Henrietta, in such bad light,” her mother warns. And she’s right! Never since the beginning of the world has there been so little light. Our winter afternoons have been known at times to last a hundred years (SIMIC, 1989, p. 7).

Divided in two paragraphs, the poem juxtaposes surreal images and reality. In the first part, the poet explores fantastic images to describe a mother’s dramatic attempt to protect her family. There is a comparison between the son and the clothes, and the mother is gently sewing the son’s scars from the war. The most fantastic in this passage is the paradox, since the poet uses the word “gentle” to describe gestures that unavoidably cause pain. This mother is gentle in order to soften the suffering of her family and make them survive. The last line of this stanza tells us about the ability of his mother in that context: “the needle’s sharpness is all her own”.

In the second part, the poet introduces his grandmother. She is warning her daughter about the bad light while she is sewing, perhaps with a candle light: “You will ruin your eyes [...]”, which may imply the damages she will cause to herself in order to save her family.

In a quotation from “Notebooks, 1963-69,” Simic says:

In my childhood women mended stockings in the evening. To have a “run” in one’s stocking was catastrophic. Stockings were expensive, and so was electricity. We would all sit around the table with a lamp in its middle, the father reading the papers, the children pretending to do their homework, while secretly watching the mother spreading her red painted fingernails inside the transparent stocking (SIMIC qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 185).

This memory of his childhood is perfectly reproduced in this poem about grim times. Besides indicating the rationed electricity, the “little light” suggests melancholy, the long winter, and all the destruction caused by the war.

In another poem, the poet assumes a mythic tone when he presents a vision of a ghost, a powerful military leader who is a symbol of all wars, and also of tyranny: Napoleon Bonaparte:

I am the last Napoleonic soldier. It's almost two hundred years later and I am still retreating from Moscow. The road is lined with white birch trees and mud comes up to my knees. The one-eyed woman wants to sell me a chicken, and I don't even have any clothes on.

The Germans are going one way; I am going the other. The Russians are going still another way and waving good-by. I have a ceremonial saber. I use it to cut my hair, which is four feet long (SIMIC, 1989, p. 9).

The mythical enters the poem to suggest a historical event: As the Napoleonic soldiers once did, the poet also retreats from the capital of Russia. In two hundred years the story is the same: A despot tries to overcome the world, and people are forced to retreat according to the battles. Along the road, the contrast of "birch trees" and "mud up to [his] knees" suggest all the soldier's long journeys. In the last lines of the first part, he presents the cruel results of the war: misery and mutilation.

The second part of the poem presents an image of the end of World War II. Besides referring to actual roads taken by soldiers in their long pilgrimage after the war, "ways" may also suggest different ideological paths dividing the world since then: the socialist and capitalist blocks, and the split Germany. The poet ends the poem with a strange image as in the folktales, to tell us about the domestic use of the war weapons. Buckley concludes that, "the armies change, but nothing else changes in two hundred years" (BUCKLEY, qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 104).

Myth and reality also merge in another poem showing a boy.

[Holding] the Beast of the Apocalypse by its tail, the stupid kid! Oh beards on fire, our doom appeared sealed. The buildings were tottering; the computer screens were as dark as our grandmother's cupboards. We were too frightened to plead. Another century gone to hell—and what for? Just because some people don't know how to bring their children up! (SIMIC, 1989, p. 11).

Simic begins the poem using a reference from the New Testament, which deals with a monster that would come from the sea to destroy human-kind:

The Beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies... He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation [...] (THE HOLE BIBLE, 1984).

Metaphorically, the Beast may represent the war, considering all the terrible things it brings. The 'He' of the poem may be an allusion to Adolph Hitler, who was considered a "stupid kid," first because he was the one who started

the war; and second, because he was dominated by it, that is, he tried to get hold of the war, but once it started it acquired a life of its own.

We can consider that the poem has three movements: The first is characterized by the coming of the Beast, which reflects the beginning of the war; the second is the action of the Beast, or the culmination of the war; and the third movement is the outcome of the actions of the Beast: destruction and people's fear ("our doom appeared sealed").

Simic blends current elements and biblical facts to depict the scene of destruction: beards "on fire, buildings were tottering, computer screens were dark [...]" — the latter suggesting the idea that, more than half a century after the Second World War, History repeats itself. Besides the idea of fear, there is the suggestion that people were too oppressed to argue in favor of their cause: "We were too frightened to plead".

Simic argues that, because of the war, humankind has lost many centuries and the world is not the same. He ends the poem with a critique of our society, that values individualism, selfishness, ambition, and on parents who educate their children to win at any cost.

