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CHARLES SIMIC'S USES OF *HIS*-STORY

por

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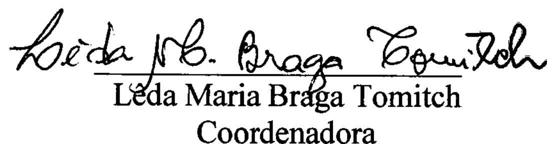

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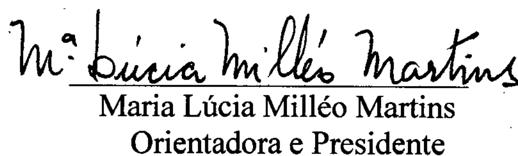

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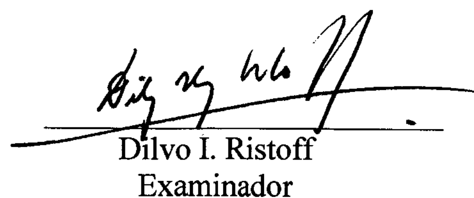

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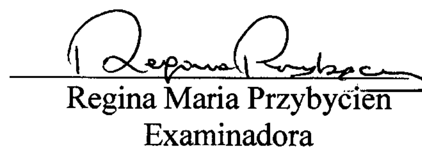

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**I dedicate this thesis to my son Lian,
who brings me happiness and
self-confidence.**

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ABSTRACT

CHARLES SIMIC'S USES OF *HIS*-STORY

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2001

Supervising Professor: Dr. Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins

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. This thesis investigates how his long partnership with a context of war is recreated in his poetry. My objective is to contribute to a reading of Simic's writing in order to investigate how public history interweaves with his private history. The purpose of this investigation is to sustain the idea of seeing his poems as a valid historical documents. In order to fulfill this objective, I draw, mainly, upon the distinct genres used by Simic, such as poems, prose poems, essays, articles, and interviews. The theoretical support presupposes the reading and analysis of works by theorists such as James Longenbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Hayden White. The results confirmed that Simic's poetry conveys not only the monumental history all around him, but also his own historicity within that context.

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RESUMO

CHARLES SIMIC'S USES OF *HIS*-STORY

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2001

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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. Esta dissertação investiga como os eventos históricos são recriados na poesia de Charles Simic. Meu objetivo é contribuir para uma leitura dos trabalhos de Simic, buscando as inter-relações do pessoal com o histórico. O propósito desta investigação é mostrar como a poesia do autor, relacionada principalmente à Segunda Guerra Mundial, é válida como instrumento histórico. Durante este estudo, são analisado diferentes gêneros usados por Simic, como poemas, poemas em prosa, ensaios, artigos e entrevistas. A base teórica pressupõe a leitura e análise de teóricos influentes, como James Longenbach, Friedrich Nietzsche e Hayden White. Os resultados confirmam que a poesia de Simic reflete não apenas a história monumental, mas também sua própria historicidade dentro daquele contexto

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 08

CHAPTER I – THE INTERWEAVING OF HISTORY AND POETRY 11

CHAPTER II – "IN THE BEGINNING...": A MEMOIR 23

CHAPTER III – "THE WORLD DOESN'T END": PROSE POEMS 41

CHAPTER IV – "HISTORY PRACTICING ITS SCISSOR-CLIPS / IN THE DARK": POEMS 56

CONCLUSION 76

REFERENCES 80

Despair

Alexander Ristovic

You opened the matchbox.
there was a single match left.
You took it out, so now
the box was empty.
You put three ladybugs in it.
With that one match you set
the box on fire,
and while it burned,
giving off a little smoke,
you turned to me,
to laugh in my face![1]

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[1] Translated by Charles Simic.

INTRODUCTION

One can read literally hundreds of pages of contemporary poetry without encountering any significant aspect of our common twentieth-century existence. The poets write about Nature and they write about themselves in the most solipsistic manner, but they don't write about their executioners.

(Charles Simic)

Charles Simic's first poems were published in 1959, when he was 21. His first full-length collection of poems was published in 1967. In a very short time, his work began to attract critical attention. But, Simic is a poet very difficult to categorize. Although he has collected considerable acclaim from fellow poets and has received the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his book of prose poems The World Doesn't End, he remains an enigma, since some of his poems reflect a surreal, metaphysical bent, and others offer grimly realistic portraits of violence and despair.

Born in Yugoslavia in 1938, Charles Dusan Simic has a long partnership with a context of war, initiated in his childhood during the Second World War. Besides that, in 1961 he was

drafted into the U.S. Army, and served as an MP in France (Corbett 33). According to Corbett, Simic is "one of the only American poets of his generation to have first-hand knowledge of World War II, and to have soldiered in the army" (32).

This "first-hand knowledge" of the war accounts for a long intimacy of Simic's work with history—public, monumental—in permanent dialogue with his own historicity. The term "*his-story*" is thus result of such junction. The term is taken from a comment by Stephen Yenser on Robert Lowell's book History where he significantly recreates public history in combination with his own personal history. History, says Yenser, is also his-story – "the kaleidoscope arranging and rearranging the materials of his and others lives, so that they make his own seen comprehensible and whole" (qt. in Kalstone 207). Like Lowell, Charles Simic makes use of this formula, exploring it in different genres in his work.

This research aims at contributing to a reading of Charles Simic's writings in order to investigate how monumental history is interwoven with his personal history. In order to do this I am proposing a dialogue among the different genres used by him, as memoirs, essays, prose poems, and poems. The pertinence of this research lies on the facts that relatively little has been written about Simic. From what I have gathered, there have been no theses or dissertations written on him, nor have I been able to locate any books published in Brazil.

In the first chapter I argue that the conventional distinctions between "History," and "Poetry" are questionable. Informed by James Longenbach's study Modernist Poetics of History, I trace a historical background on the validity of poetry as historical document—from the positivistic assumptions about history, contested by the "existential historians," and the poet-historians, such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, to a contemporary discussion of history and its link with art. This discussion will have as basis Friedrich Nietzsche's The Use and Abuse of History and Hayden White's Tropics of Discourse, which was also of capital relevance, concerning the

historical text as literary artifact. Besides these theorists, I also bring Simic's own view on poetry and history.

Having presented this theoretical debate as basis for the reading of Simic's uses of "his-story," I start the second chapter with some brief theoretical considerations on autobiography with a discussion of James Olney's Metaphors of Self. Then, I present a synopsis of Simic's memoir, "In The Beginning..." which is part of his 1994 book Wonderful Words, Silent Truth. Afterwards, I explore the interplay of history with his memoir, observing closely some important aspects, such as the use of the child's perspective, the use of the comic to report the tragic, the influence of jazz and blues, and the use of fragments as an attempt to reconstruct "*his*-story."

Chapter three is dedicated to Simic's prose poems. I have selected seven poems from the first part of his book The World Doesn't End, in which I verify how he makes use of history and myth, surreal images, and folk tale narratives to describe his experience in Yugoslavia during Word War II.

For chapter four, I have selected six poems which are the most representative of wartime experiences The poems discussed are: "History" from Austerlties, and "History" from Unending Blues, which help me to verify what Simic's concept of History is; "Prodigy" from Classic Ballroom Dances, and "War" from Hotel Insomnia, which are poems closely related to the Second World War; "Documentary" from A Wedding in Hell, and "Paradise Motel" from Hotel Insomnia, which are fragments of contemporary history. In this last chapter I also mention how Simic makes use of the mythical method, bringing past myths to a contemporary scene. I conclude my research with an overview of the findings and suggestions for further research on other poets who also make use of history.

CHAPTER I

The interweaving of History and Poetry

Note to the future historians:
Don't read old issues of the New
York Times. Read the poets.
Charles Simic

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was a time of an intensive debate about the nature of history and its representation in art. For a long time, there was a rigid distinction between reality and imagination. The knowledge of reality would be the objective of history, whereas the "imaginable," was the objective of literature. Consequently, they were placed in antagonistic fields: history was science, and literature was art. This characterization of history as science or truth, and literature as art or fiction was a powerful concept among the nineteenth-century historians, whose aim was to eradicate any allusion to the fictive from the historical discourse. According to James Longenbach[1], in the introduction of Modernists Poetics of History, in the nineteenth century, most of the great conceptions of history were based on models of "linear change," or "historical progress." Such models consisted in arranging historical events following a logical pattern or predetermined laws. Despite differences among theorists, history was seen as "the story of man's development in time" (5).

One of the first to question the validity of these models was the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In The Use and Abuse of History, he writes

> As long as the soul of history is found in the great impulse that it gives to a powerful spirit, as long as the past is principally used as a model for imitation, it is always in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction. Sometimes there is no distinction between a 'monumental' past and a mythical romance, as the same motives for action can be gathered from the one world as the other. (15)

Nietzsche also raises the question about the issue of objectivity and subjectivity. According to him, there is still a class of naive historians who conceive that there is a totally fair objective text, which can only find its truth in the canonical text, and in which there is a complete detachment from all personal feelings. These people consider subjective historical writing everything that does not relate to these universal accounts belonging to the canon. For him, it is nothing but a myth to say that the "picture given to such a man by the object really shows the truth of things," (37) for the moment of creation is actually a moment of "composition," since the facts do not speak for themselves. Consequently, its result, instead of being a "historically true picture," will be one artistically organized. To think objectively of history, in Nietzsche's view, "is the work of the dramatist: to think one thing with another, and weave the elements into a single whole, with the presumption that the unity of plan must be put into the objects if it is not already there" (37-8).

Nietzsche affirms that he is not able to imagine a totally fair kind of historical writing, which conceives a reality existing outside the mind, and he sharpened his conception of the interweaving between the artistic and historical writing by quoting Grillparzer, who professed that

> [H]istory is nothing but the manner in which the spirit of man apprehends facts that are obscure to him, links things together whose connection heaven only knows, replaces the unintelligible by something intelligible, puts his own ideas of causation into the external world, which can perhaps be explained only from within; and assumes the existence of chance where thousands of small causes may be really at work. Each man has his own individual needs, and so millions of tendencies are running together, straight or crooked, parallel or across, forward or backward, helping or hindering each other. They have all the appearance of chance, and make it impossible, quite apart from all natural influences, to establish any universal lines on which past events must have run. (qt. in Nietzsche 38)

Nietzschean anti-historicism remains as a powerful philosophy in a century that intensively propagated the development of the historical sense. In Longenbach's understanding, since Nietzsche's "critique of positivistic historiography, it became difficult to find the 'truth' of history in the scientific patterning of events" (6).