The image of the "Beast," reappears in another poem, as in "Haunted Mind," in which "the Beast of War/ Lick its sex on TV" (Wedding in Hell 7-8). According to William Corbett, this Beast may be a reference to "the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims brutally murdering one another in the mountain, villages, and cities of Bosnia in what was once Yugoslavia" (CORBETT, 1996, p. 33).

The speaker of the following poem is an adult, who mixes reality and fable:

The city had fallen. We came to the window of a house drawn by a madman. The setting sun shone on a few abandoned machines of futility. "I remember," someone said, "how in ancient times one could turn a wolf into a human and then lecture it to one's heart's content" (SIMIC, 1989, p. 15).

From the first lines, the poem presents a scene of postwar: fallen cities, abandoned machines, ruined houses. Opposing the first lines, full of images, the poet uses a fable not only to refer to the war scene, but also to show his disillusionment with wars and also with human nature.

The poet criticizes the irrationality of the war: man is supposed to be superior to animals because of his capacity to reason but, different from them, he destroys himself and everything that he has built. As Buckley concludes, Simic implies that "one might have a better chance reasoning with the wolf than with human beings" (BUCKLEY qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 105).

The concluding three-line poem, entitled "History Lesson," functions as a coda to this section:

The roaches look like
Comic rustics
In serious dramas (SIMIC, 1989, p. 21).

The poem uses roaches emblematically to represent the ultimate survivors of wars. As the rustics in the city, the roaches are also displaced, taking humans' place in serious "dramas." Drama may be related to both the actual conflict of war, or to a play, where the roaches, as the only survivors from great catastrophes, assume the place of the actors. The lesson that the poet wants to leave us is that, despite the tenuous limit between the tragic and the comic, there is no comicalness in the war. According to Buckley, when we consider the long history of war, "all the armies marshaled across the countries, all the high drama settled with the dust, this image may well present to us a sense of irony and folly" (BUCKLEY qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 104). In a synopsis of his discussion of Simic's prose-poems, Buckley points out the indissoluble link between personal and public history, history and myth, conjunctions which remain in several of Simic's works, especially his poems.

Simic's writings intertwine personal with public history, making each part of the other. He really experiments in his poetry with what he theorizes in his essay "Notes on Poetry and History." In this essay, the poet quotes Octavio Paz to support his notion that the languages of the poem and of history are interwoven:

The language that nourishes the poem is, after all, nothing but history, name this or that, reference and meaning [...] Without history — without men, who are the origin, the substance and the end of history — the poem could not be born, or incarnated, and without the poem there could not be history either, because there would be no origin or beginning (SIMIC, 1988, p. 126).

Along this essay Simic sustains his argument that history is inherent in poetry, and declares his surprise and disbelief when he sees that for most contemporary American poetry history does not exist. He states that "the poets write about Nature and they write about themselves in the most solipsistic manner, but they don't write about their executioners" (SIMIC, 1988, p. 127).

Besides his own involvement in past history, Simic writes essays, and poems on contemporary political events, social problems, and particularly on the role of the poet in this era, that is to say, "give faithful testimony of our predicament so that a true history of our age might be written" (SIMIC, 1988, p. 126).

In order to transform historical report into poetry, Simic combines myth and History, realism and surrealism, as well as folk memories and fables, bringing fantastic images to enable us "to sense and identify the realism lurking

beneath the surface” (AVERY qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 104). Simic’s prose poems also show us an ironic view of the sad state of contemporary society as well as of the society in earlier times. His work not only adds past history but also dialogues with history’s continuity. As Helen Vendler observes, Simic is certainly one of the most influential poets of his generation:

he is certainly the best political poet, in a large sense, on the American scene; his written emblems outclass, in their stylishness, the heavy-handedness of most social poetry, while remaining more terrifying in their human implications than explicit political documentation. In his plainness of speech, he is of the line of Whitman and Williams, but in the cunning strategies of his forms, he has brought the allegorical subversiveness of Eastern European poetry into our native practice. The next generation of political poets will be on their mettle if [they] want to surpass him (VENDLER qt. in WEIGL, 1996, p. 134).

Since 1973 Charles Simic has lived in New Hampshire, where he is Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. He has published 27 books of poetry, 9 books of essays, 1 memoir book, and several translations. In addition, he has been distinguished with an assortment of awards, including fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Mac Arthur Foundation, and the National Endowment for The Arts. In 1995, he received the Griffin Poetry Prize, for the book *Selected Poems: 1963-2003*. Simic is also an important translator of Yugoslavian, South American, and French poetry, winning two PEN International Translator Awards. This year, he was acclaimed the U. S. Poet Laureate by the Library of Congress.

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