After the First World War, some "existential" historians came to join the debate. Longenbach explains that "rather than seeing history as a deadening influence in the present, these thinkers emphasize that history is a living part of the present that cannot be destroyed. To live for the existential historians, is to live historically" (10).

Opposing Nietzsche's view about the burden of the past and the assumption of a "naive consciousness," the existential philosopher Wilhem Dilthey believes that "what human spirit is can be revealed only by the historical consciousness of that which the mind has lived through and brought forth [...] What man is only history can say" (qt. in Longenbach 10). For Dilthey, historical understanding helps us to learn about the past and also about ourselves; therefore, it cannot be destroyed. For him, the first condition for the possibility of the study of history lies in "that I myself am a historical being, that the man who studies history is the man

who makes history" (qt. in Longenbach 14). In this sense history and man are inextricably linked.

For Hans-George Gadamer, another existential philosopher, "to be historical means that one is not absorbed into self-knowledge" (qt. in Longenbach 10). He believes that interpreting the historical past is possible because we are not completely separate entities, but linked by the traditions of our languages and cultures. In this sense, says Longenbach, "writing a poem is as historical an act as playing Chopin or falling in love" (10).

In an analysis of the historical text as literary artifact, Hayden White[2] observes that history deals not only with events and facts but also with "the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure." He adds that these sets of relationships are not present in the events themselves: "they exist only in the mind of the historian reflecting on them." White stresses the urgency of revising the distinction conventionally drawn between history and poetry and states that, 'if there is an element of the historical in all poetry, there is an element of poetry in every historical account of the world" (97-8).

Besides that, the language used by the historian to describe the events is of crucial importance, taking into account that in our consideration of the historical world, as well as in fiction or in poetry, we are dependent on the techniques of figurative language. White affirms that "if the historian's aim is to familiarize us with the unfamiliar, he must use figurative, rather than technical, language" (94). "In point of fact," he says,

> history—the real world as it evolves in time—is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelists tries to make sense of it [...] It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same. (98)

White argues that this separation between fiction and history—the representation of the imaginable" versus "the representation of the actual"—must give place to the recognition

that even if we suppose that novelists deal only with imaginary events whereas historians with real ones, "the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the *object* of a representation is a poetic process" (125). In White's words,

> the historians must utilize precisely the same tropological strategies, the same modalities of representing relationships in words, that the poet or novelists uses [...] These fragments have to be put together to make a whole of a particular, not a general, kind and they are put together in the same ways that the novelists use to put together figments of their imagination to display an ordered world, a cosmos, where only disorder or chaos might appear. (125)

The necessity of dissolving the distinction between these opposing fields, considering that it is quite impossible to write history without making use of the techniques of the poet, led contemporary criticism to sharpen the debate. White argues that

> contemporary critical theory permits us to believe more confidently than ever before that 'poetizing' is not an activity that hovers over, transcends, or otherwise remains alienated from life or reality, but represents a mode of praxis which serves as the immediate base of all cultural activity (this an insight of Vico, Hegel, and Nietzsche, no less than Freud and Lévi-Strauss), even of science itself. We are no longer compelled, therefore, to believe—as historians in the post-Romantic period had to believe—that fiction is the antithesis of fact (in the way that superstition or magic is the antithesis of science) or that we can relate facts to one another without the aid of some enabling and generally fictional matrix. (126)

In the early twentieth century, the poet-critics Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot join the existential philosophers' debate, arguing that the historical sense is not built from a sequence

of events that occurred in the past; but it is a result of the historian's effort to understand the past in the present. Longenbach says that,

> Like the existential historians, Pound and Eliot proceed from the assumption that knowledge does not lie on the surface of events, waiting to be collected by an impartial observer, but lurks within them. To uncover that knowledge, the interpreter must penetrate that surface—and such an effort demands the investment of the interpreter's own experience into his work. The 'poems including history' written out of these presuppositions about the nature of historical knowledge consequently tend to take the form of a 'palimpsest' rather than a chronological schema: *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* display a present that is woven from the past in a complex tissue of allusions, a past that exists only as it lives in the texture of the present. (27-8)

In order to understand the modern "poem including history," (28) for Longenbach, we must consider Eliot's argument for historical sense. In his essay "Traditional and The Individual Talent," Eliot defends that to find a good poet we should look for the history of his ancestors, since "no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," but only has significance in "his relation to the dead poet and artist" (4). This historical consciousness involves a great labor, which

> compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (4)

Besides the awareness of the past, Eliot insists that a good artist should have control of his emotions. "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion," he declares, "but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (10-11). About this process of depersonalization, he declares, "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (7-8).

For both Pound and Eliot, the experience of recapturing the past is of fundamental importance, and it is the function of the "poet-historian" to try to understand the past in the present. Longenbach claims that both poets "found their inspiration in history," and also "they felt that a healthy relationship with the past is essential for the highest quality of life and literature in the present" (11). Writing on Pound's *Cantos*, Eliot remarked that "a large part of the poet's inspiration must come from [...] his knowledge of history"(qt. in Longenbach 11).

Pound and Eliot, nevertheless, were not only concerned with the specific action of remembering the past, but with the process and methodology of that action. Although they both make use of past tradition in a contemporary scene, they differ in one point. In Pound, past myths are brought in their original habitat, as in the "Canto*s*," where there are manifestations of gods in their original world. Eliot makes use of the "mythical method," bringing past myths to the modern world. This is especially clear in "The Waste Land," in which different historical periods, different myths, characters, and voices fuse as in the episode of Tiresias. Although "a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' [he] is yet the most important personage in the poem" and what he "sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (52). In his endnotes to this passage Eliot writes that "just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phonecian sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from

Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two seers meet in Tiresias" (52).

In the final version of *Canto 1*, Pound also revives the ghost of Tiresias, but rather than bringing it to modern context, the poet preserves its original environment. Distinct periods of history are only fused here by the layers of languages: Pound adapts the passage from a Divus' Renaissance Latin translation to a Modern English Anglo-Saxon verse. In this regard, and referring to the translation of the Odyssey, Robert Langbaum observes that Pound shows "how myths endure through changes of language and how the memory of the myth and the memory in language of its own changes sustain cultural continuity" (175).

Charles Simic also sees poetry in a continuous interplay with history. In his essay "Notes on Poetry and History" he quotes Octavio Paz to support his notion that the language 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. (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" (127).

The poet begins the essay describing TV images that had astonished him: a day's action in the Vietnam War. He argues that, after the invention of photography and electronic media, there is no way to avoid the pressure of reality. Daily tragedies are brought to us every morning and evening, and history literally enters our world: "I remember standing there for a

long, long time not knowing what to do with myself, feeling the strangeness, the monstrosity of my situation" (124). For him, there is nothing that can justify the atrocities in this century, since "we are orphans of ideology," and the poet "who forget that is living in fool's paradise" (125).

Along the essay, Simic calls our attention to an image of an unknown child, who runs "on a street of collapsing buildings in a city being fire-bombed," (125) to disclose another conception that is largely found in his poems, which says that art is concerned with anonymous human suffering instead of idealized revolutions and their heroic leaders. For him, "if history, as it comes through the historian, retains, analyzes, and connects significant events, in contrast, what poets insist on is the history of 'unimportant' events" (126).

Arguing in favor of the lyric and the history of common events and people, instead of the epic and its accounts of gods and heroes, Simic declares Sappho[3] to be his model rather than Homer:

> Beginning with Sappho's insomnia, there's a tradition of the poem which says 'I exist' in the face of all abstractions of cosmos and history, a poem of passionate desire for accuracy for the here and now in its miraculous presence. I am not talking about confession. The best poetry of this kind is conspicuous by the absence of ego. The most reliable 'histories' are told by first-person pronouns who remain subordinate even anonymous. (126-7)

In his essay "Poetry Is the Present," Simic states that the lyric poem is responsible for a great turn in of literature. There is, since Sappho, a more realistic view of the world:

> It is in lyric poetry that the literary universe is inhabited for the first time by individuals. There were always lyric poems, folksongs sung by women, but their speaker was anonymous. Sappho inserts the first-person pronoun, makes the experience of the folksong personal. (54)

In Simic's view, the historical consciousness interplays with imagination, but what really matters is its representation in art. In "Notes on Poetry and History," he mentions that,

> one of the most terrifying lines of the twentieth-century poetry is by Salvatore Quasimodo. It speaks of 'the black howl of the mother gone to meet her son crucified in the telegraph pole...' That strikes me as absolutely right. I prefer it to a poem like Richard Ebberhart's 'The fury of Aerial Bombardment.' The same horror is in both poems but not the fury of imagination which brings us this poor mother. (126)

The consciousness of the war and the "fury of imagination" are clearly interwoven when Quasimodo makes use of a past religious myth. Christ's holocaust becomes the modern disaster. The suffering of Christ's mother when she sees His crucification is the same of that poor mother who sees "her son crucified on the telegraph pole."

Simic also argues in favor of the commitment of poetry without being partisan or propagandistic. In an interview with Sherod Santos, he declares,

> I never liked the term 'political poetry.' It implies a cause, partisanship, petitions for this or that, and finally propaganda, regardless of how worth the reason. On the other hand, the world is mean, stupid, violent, unjust, cruel [...] And you must say something. A poet who ignores the world is contemptible. I find the narcissism of so much recent poetry obscene. I don't mind people talking about themselves-we all do-but *all* the time! (75)

Simic defends that poets seem to be able to make more sense of this age of uncertainty than other artists are. In Simic's perspective, the poet "reveals the essence of the recorded events more authentically than the historian" (84). "I don't believe in history anymore," says Simic in the same interview. And, in "Notes on Poetry and History," he concludes: "One must, in spite of everything, give faithful testimony of our predicament so that a true history of our age might be written" (128).

Once, asked by Bruce Weigl, how he reconciles the larger forms of history (especially the twentieth century) with "the more exclusive forms" of art and "why writing poems in the late twentieth century?" Simic answers by referring to Martin Heideigger:

> Already Höldelin asked the question: '...and what are poets for in a destitute time?' and Heidegger replies: 'In the age of the words' night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. For this it is necessary that there be 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 human condition. As for our age, the world has never been a more complex place. God is dead, we say, but our TV preaches talk to him all the time. Such contradictions are everywhere. Our situation is impossible and, therefore, ideal for philosophers and poets. (qt. in Avery 210)

[1] James Longenbach's study has oriented me in the selection of the theorists, and their testimonies in relation to the validity of history in literature.

[2] Hayden White's Tropics on Discourse was of capital importance in the sense that it has offered me detailed basis on the subject of "the historical text as literary artifact."

[3] In regard to Sappho, Simic adds that her writings were burned by the early Christian Church, and today only a few fragments of her poems are left. He writes, "[a]bout her life we know next to nothing. Some ancient authors say she was a priestess, some say a prostitute" (54).

CHAPTER II

"In the Beginning...": A memoir

Ghosts move about me
patched with histories.
(Ezra Pound)

This chapter consists of three sections. The first aims at presenting brief theoretical considerations on the issues of public history and autobiography. The second focuses on a synopsis of Simic's memoir entitled "In the Beginning..." which is part of his book Wonderful Words, Silent Truth. The third explores the interplay between his private history and the collective history of this century, observing closely some key aspects, such as the use of a child's perspective, the use of the comic to report the tragic, and the device of fragment in narrative. In doing so, I will be illustrating the fragility of boundaries between history and fiction, considering biography a fictional construction, since it is a made-up story, which does not necessarily lack truth.

I.

In Metaphors of Self: the meaning of autobiography, James Olney defines autobiography as an attempt to describe a lifework, in matter and content as well, which cannot be separated from the writer's life and his personality. Olney says that

> what an autobiographer knows, of course, or what he experiences, is all from within: a feeling of his own consciousness and the appearance of others surrounding him and relating to him more or less, in this way or that. (35)

Olney affirms that if one places autobiography in relation to the life from which it comes, it becomes not only a history of the past or only a book currently circulating in the world; but also, intentionally or not, "a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition" (35). Metaphor, in his concept, is essentially "a way of knowing": "to grasp the unknown through the known, or let the known stand for the unknown and thereby fit that into an organized patterned body of experiential knowledge" (31).

In regard to the interweaving of history and autobiography, Olney argues that if autobiography is in one sense history, then one can also say that history is autobiography. He observes that,

> The makers of history [...] could find in their autobiographies the destiny of their time achieved in action and speech; and the writers of history organize the events of which they write according to, and out of, their own private necessities and the state of their own selves. Historians impose, and quite properly, their own metaphors on the human past. (36)

Olney endorses the conception that history is not an objective collection of facts but rather it is the historian's point of view on the facts, "a point of view that, taken as sum of what he has experienced and understood, reveals to us the historian"(36). As readers, he says,

we go to history, as to autobiography and poetry, to learn more not only about other people and the past but about ourselves and the present. Olney adds that the autobiographer not only repeats his past experience but also reconstructs this experience. Thus "symbolic memory" and imagination become necessary elements of a true recollection. The autobiographer, he concludes, "who draws out of the flux of events a coherent pattern, or who creates a sufficient metaphor for experiences, discovers in the particular, and reveals to us, the universal" (45).

Simic's autobiography "In the Beginning... " largely mediates between public history and personal history, and it is indispensable to help us account for this same combination in Simic's other works. Asked about the relation between his autobiography and history, in an interview with Bruce Weigl, Simic quotes Emerson who said: "There's properly no history, only biography." And adds, " There's History too, independent of my life and your life. I'm more interested in history than in autobiography" (222).

II.

Charles Simic starts the memoir of his childhood by placing the reader in time and space. The year is 1943, his country was at war, and occupied by German forces. The Germans first bombed Belgrade in April of 1941 when he was just three years old. He asserts that he does not remember many things about that day, but he remembers the night the Gestapo came to arrest his father, who was lucky to be soon released.

In 1944, the English and the Americans started bombing his hometown again. "We approved of American and the English bombing of the Germans," he said, "I never heard anyone complain. They were our allies. We loved them" (6). In addition to the German occupation, a civil war was going on in Yugoslavia. Royalists, Communists, Fascists, and

various other political factions were fighting one another. Simic's family was divided between the Royalists and the Communists.

In the same year, after an Easter Sunday full of bombing raids, Simic's mother, who was pregnant at that time, decided to leave Belgrade, since it was dangerous to remain in the city, and they went to live with his grandparents, in a summerhouse not far from his hometown. As the fight was intensified and there was too much indiscriminate killing, they went to a farther village. But they had to come back to the grandfather's house in mid-October when they were warned about the coming of the Germans.

When the Russians liberated Belgrade, Simic and his mother got back to their apartment. Soon, his mother would get a cot in the basement of a private clinic, and he was entrusted to the care of one of his mother's aunts, the only relative they had left in the city. Her name was Nana, and Simic refers to her as "the black sheep in the family" (9). Of the time with his aunt, Simic alternates joyful and tragic memories. He recounts his adventures with his friends roaming the neighborhood, climbing over the ruins and playing with war junk from dead soldiers. He also remembers that Belgrade quickly became the city of the wounded: "One saw people on crutches on every corner" (11). He adds that the Russians had a formula for every serious leg wound: amputate the leg.

By the time his brother was born, he and his mother had come back home, and Simic started school in the spring of 1945.The Communists were in power and he said that people tried to do brainwashing in school: "[the man] said there was no God [...]" (15). Meanwhile, Simic's life on the streets was getting difficult, and he started stealing with older boys, both for profit and for fun: "I was usually the one to make the snatch, since I was the smallest and the fastest." He recounts that, at that time, most food was rationed, and if one took someone's monthly portion, it was considered a crime. There was too much poverty and too much hunger everywhere.

The first time Simic's family left Belgrade for Austria was in the fall of 1945. As the border was closed, and they could not cross illegally, they came back to Belgrade. At the second time, they crossed the border, but got into the hands of an American-Austrian border patrol, that handed them over to the English Army, who drove them back to Yugoslavia, where they were under arrest by the Yugoslav border guards. Then, for two weeks, they were transported from prison to prison until they reached Belgrade. His mother was kept in prison for four months, while he and his brother were sent home to their grandfather's house. Besides the picture of devastation, Simic remembers that "[e]verything looked different," and "[Yugoslavia] was no more the same country." Simic also remembers the time they had almost nothing to eat: "I remember coming back from school one afternoon, telling her I was hungry, and watching her burst into tears" (21).

Among his happiest memories, were the moments he used to spend with books: "My friends read too. We liked Westerns, mysteries, adventure stories, comic books... I read Zola, Dickens, and Dostoevsky [...] I loved the Serbian folk ballads and poems [...]" (23). Simic first experiences with reading dates from very early, as he declares: "By the time of ten I was in love with books [...]" (23). He credits his continuous need of reading to the fact of his father having a large library. Since then, he says, "the need to read has never left me. I still read all kinds of books on all kinds of subjects" (23). Music is also part of his cheerful memories. He affirms that his radio was always on, and since he discovered American jazz, he could not get enough of it. Reading and imagination would lead him into the world of Johnny Hodgers, Lester Young and Billie Holliday.

In June 1953, his mother told him that they would leave at once. She had finally got their passport, and had decided to leave for Paris to stay with her brother while they waited for the visa. Her plans were to join his father later, who was already living in America. For one full year, in Paris, Simic slept on the floor of a tiny room, and then he realized how poor

they were. When he enrolled in school, he felt inferior. The teachers kept giving him zeros until he gave up. In his opinion, the only advantage of being in school was that they got free lunch there.

Simic remembers that his only entertainment in Paris was walking, and eventually he went to the movies with some bad boys from his school. Nevertheless, he affirms that the most important thing he did in Paris was studying English: “I worked hard. I liked the language immediately” (36). By June of 1954, they had received their American visas. Simic was optimistic, but not completely. Since he had flunked everything in French school, he wondered if he would not be a failure in America too.

On August 5, they left Paris in the cheapest class of the boat The Queen Mary. From that journey, Simic remembers the contrast between his family and the elegant ladies and men in dark suits smoking cigars. Rich people, who never lost their composure, not even when there was a storm. Since his first sight of the Statue of Liberty and the island of Manhattan, he instantly fell in love with America. He says: “It was incredible and wonderful! The trash on the streets, the way people were dressed, the tall buildings, the dirt, the heat, the yellow cabs, the billboards and signs [...]. It was terrifically ugly and beautiful at the same time! I liked America immediately” (40).

After the expected gathering with his father, Simic’s day was full of many good surprises: the television set in their hotel room, American food, new clothes and shoes, among others. Simic’s relationship with his father was always a very frank one: “The ten years that we didn’t see each other made it difficult to reestablish our relationship on a father-son basis. It was much easier to be friends, to talk like friends” (42).

Later, Simic attended a high school in Elmhurst Queens, and had a part-time job in a small company that supplied special crews for airplanes. He remembers that with his payment he bought a cheap phonograph and his first jazz records. On Sundays, he used to go to

Manhattan and to the movies. Simic's liking of America was deepening each day and he was beginning to feel very comfortable there: "I am surprised how quickly we felt at home in the United States" (45).

Because his father was transferred, in June of 1955 they moved to Chicago. They moved to Oak Park shortly after that. While a student at Oak Park High School, a suburban school with caring teachers and motivated students, Simic began to take a new interest in his courses, especially literature. Soon, he would reveal himself a voracious reader. Influenced by the teachers, he started to read Joyce and many other contemporary classics, as well as contemporary French poets. In addition to that, he used to go to the public library every day. He also took an interest in painting, and discovered modern art and its aesthetics. He remembers that he started to write poems at school and that it all began with his wanting to impress his friends, but then, in the process of writing, he found out a part of himself, an imagination and a necessity to verbalize certain things, that he could not afterwards forget.

After graduation in August of 1956, he worked in a full-time job as an office boy for the *Chicago Sun Times* while attending college at the University of Chicago at night. At that time, he decided to move from his parents' house and to get a basement for himself. Later, as he got promoted to a proofreader, which gave him an excellent salary, he bought many books, jazz records, and started painting again.

He then started to make friends in the neighborhood and got to know girls at the University. Poetry continued to be his ambition, and he was introduced to the poems of Lowell and Jarrell, and to the works of Stevens and Pound. He also used to go the Newberry Library to read the French Surrealists and literary magazines: "I'm amazed by the change I underwent in that four to five year period. One moment [...] I was an unremarkable Yugoslav schoolboy, and the next moment I was in Chicago writing poetry in English, as if it were the most normal thing to do" (52).

Simic's first poems were published in the winter 1959 issue of the Chicago Review. He recalls his unsteady position at that time: "One month I was a disciple of Hart Crane, the next month only Walt Whitman existed for me. When I fell in love with Pound I wrote an eighty-page long poem on the Spanish Inquisition." (52) Between 1959 and 1961, he churned out a number of poems, but according to him, except for a few poems, it was all bad. When he was in the Army, in 1962, he destroyed them all: " I still wanted to write poetry, but not that kind" (53).

III.

Along Simic's autobiography we hear about his birth in Belgrade, the Second World War and his life under the Nazi occupation, the Yugoslav Civil War before his escaping to Paris, and then to the U.S. when he was fifteen, and many other crucial facts linking his story to a larger history. Throughout his memories, we can recognize that a double perspective—the child's and the adult's—is subtly and regularly interwoven. It is an adult narrating, but an adult who is capable of reliving the child's perspective and voice. This happens, for example, in the passage, in which he remembers his lifelong insomnia:

> I was supposed to be asleep. Come to think of it, I must have been afraid to be alone in that big room. The war was on [...] Terrible things happened at night. There was a curfew [...] I see myself on tiptoes, one hand in the curtain, wanting to look but afraid [...] My father was late and outside the roofs are covered with snow. (3-4) [1]

Along the first part of his memoir, Simic recreates the child's language using short sentences and simple words, to tell us about the war game and its paradoxes, among which his experience living the horrors of the war and yet having to be a child. In the following

passages, he describes his and his friends' necessity of living their childhood in that catastrophic context:

> In the meantime, my friends and I were playing war. All the kids were playing war. We took prisoners. We fell down dead. We machine-gunned a lot. Rat-tat-tat! How we loved the sound of machine guns [...] This kind of playing drove the grown-ups crazy. There was already so much real shooting in the world, and now these kids with their imaginary guns! [...] I had a friend [...] who could imitate an air-siren perfectly. Every time his parents left him at home alone, he'd stand on their sixth floor balcony and wail. People on the street would threaten him first, then plead with him to stop. He wouldn't. Instead, he'd get even louder, even more inspired. We thought it was all very funny. (I.B. 5)

Simic's innocence as a child stands in contrast with the desolation of war, that emerges permeated with uncertainty, violence, and hunger. Nevertheless he uses humor and irony as a means to avoid the *cliché* of the usual narratives which deal "only" with the horrors of war, and the worn-out discourse of sentimentality. The child's voice mixed with his sense of humor acts as a release, soothing his sense of loss.

Later, he describes life during the Russian liberation as a challenging experience, as in the passage where he remembers wandering with his friends and taking ammo belts, helmets, and war-junk to play with, from the bodies of German soldiers:

> I was happy. My friends and I [...] roamed the neighborhood, climbed over the ruins, and watched the Russians and our partisans at work. There were still German snipers in a couple of places. We'd hear shots and take off running. There was a lot of military equipment lying around. The guns were gone, but there was other stuff. I got myself a German helmet. I wore empty ammo belts. (I.B. 10)

It is clear that all that scene of violence and hunger does not really frighten the little boy, who usually went for days without food, hid in shelters, and played on the rubble-spattered streets with ammunition from soldiers' corpses. In fact, he was glad, as he declares, in an interview with Sherod Santos:

> The truth is, I did enjoy myself. From the summer of 1944 to mid-1945, I ran around the streets of Belgrade with other half-abandoned kids. You can just imagine the things we saw and the adventures we had. You see, my father was already abroad, my mother was working, the Russians were coming, the Germans were leaving. It was a three-ring circus. (68)

But of course not all was adventure. Along with the intensification of the fighting there was a lot of indiscriminate killing, some in the neighborhood: "After I found some bodies in the roadsides ditch near our house, I was not allowed to go out anymore. Our neighbors were executed in their own home. The people across the street just disappeared" (I.B. 8).

Although Simic's father had spent a considerable time apart from him, he had a great influence on Simic, especially if we consider his cultivated sense of humor, as we can confirm in this passage when Simic introduces him:

> One night the Gestapo came to arrest my father... He was saying something, probably cracking a joke. That was his style. No matter how bleak the situation, he'd find something funny to say. Years later, surrounded by doctors and nurses after having suffered a bad heart attack, he replied to their 'how're you feeling sir' with a request for some pizza and beer. The doctors thought he had suffered brain damage, I had to tell that this was normal behavior for him. (I.B. 4-5)

Like his father, Simic never separates humor from seriousness and quite often he selects and juxtaposes dazzling images and blends horror and fun. His observations about his life in

Belgrade are filled with wisdom and humor, often irreverence, and a certain irony, as when he talks about the time when the English and the Americans started bombing Belgrade:

> The building we lived in was in the very center of the city [...] near the main post office and parliament. A dangerous place to be. That's what we realized in the spring of 1944 [...]. It was Easter Sunday (a nice day to pick for a bombing raid)...the windows were open, since it was such a beautiful spring day. 'The Americans are throwing Easter eggs,' my father said (I.B. 5-6).

When asked by Weigl about this issue of humor in his work, he quoted Horace Wallop, who said: 'The world is a comedy for those that think, a tragedy to those that feel" (213), and added that since we are capable of both, he cannot see a literature which excludes one or the other: "Look at most of our leaders in political and intellectual life with their vanity, gullibility, greed, malice – they could be stock characters out of classical comedy," (213) he concludes. When asked by Santos if those days are the origin of his constant sense of humor, he declared:

> I'm the product of chance, the baby of ideologies, the orphan of history. Hitler and Stalin conspired to make me homeless. Well, then, is my situation tragic? No. There's been too much tragedy all around for anyone to feel like a Hamlet. More likely my situation is comic... One has just to laugh at the extent of our stupidity. (68)

"Perhaps," Helen Vendler analyzes, "for one who as a child saw World War in Yugoslavia, life will always be overcast by horror; and yet for one who escaped destruction, life will also seem charmed, lucky, privileged" (120).

Simic's autobiography demonstrates periods of trouble and perplexity. Nevertheless, it is not only centered on what went wrong. Besides presenting the pitiful reality, he also presents the ironic side of history: the war that kills is the same that saves, as we can see in the following passage:

> Now the tragic farce begins. The Russians in those days had a cure-all for every serious leg wound: amputate the leg. That's what they told my uncle they were going to do. He was very unhappy, crying even, while the doctor cheerfully reminded that he still had one leg left. Anyway, they strapped him to the field operating table and got ready to cut the leg, when all hell broke loose. Grenades, bombs flying. The tent collapsed. Everybody ran out, leaving him there. When the shooting was over, they came back but they were no longer in the mood for the operation. He ended up, somehow, on a farm, where he was exceptionally well nursed by the kind people who lived there, and so on. End of that story. (I.B. 12)

In his essay "Cut the Comedy," Simic argues that comedy says as much about the world as tragedy does, and "in fact, if you seek true seriousness, you must make room for both tragic and comic vision" (40).

Simic writes vividly and insightfully about his immigrant experience, moving to stay ahead of the war and bad economics. Life in exile is experienced as a salvation, and America is the place of happiness for the young boy. He discovers a new life and a new history in postwar. The interplay of the child's and the mature voice ceases by the end of his memoir, when he starts talking about his adult life, his feelings about his first days in New York, sleepless nights, dreams, and other poets. Simic reflects on his peculiar relation with the past and learns not to take things for granted. The war was experienced as loss of points of reference as well as a great deal of illusion and idealism. For him, anything is possible in this century. He wrote: "My previous life has taught me that making plans was a waste of time. My father used to ask me jokingly, 'Where are we going to immigrate next?' Anything was possible in this century" (I.B. 53). If the experience of loss destroyed the child's illusion that all is permanent, paradoxically such experience also supports the adult existence. Life, to Simic, is still unpredictable.

According to Matthew Flamm, in his essay "Impersonal Best: Charles Simic Loses Himself," Simic writes "about bewilderment, about being part of history's comedy act, in which he grew up half-abandoned in Belgrade and then became, with his Slavic accent, an American poet" (166).

Throughout his memoir, Simic reconstructs history as well as his history, and trying to understand what has happened to him and to his life, many times he transports himself to the past, and from past gets into the present: "Someone else was pacing up and down in the next room [...] It was dangerous even to peek between them at street [...] I see myself on tiptoes [...] My father is late [...]" (I.B. 4).

Often Simic recalls time, place, circumstances, emotions, bringing back some facts of memory and neglecting others, because some things are better to forget: "Did we leap into a ditch by the railroad track, or was that some other time? How many of us were there? I remember my mother but not my father... My film keeps breaking. An image here and there, but not much continuity" (I.B. 4).

Images, feelings and reminiscences are brought back through the language of his new country, and retold as a way to resist the destiny of exile and defend him against the power of forgetting, as he says:

> Writing brings it back. There's the logic of chronology, which forces one to think about what comes next. There's also the logic of imagination. One image provokes another without rhyme or reason--perhaps with plenty of hidden rhyme or reason! I have to believe that. (I.B. 30)

In Simic's case, even after a number of years of writing, things do not come out easily. It requires patience, a "monastic solitude," an obsession to cultivate what he calls "madness," as he declared in an interview with George Starbuck: "Madness... means *your own sense* of

reality, your own sense of yourself existing in this world. *Consciousness* of yourself existing in this world" (45).

As mentioned before, the radio also plays an important role in both Simie's personal life and work. He grew up with all kinds of music, and became a serious fan of jazz and blues. Once he declares to Santos: "Jazz made me both an American and a poet," and implies that poetry is really not much different from jazz, "which is to say that one plays with the weight of all that tradition, but also to entertain the customers and to please oneself. One is both bound and free. One improvises but there are constraints, forms to obey." (69)

Asked by Weigl as to how the purpose of blues is similar to the purpose of his work, he declares:

> [The Blues] exists because people sing. Everywhere in the world people sing. If they're oppressed, they sing even better. In the upper classes, as you know, it's not polite to whistle or hum. The houses of the rich are very quiet. The poor, on the other hand, are either hollering at each other, or blasting the radio and singing. If people didn't sing in showers, there'd be no poetry either. (219)

In the interview with Santos, Simic claims that his interest in blues as an art form taught him a number of things: "How to tell a story quickly, economically. The value of gaps, ellipses, and most importantly, the virtues of simplicity and accessibility" (70).

Throughout his memoir, Simic dramatizes scenes of subhuman lives, political violence, resignation, destruction, hunger, and exile, and establishes a strong link between his life and the collective one. Historical precision enters the picture along with people, places, and dates, as we can see in these passages:

> The war is on. The year is 1943. (I.B. 3)
>
> It was a relief when the Russians finally came... It was mid-October 1944. (I.B. 8)
>
> There was a time in 1947 or 1948 when we had almost nothing to eat. (I. B. 21)

What these passages indicate to us is that the author intends to portray something that really happened, but the most important, in this case, is the imagination of the author, which is at work, not in producing an imaginary scene, but in bringing together these various elements to portray something real. Talking about his war poems to Starbuck, he declared:

> I don't wish to come out and say 'I've seen this and that.' I've seen terrifying sights. But on the other hand, I wasn't very unique in that. Everyone else was there. They saw the same thing. Men hung from lampposts, whatever. There would be another falseness. All those things did not really astonish me at that time [...] If you were writing a poem about it, one really has to capture that complicated game. That innocence. One can't say, 'I turned over dead Germans to get hold of their holsters.' Because it wasn't like that at all [...] There was something there, which I can't quite name, but I felt touched and disturbed. But it wasn't any of the obvious things: that here was a dead man, that this was War. (35-6)

Most of Simic's memoir echoes the history of the world's inhumanity and how it continues to mean in the present. Recent events in Yugoslavia reflect his own story. His childhood experience is repeated and multiplied today by more than a million children displaced by the civil war. Simic describes the human condition in a century of mass destruction. His story mixes with the current atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. He says:

> It seems to me that all those events still go on [...] I think every tragedy, every event, some place on some scale continues. It is still current. It is still present. You cannot say, 'Well, this was in the past, but we live different.' Or, 'I live differently.' It still goes on, as vivid as it ever was. (36)

Simic's memoir not only joins past history but is also in constant dialogue with history's continuity. More than a half century after the Second World War, one can see all those atrocities everywhere. In his essay "Orphan Factory," Simic establishes a link between his

childhood and recent tragic events in the region of Yugoslavia. He says, "Today when I watch the war in Yugoslavia on TV, I have the feeling I'm watching the reruns of my childhood [...] The bombed buildings, the corpses lying in the streets and Sarajevo, the crowds of refugees are all frighteningly familiar" (23).

Simic's reminiscences of the massacre of innocent people in his homeland during the war are repeated up to our time. In his essay "Open Wound," Simic comments about the siege state of Sarajevo in the years 1992 and 1993, and says that, like him and his friends in the past, these children are also playing among the ruins. But obviously there are differences, whereas Simic and his friends used to "sell" gunpowder, these children from our present days are selling cigarettes. He adds that, in the present, there are also many "sniper victims lying in the streets, people with arms and legs blown off, corpses wrapped in plastic, wrecked churches and mosques, crowds of refugees on the run" (87). As in his homeland, "every window is broken, every street strewn with rubble" (I.B. 87).

Simic is aware of the fact that all this is part of our routine, and he says in this same article: "One sits at the breakfast table sipping coffee and turning the pages of the daily newspaper only to come to a photograph of a child killed in the street, lying in a pool of blood" (87). But, differently from most people that seem not to care anymore, he argues that the poet must be aware, otherwise he will live in a "fool's paradise" (125).

Asked by Santos to comment about his engagement to historical issues, he reaffirms what he had advocated in his essay "Notes on Poetry and History," when he says that, despite everything, one must give true testimony of his condition:

> The world is mean, stupid, violent, unjust, cruel [...] Well, what do you say to that? And you must say something... I'm uncomfortable with poetry which just keeps telling me how wonderful nature is, or how much the author is misunderstood. (76)

The question of individualism is present in Simic's arguments, and he is totally against the egotism and narcissism of some contemporary poets that insist on putting themselves at the center of their poems, and do not comment on the real world. Simic's "I" often seems impersonal: "It doesn't seem necessary for me to equate that "I" with myself," he states in an interview with Rick Jackson, and adds: "I've always felt that inside each of us there is profound anonymity. Sometimes I think that when you go deep inside, you meet everyone else..." (62)

In an interview with Wayne Dodd, Simic reaffirms his engagement, "I feel a certain responsibility toward other lives [...]" (26) and reinforces his concept that a poet who ignores the world around him, and keeps talking about himself all the time, is miserable, since every day in the world millions of children and adults are maimed or die of hunger and disease caused by the wars, or are left with emotional problems, which they have to bear for the rest of their lives.

[1] All the subsequent quotations marked as I. B. are from Simic's memoir "In The Beginning....".

CHAPTER III

"The World Doesn't End": Prose-poems

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

I.

Considering that prose poems have not ceased to puzzle readers and critics alike, before beginning the analyses of Simic's prose poems, it is worthwhile to look at some definitions and characteristics of prose poetry offered by poets and critics.

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" (Delville) was first introduced to the English-speaking public in Stuart Menrill'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.

If we turn to specialized reference works, such as the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, we find the following detailed description of what a prose poem should and should not be:

> PROSE POEM (poem in prose). A composition able to have any or all the features of the lyric, except that it is put on the page—though not conceived of—as prose. It differs from poetic prose in that it is short and compact, from free verse in that it has no line breaks, from a short prose passage in that it has, usually, more pronounced rhythms, sonorous effects, imagery, and density of expression. It may contain even inner rhyme and metrical runs. Its length, generally, is from half a page (one or two paragraphs) to three or four pages, i.e., that of the average lyrical poem. If it is any longer, the tensions and impact are forfeit, and it becomes—more or less poetic—prose. The term "prose poem" has been applied irresponsibly from the Bible to a novel by Faulkner, but should be used only to designate a highly conscious (sometimes even self-conscious) art form. (qt. in Delville)

The entry on 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. (qt in Buckley 97)

In an article from internet, "The Prose Poem and the Ideology of Genre," Delville argues that despite the advent of free verse and the subsequent oldness of metric and stylist criteria for distinguishing poetry from prose, "the prose poem has paradoxically continued to be regarded by many as a rather disturbing mode of literary expression." And he adds that,

> the history of the contemporary prose poem in English is, to a large extent, the history of the successive attempts by poets to redefine the parameters governing our expectations of what a poem (or a prose poem) should look or sound like.

In the same article, Deville quotes Martin Gray who defines prose poem as a genre of a "short work of poetic prose, resembling a poem because of its ornate language and imagery, and because it stands on its own, and lacks narrative: like a lyric poem but not subjected to the patterning of metre."

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" (98). 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 [...] (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 [...]" (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. (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* [...] (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. (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. (46)

Charles Simic's The World Doesn't End is one of the most recent, and also one of the most accomplished representatives of contemporary American prose poems. Deville argues that, even though Simic's collection of prose poems share 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.

II.

My second aim in this chapter is an analysis of some Simic's prose-poems, in order to verify how he uses historical accounts, surreal images, myths and folk tale narratives to describe his realistic experience of growing up in Europe during World War II.

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. (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.' (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. (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 Buckley 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" (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 heroes 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. (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, 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. (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" (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 all the 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" (I.B. 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 [...]". (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. (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. (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. (Charles Simic: Essays on the Poetry 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. (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" (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! (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 humankind:

> 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 [...] (Revelation 12:5)

Metaphorically, the Beast may represent the war, considering all the terrible things it brings. The 'He" of the poem may be an allusion to Adolf 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 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" (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." (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" (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.

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" (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.

CHAPTER IV

"History practicing its scissor-clips / In the dark...": Poems

Poetry soon became more than music and images; it was also revelation, information, a kind of teaching.
(Adrienne Rich)

In giving sequence to the interweaving of personal and public history in Simic's poems, in this chapter my analyses will focus on the following steps: At first, I will investigate what kind of history is important to Simic. Then, I will draw upon the war poems. More specifically, I explore how his long partnership with the context of the Second World War is recreated in his poems. Finally, I will deal with his haunting memories in dialogue with his current experience, also verifying how he makes use of the "mythical method," bringing the past to a contemporary scene.

Several of Simic's poems are filled with both personal and historical references, and they confirm the responsibility he confers on poets, when he says that they must, "in spite of everything, give faithful testimony of our predicament so that a true history of our age might be written" ("Notes on Poetry and History" 126).

In the following poem, "History," from his 1982 book Austerities, the intersection of public and private begins as the poet moves from the "setting" to the action of the scene:

On a gray evening

Of a gray century

I ate an apple

While no one was looking.

A small, sour apple

The color of woodfire

Which I first wiped

On my sleeve.

Then I stretched my legs

As far as they'd go,

Said to myself

Why not close my eyes now

Before the late

World News and Weather. (Austerities 205)

The poet begins the poem giving us the general setting for the action: The "gray century," common to all, suggests not only a context of war but is extensive to other evils of our time. Then the poet shifts to a very private action: "I ate an apple / while no one was looking." Although there is no witness to the action, the title indicates that this is History. Here the poet validates

what he calls "the history of unimportant events" (history behind the scenes), and challenges the pretentious testimony of the so-called "official history," restricted to the stage of big events.

The gloomy atmosphere of the century seems to contaminate the taste of the apple ("sour") as well as its "color of woodfire"—the color here as if mirroring the burning, the destruction that generates the "gray." The action of eating a "sour apple" may suggest the difficulty to consort with certain things in a context of a "gray century." "Sour" may also reflect the author's personal bitter experiences, whereas woodfire may be a correlative object for flame and burning caused by the war.

The attitude of stretching his legs works as if it were a truce for him to this century marked by battles and wars, and the attitude of closing his eyes takes us back to the first stanza. Ironically, he closes his eyes in an attempt to ignore the reality of the century.

Simic's attempt to depict the incessant suffering inherent to any age is also present in another poem also called "History"

> 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.
>
> More likely she wipes her eyes and nose with a
>
> sleeve,
>
> Asks for a stiff drink, takes her place in the
>
> breadline.

Then the children die of hunger, one by one.
Of course, there are too many such 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! (Unending Blues 15)

The poet begins the poem by presenting us men and women in their daily life, with their routine problems. Then, he moves from the collective to the individual, narrowing his reference to wonder about the state of mind of a particular couple and their small drama: "Let's suppose he was sad and she was upset"—minor problems, which they usually get over and become part of their everyday. The poet suggests that there is always hope in the change of seasons. There is always a spring coming, no matter how difficult the situation is.

In the first three lines the poet presents people and their lives before History's arrival, focusing on what he calls "history of the unimportant events," and establishing an opposition, since what they lived before was History in the "official" sense. The "History," the author is concerned to describe, brings tragedies and feeds itself with them: "he was arrested and shot."

The poet uses the individual to represent the collective, personifying in the couple the reality of many families during the tragedies: Imprisonment, hunger, death, and misery. But, the lines, "Of course, there are too many such cases for anyone to be underline them with a red pencil," shows us the poet's awareness that it is a clichéd comment, since "from the perspective of History, such events happen too often to take notice, even justifying the loss of many innocent lives to the machinery of history" (Avery 82).

In the last lines of the third stanza the poet seems to arrive at the essence of language, giving us only fragments of the reality, and the reader is left to fill the blanks in a context of war. To Avery, "the widow is now sexually exploited for her own survival" (83). The last fragment, "much-bitten breast," may be an allusion to the violence against the body, not only physical, but moral.

In the last stanza, the poet shifts from the past to the present and verifies that what was pain and suffering in the past becomes art and entertainment in the present. "Coffins and instruments of torture" become relics in the museum, as if all these things were destitute of life. The idea of History being built of tragedies is reinforced by the line, "History loves to see women cry." And there is also the idea of oppression, since the woman only "whispers," whereas the man "shouts." This idea takes us to the fact that those who have the role of "fighting" a war are men, and women are left the passive task of waiting and crying for the lives of their beloved ones.

The image of history as something sinister is constant in Simic's poems. His poetry about the Second World War is, mainly, the story of his own experiences as well as a documentary of his nation in mourning. In "Frightening Toys," he writes:

History practicing its scissors-clips

In the dark,

So everything comes out in the end

Missing an arm or a leg.

Still, if that's all you've got

To play with today . . .

This doll at least had a head,

And its lip is red! (The Book of God and Devils 1-8).

Reading "History" as a metaphor for the war, we can say that it intensifies the idea of History as destruction. Simic describes the damages that "History" brings: a postwar scene with its cruelties and deaths, a frightening memory that he retakes in his memoir, saying that his hometown was a city of the wounded, and there were people on crutches on every corner (I.B. 11). Besides the idea of mutilation done during wartime, this poem may also be associated with the mutilation of facts, that is, omission of some incidents by historians, which helps in the creation of a partial version of events.

History "happens" in Simic's poems since he makes his interpretation of true facts, and externalizes it into a representative artifact for others. But, sometimes he seems to admit that there is a barrier between the facts and poetry. In a poem from 1992, he declares the impossibility of history to be totally true, because there will always be a "glass" between the testimony and the facts:

True History

Which cannot be put into words—

Like a fly on the map of the world

In the travel agent's window (Hotel Insomnia 1-3).

Simic's personal experiences represent a recounting of events of the Second World War, not so much as they happened but as he remembers them. What he "remembers" is what he has lived: his personal experiences that he remembers selectively, finding or focusing on certain themes and not others, as we can see in the following poem:

Prodigy

I grew up bent over

a chessboard

I loved the word *endgame*.

All my cousins looked worried.

It was a small house

near a Roman graveyard.

Planes and tanks

shook its windowpanes.

A retired professor of astronomy

taught me how to play.

That must have been in 1944.

In the set we were using,

the paint had almost chipped off

the black pieces.

The white king was missing

and had to be substituted for.

I'm told but do not believe

that that summer I witnessed

men hung from telephone poles.

I remember my mother

blindfolding me a lot.

She had a way of tucking my head

suddenly under her overcoat.

In chess, too, the professor told me,

the masters play blindfolded,

the great ones on several boards

at the same time. (Classical Ballroom Dances 138)

The poem begins with a narrative, where the poet once more interweaves his story with the history of the war. The atmosphere of tension is established from the very beginning when the poet says: "All my cousins looked worried." Then, the poet provides us the background for the chess game, a context of war: a "Roman graveyard," "tanks and planes." He also contextualizes

his personal story informing the reader when, exactly, in history he was: "1944." From the external context of war the poet goes to the inside, to indicate the long indoor periods that people undergo during wartime. That setting of the chessboard is still very vivid in the child's memory: He remembers everything, even the chipped paint on the black pieces, which may be associated to the war waste. The lines, "The white king was missing / and had to be substituted for" remind us of the casualties during the war.

Some things were forgotten by the trauma caused by the war: "I'm told but do not believe / that that summer I witnessed / men hung from telephone poles." According to Flamm, "that amnesia will be his handicap, as well as a source of inspiration, of even greater vision, as long as he can learn to live with if" (170).

The reference to "blindfolding" relates both to the child and to the masters. In the child's case, because the mother prevents him from the horror; in the masters' because they are not concerned with the suffering around them, but only with the game. As Marianne Boruch says, the masters are in "control, high and oblivious, unseeing in their power," (17). The idea of children playing chess (emblematic for playing war) "during war" is constant in other poems, as in "The Big War," where he says: "We played war during the war, / Margaret. Toy soldiers were in big demand" (The book of Gods and Devils 1-2), as a clear reference to the war being part of the child's routine.

The act of "blindfolding" reminds us of Simic's concern with the interplay of the consciousness of the war and the "fury of the imagination," which he explains quoting lines by Quasimodo:

> One of the most terrifying lines of twentieth-century poetry is by Salvatore Quasimodo. It speaks of "the black howl of a mother gone to meet her son crucified on telegraph pole.... " That strikes me as absolutely right. I prefer it to a poem by Richard Eberhart's "The

> Fury of Aerial Bombardment." The same horror is in both poems but not the fury of the imagination, which brings us this poor mother. Also, the business about God being silent and indifferent to our suffering in Eberhart's poems does not have the immediacy and the starkness of this commonplace twentieth-century crucifixion. ("Notes" 126)

The ending of the poem takes us back to the title: prodigy, which may refer to the child prematurely living the experience of the war, having an adult experience in the war, as well as to the heads of the war, who play at "several boards at the same time." But more than this, the title suggests that we are all always trying to be prodigious of war, of winning, of destroying the enemy's forces. We may not be but we certainly wish to be prodigies, so good at it that we can be blindfolded and still play it.

In "Charles Simic's Classic Ballroom Dances," David Young argues that what we retain from this poem is a "strong sense of how firmly the mundane details of chess set and wartime have been elevated into a stunning design" (65). Boruch argues that the end of the poem keeps it from vanishing, " or more accurately, through it, the poem vanishes into something more haunting than our human-made machinery can figure, past the lie that we understand things—ourselves among them—or that our understanding is complete" (18). These stemming reminiscences from the war and the child's voice are recurrent themes in Simic's poems as a way of perpetuating History as well as inciting people's awareness.

Simic starts the poem "Make Yourself Invisible" by telling us about a tranquil environment where he was reading while his sister was drawing islands with palm trees. But these childhood remembrances are suddenly assaulted by the bombs falling:

That spring we could smell lilacs

During the blackout

Boom! Boom! The bombs fell

While a dog barked bravely

In someone's back yard.

Make yourself invisible,

The old witch said.

From now on, we were breadcrumbs

In a dark forest

Where the little red birds

Had just fallen silent. (Walking the Black Cat 8-18)

This poem has two distinct movements: before and after the bombings. Before the bombings, there was a peaceful surrounding and absolute silence. Then, the ambience of war: The blackout, when people's senses get more acute—"That spring we could smell lilacs," and the noise caused by the bombs.

In the last stanza, the poet appropriates and subverts the tale of Hansel and Gretel to tell his own story. Different from the original fable, where breadcrumbs are scattered by the children along the path to show them the way back home, in the poem, the children become the breadcrumbs "In a dark forest / Where the little red birds / Had just fallen silent"—the little red birds here metaphorically represent the war planes.

Flamm states that Simic's poems are "best read as a self-portrait," (166) since he tells us about his past all the time. Nevertheless, to Flamm, what is relevant is not that "he suffered... but that ordinary expectations were shattered" (166). Simic avoids the obvious, and "the anonymity

of poems, their puzzled nature, their amnesia-like scattering of the few autobiographical details, all reflect the experience" (166).

The poem "Two Dogs" shows the fragility of the line between Simic's past and present life, as he declared to Santos: "I am still haunted by images of the war" (74). The poem begins with a scene of an old dog in some town in the south of the USA, which takes the poet back to a memory of war:

> It made me remember the German marching
>
> Past our house in 1944.
>
> The way everybody stood in the sidewalk
>
> Watching them out of the corner of the eye,
>
> The earth trembling, death going by...
>
> A little white dog ran into the street
>
> And got entangled with the soldier's feet.
>
> A kick made him fly as if he had wings.
>
> That's what I keep seeing!
>
> Night coming down. A dog with wings. (The book of God and Devils 11-20)

Current ordinary events from the first stanza give way to Simic's haunting memories, and the poet is back to the past: "1944," where fright is the dominant feeling. In the child's perception, the earth trembles not only because of the bombs, but mainly because of fear and the marching of the soldiers, since "death [was] going by. . ."

Then the poet remembers the surreal scene of a dog "flying," which emblematically represents all the violence that permeated those times, and also reminds us of people's subhuman condition in wartime. The image of "[a] dog with wings" may be a reference to the only possibility for freedom at that time: dying and reaching a possible heaven. It also shows the

poet's irony, since "wings" stands for freedom, and in the poem it is used as a result of a violent action. These memories are still clear to Simic. Asked about the writing of this poem in an interview with Starbuck, Simic states:

> That's about a kind of a camp I was once in. It wasn't a concentration camp. It was a temporary camp. And just the memory of watching a dog, *outside* the perimeter of barbed wire, eating grass. . . . Absurd. The poor dog had an upset stomach. It was a dog that a guard was leading on a leash. Big German Shepherd. Those kind of memories that I have been able to return to. (36)

In an electronic web site, Vernon Young observes that the common source of Simic's poetry is memory. He says that, when composing poems, the poet turns "to his unconscious and to earlier pools of memory. Within microcosmic verses which may be impish, sardonic, quasi-realistic or utterly outrageous, he succinctly implies an historical montage [...]." According to Young, Simic "feels the European yesterday on his pulses." To Boruch, memories persist and are personal. But "if tapped for their strangeness, they often begin to assume weight, historical or mythic, even a spiritual weight, as if these poor shards we find in our lives were really part of a larger buried vessel" (6).

Since the outbreak of more recent wars, Simic's poems have grown more anguished and direct. "I have written a lot of poems which were affected by [the civil war in Bosnia]. But it is not the first war that has affected me. All wars since the Second World War have affected me," he once declared (Patterson) We can feel this sense of timelessness in his poem entitled "War, " that was written during the Gulf War, but that can be applied to any war:

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. (Hotel Insomnia 26)

According to Hendler Vendler, the poet excludes everything else that might be going on in 'real' wartimie "in favor of a single emblem, the domestic Muse enumerating the many war dead, followed by a motto underneath: 'All our names are included.' The motto broadens the emblems from the war dead to all dead" (120). The last line engages the private (the poet's life) and the public (our lives), suggesting that nobody is safe from the atrocities of the war.

The brutal fighting in Simic's birth country surely inspires reactions even more highly charged, especially when he is perplexed by images from the earlier civil war, as he declares in an interview with Starbuck: "I think every tragedy, every event, some place on some scale continues. Is still current. Is still present" (36).

Simic must be living through an unending flashback. Burning cities, like those he saw as a child, sprawl across television as he watches, paralyzed and helpless, in "Documentary":

Today I saw a city burning on TV.

Someone distant and ghostlike

Walked through the rubble,

And then the camera made a sweep

Of the fiery sky and the clouds.

Alone, stepping carefully,

His head bowed so low – he didn't have a head –

While searching for something

Of no interest to the camera

Which wanted us to admire the sky

With its towers of black smoke,

And the accompanying commentary,

Words about "our tragic age,"

Which I didn't hear – watching him

Stop and bend over

Just as he vanished from view. (A Wedding in Hell 11)

Along the poem, we notice two different points of attention: what the person who is documenting the war wants to show (the public drama) and what calls the poet's attention (a private drama of an unknown person). The poem starts by informing us that the war was coming. Then, the poet gives us fragments of reality, and calls our attention to a figure of a faint person, who is taken by the camera by chance, walking through the destroyed city. Suddenly the TV camera moves and shows the war drama through cinematographic images: "the fiery sky, towers of black smoke" and the cliché: "our tragic age."

Simic juxtaposes these two striking images to criticize the omission of the media, since it is concerned with landscape instead of the suffering of the anonymous people. The poet says, "he didn't have a head" informing us that the camera "cut off" this person's head perhaps because he is curved, but we are left with the question: What about his mind in a context like that?

The lines, "While searching for something / Of no interest to the camera / Which wanted us to admire the sky /..." present the idea that the anonymous figure, who the poet is concerned with, is totally ignored by the media, which is not interested in "minor" problems.

The last stanza, especially in the line, "Which I didn't want to hear" illustrates Simic's views in "Notes on Poetry and History," when he says that the objective of the poet, in contrast to the historian's, is to insist on "the history of the unimportant' events" (126). "In place of the historian's distance," Simic proclaims, "I want to experience the vulnerability of those participating in tragic events" (126).

In a number of Simic's poems about contemporary history, the TV is a recurrent theme. According to him, TV images help the craziness of the modern world. Every time people turn on the TV, they see somebody getting killed. He says:

> This is the modern world. People would read about wars and battles in papers. Things that had occurred months before or days before, in the nineteenth century and they would say, "too bad, Crimean War, all those poor young men." You would say something like that. But it's different than actually watching it constantly on television. So that's just a part of it. Once you have CNN you can't avoid it, you can't escape it. (Patterson)

Simic mentions that his recent poems about the nightmare of history are in part responses to the pressure that TV images exert on him. In "Paradise Motel," he writes:

> Millions were dead; everybody was innocent.
> I stayed in my room. The President
> Spoke of war as of a magic love potion.
> My eyes were opened in astonishment.
> In a mirror my face appeared to me
> Like a twice-canceled postage stamp.

I lived well, but life was awful.

There were so many soldiers that day,

So many refugees crowding the roads.

Naturally, they all vanished

With a touch of the hand.

History licked the corners of its bloody mouth.

On the pay channel, a man and a woman

Were trading hungry kisses and tearing off

Each other's clothes while I looked on

With the sound off and the room dark

Except for the screen where the color

Had too much red in it, too much pink. (A Wedding in Hell 10)

The poem begins with the poet's statement that the common and innocent people are the ones who go to the war. The poet remembers all his astonishment in the face of the absurdity of the war and the sense of unreality, stating the contrast between what he watches—millions of innocent people dead and the President's misunderstanding of the real meaning of war—war as a "a magic love potion." This image may also refer to the absurd passion some people have for wars.

The pressure of reality on the contemporary poet in contrast with the sense of unreality is discussed by Simic in "Notes on Poetry and History," where he shows the way in which the world's daily tragedies are brought to us:

> It's really the raw data of history given to us so soon after the event and in such detail that makes us a voyeur [...] On one hand the multiplication of the images of suffering and atrocity, and on the other hand the unreality they bring to our lives with the accompanying suspicion that all that suffering is meaningless, that it is already being forgotten, that tomorrow brand-new sufferings will come. (125)

"In any case, neither history nor ideology nor psychology with their explanations makes it easier for me to bear the horror of these images," the poet concludes.

This feeling of disillusionment is reinforced in the beginning of the second stanza, when he comments: "I lived well, but life was awful." The TV reality—"There were refugees crowding the roads; / So many refugees crowding the roads"—brings the poet's childhood memories back. In his essay, "Orphan Factory," he declares:

> Today when I watch the war in Yugoslavia on TV, I have the feeling I'm watching the reruns of my childhood. It's like the networks were all engaged in some far-out science fiction plot to pluck the images out of my head. The bombed buildings, the corpses lying in the streets of Sarajevo, the crowds of refugees are all frighteningly familiar. (23)

The poem calls attention to the way television invades our privacy everyday and brings with it the idea that the horrors of the war are ephemeral, since this reality may end "with a touch of the hand," and we watch the war tragedies vanish before our eyes. In "Time Channel," Simic argues that the horrors of the war are commonplace in our daily life, and "some people watch this channel because at least there won't be any surprises."(63). Simic mixes reality and unreality in this stanza. One may say that the terrible image of the last line that sees History as a vampire ("the fury of imagination") is what makes this passage "poetry."

In the last stanza, Simic tells us about two characters in a movie to stress the idea of voyeurism, as well as the idea that most people do not want to be upset by reality. The way the

poet ends the poem, having red and pink on the TV screen, gives us the idea of blood of war and sensuality in the same scene. We may also notice that there are references to sensuality in all the stanzas.

This association of war and sensuality is also present in "History of Costumes" (a poem from his most recent book, Jackstraws), where he makes an analogy between the smoke of the split buildings and the slit of women's skirts, in a reference to the wartime: "In a building split in a half by a bomb, / / The smoke that was like the skirts / Slit on the side to give the legs the freedom / To move while dancing the tango / Past ballroom mirror on page 1944" (9-12).

Over the years, as Simic presents the history of the past side by side contemporaneous history, he also brings past myths to a contemporaneous scene. Past and present myths form a "simultaneous existence and compose a simultaneous order" ("Traditional and Individual Talent" 4). As Eliot did, especially in "The Waste Land," past and present coalesce in "Early Morning in July". The poem starts with a description of an ordinary world. Then, this world becomes increasingly strange, and the poet mixes it with an uncanny environment:

The streets were cool

After the heat of the night.

The dives, their doors open,

Smelled of stale beer.

Someone swept the floor

With even strokes.

[...]

Yesterday I saw Ulysses

Make Greek pastry.

Joan of Arc was at the dry cleaner's

Standing on a chair

With pins in her mouth.

St. Francis sold piranhas in a pet shore.

[...]

Thomas Alva Edison

Roamed the streets in white socks

And blood on his shirt. (Hotel Insomnia 60)

Simic displaces different myths, from different times in history, as an attempt to make sense of this new world. But, at the same time he domesticates the myths, there is always a grim element as in "blood on his shirt."

A good deal of experiment with the mythical method is found in many of Simic's poems. Another example is "Begotten of the Spleen," where Simic junggles the most nightmarish aspect of our century's history:

The Virgin Mother walked barefoot

Among the land mines

[...]

Judas was the night nurse,

Emptying bedpans into the river Jordan,

Tying people on a dog chain.

[...]

St. Peter came pushing a cart

Loaded with flying carpets.

They were not flying carpets.

[...]

They were piles of bloody diapers

The Magi stood around

Cleaning their nails with bayonets.

[...] (Classic Ballroom Dances 148)

The poem leads us back to biblical myths, as a way to reaffirm that history repeats itself. There is the resonance of the horrors of World War II without employing any of its familiar images. As a poem by Ingeborg Bachamann's quoted in Simic's Orphan Factory says: "War is no longer declared, / but rather continued. The outrageous / has become the everyday..." (76).

CONCLUSION

From the beginning of my research I have tried to investigate the interrelations between the personal and the historical, as well as to show how private experiences can validate public ones. As we have observed, History and Fiction are conventionally considered mutually exclusive: History is seen as related to events that really happened in the past whereas fiction portrays imaginary events. But, this distinction has lately been challenged by literary theorists, philosophers of history, and writers. One can see why the distinction might begin to blur if we look first at works considered fictional. Some novelists and poets have tended to attribute historical accounts to their writings. Thus many works classified as fiction in fact contain elements of history.

Throughout the research, I could confirm that 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," and along the analyses of his poems, I could verify that it is possible to write intensely personal poetry without openly placing oneself at the center. 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" ("Notes on Poetry and History" 126).

Throughout his memoir, Simic alternates present and past, the comic and the tragic, the use of the child's perspective and the mature consciousness to illustrate the growing relationship between his own life and the collective one. He produces narrative accounts of how things really happened, and we can visualize the dark images and sadness, or what we may call the History of his time.

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 103). Simic's 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 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-handiness 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. (132)

Future studies on other contemporary poets who also make use of history, such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Adrienne Rich, Jorie Graham, and Yuseef Komunyakaa, is a realm that should be explored. At this moment, I must confess that working with this subject, more

specifically with such a contemporary author, was a challenge for me, since critical studies on Simic are still incipient. Also because I was dealing with a wide range of material—a reading covering Simic's first publications up to Jackstraws, his most recent book.

Since 1973 Charles Simic has lived in New Hampshire, where he is Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. He has published seventeen books of poetry. 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. Simic is also an important translator of Yugoslavian, South American, and French poetry, winning two PEN International Translator Awards.

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HISTORY

On a gray evening
Of a gray century
I ate an apple
While no one was looking.

A small, sour apple
The color of woodfire
Which I first wiped
On my sleeve

Then I stretched my legs
As far as they'd go,
Said to myself
Why not close my eyes now

Before the late
World News and Weather.

HISTORY

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.

More likely she wipes her eyes and nose with a
sleeve,
Asks for a stiff drink, takes her place in the
breadline.

Then the children die of hunger, one by one.
Of course, there are too many such 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!

FRIGHTENING TOYS

History practicing its scissor-clips
In the dark,
So everything comes out in the end
Missing an arm or a leg.

Still, if that's all you've got
To play with today . . .
This doll at least had a head,
And its lips were red!

Frame houses like grim exhibits
Lining the empty street
Where a little girl sat on the steps
In a flowered nightgown, talking to it.

It looked like a serious matter,
Even the rain wanted to hear about it,
So it fell on her eyelashes,
And made them glisten.

TRUE HISTORY

Which cannot be put into words—
Like a fly on the map of the world
In the travel agent's window.

That street empty in the afternoon heat
Except for my old father
Pressing his head against the glass
To observe her better
As she drags her threadbare shadow
From New York to Shangai.

He not sure whether to alert his friend,
The barber, napping next door
With a sheet over his head.

PRODIGY

I grew up bent over
a chessboard

I loved the word *endgame*.

All my cousins looked worried.

It was a small house
near a Roman graveyard.
Planes and tanks
shook its windowpanes.

A retired professor of astronomy
taught me how to play.

That must have been in 1944.

In the set we were using,
the paint had almost chipped off
the black pieces.

The white king was missing
and had to be substituted for.

I'm told but do not believe
that that summer I witnessed
men hung from telephone poles.

I remember my mother
blindfolding me a lot.

She had a way of tucking my head
suddenly under her overcoat.

In chess, too, the professor told me,
the masters play blindfolded,
the great ones on several boards

THE BIG WAR

We played war during the war,
Margaret. Toy soldiers were in big demand,
the kind made from clay.
The lead ones they melted into bullets, I suppose.

You never saw anything as beautiful
As those clay regiments! I used to lie on the floor
For hours staring them in the eye.
I remember them staring back at me in wonder.

How strange they must have felt
Standing stiffly at attention
Before a large, incomprehending creature
With a moustache made of milk.

In time they broke, or I broke them on purpose.
there was wire inside their limbs,
Inside their chests, but nothing in the head!
Margaret, I made sure.

Nothing at all in the head . . .
Just an arm, now and then, an officer's arm,
Wielding a saber from a crack
In my deaf grandmother's kitchen floor.

MAKE YOURSELF INVISIBLE

Drew islands with palm beach trees,
My sister did.
The beaches were empty.
We wanted to lie on their hot sand
And drink lemonade.

Read your book and be quiet,
They yelled at us from the kitchen.

That spring we could smell lilacs
During the blackout.
Boom! Boom! The bombs fell
While a dog barked bravely
In someone's back yard.

Make yourselves invisible,
The old witch said.
From now, we were breadcrumbs
In a dark forest
Where the little red birds
Had just fallen silent.

TWO DOGS

for Charles and Holly

An old dog afraid of his shadow
In some Southern town.
The story told me by a woman going blind,
One first summer evening
As shadows were creeping
Out of the New Hampshire woods,
A long street with just a worried dog
And a couple of dusty chickens,
And all that sun beating down
In that nameless Southern town.

It made me remember the Germans marching
Past our house in 1944.
The way everybody stood on the sidewalk
Watching them out of corner of the eye,
The earth trembling, death going blind . . .
A little white dog ran into the street
And got entangled with the soldiers' feet.
A kick made him fly as if he had wings.
That's what I keep seeing!
Night coming down. A dog with wings.

WAR

The trembling finger of a woman
Goes down the list of casualties
On the evening if the first snow.

The house is cold and the list is long.

All our names are included.

DOCUMENTARY

Today I saw a city burning on TV.
Someone distant and ghostlike
Walked through the rubble,
And then the camera made a sweep
Of the fiery sky and the clouds.

Alone, stepping carefully,
His head bowed so low – he didn't have a head –
While searching for something
Of no interest to the camera
Which wanted us to admire the sky
With its towers of black smoke,

And the accompanying commentary,
Words about "our tragic age,"
Which I didn't hear – watching him
Stop and bent over
Just as he vanished from view.

PARADISE MOTEL

Millions were dead; everybody was innocent.
I stayed in my room. The President
Spoke of war as of a magic love potion.
My eyes were opened in astonishment.
In a mirror my face appeared to me
Like a twice-canceled postage stamp.

I lived well, but life was awful.
There were so many soldiers that day,
So many refugees crowd the roads.
Naturally, they all vanished
With a touch of the hand.
History licked the corners of its bloody mouth.

On the pay channel, a man and a woman
Were trading hungry kisses and tearing off
Each other's clothes while I looked on
With the sound off and the room dark
Except for the screen where the color
Had too much red in it, too much pink.

EARLY MORNING IN JULY

The streets were cool
After the heat of the night.
The dives, their doors open,
Smelled of stale beer.
Someone swept the floor
With even strokes.
He was pale as Confucius,
Martha Washington, her hair in a beehive,
Yawned in the glass booth
Of a movie theater.

Yesterday I saw Ulysses
Make Greek pastry.
Joan of Arc was at the dry cleaner's
Standing on a chair
With pins in her mouth.
St. Francis sold piranhas in a pet store.
At midnight Circle's daughters
Flew on a motorcycle.
Thomas Alva Edison
Roamed the streets in white socks
And blood on his shirt.

And now this sea breeze,
This unexpected coolness.
The small, sickly tree on your block
Hasn't grown much in years.
It shivers with happiness
With its few remaining leaves,
As if Emanuel Swedenborg
Was now whispering to the spirits
On Eighth Avenue.

BEGOTTEN OF THE SPLEEN

The Virgin Mother walked barefoot
Among the land mines.
She carried an old man in her arms
Like a howling babe.

The earth was an old people's home.
Judas was the night nurse,
Emptying bedpans into the river Jordan,
Tying people on a dog chain.

The old man had two stumps for legs.
St. Peter came pushing a cart
Loaded with flying carpets.
They were not flying carpets.

They were piles of bloody diapers.
The Magi stood around
Cleaning their nails with bayonets.
The old man gave little Mary Magdalene

A broken piece of a mirror.
She hid in the church outhouse.
When she got thirsty she licked
The steam off the glass.

That leaves Joseph. Poor Joseph,
Standing naked in the snow.
He only had a rat
To load his suitcases on.

The rat wouldn't run into its hole.
Even when the lights came on—
And the lights came on:
The floodlights in the guard towers.

HAUNTED MIND

Savageries to come,
Cities smelling of death already,
What idol will you worship,
Whose icy heart?

One cold Thursday night,
In a neighborhood dive,
I watched the Beast of War
Lick its sex on TV

There were three other customers:
Mary sitting in old Joe's lap,
Her crazy son in the corner
With arms spread wide over the pinball machine.

THE HISTORY OF COSTUMES

Top hats and tight-fit monkeys suits,
You pointed to the map of the world
With your silver-tipped walking sticks
And fixed my fate forever on a dot.

Already on the very next page,
I saw my white sailor suit parachuting
Among bricks and puffs of smoke
In a building split in half by a bomb,

The smoke that was like the skirts
Slit on the side to give the legs the freedom
To move while dancing the tango
Past ballroom mirrors on page 1944.