

# Charles Simic, American Poetry, and Serbian Critical Reception

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*A Serbian-born American poet, Charles Simic (1938) has been a staple of both American and Serbian poetic scenes for decades, though for different reasons. The paper examines the reception of Simic's work in Serbian criticism, offering commentary on the translation of his poetry and its critical interpretation. Though Simic is undoubtedly part of American literary canon, and his work is informed by Modernist and Postmodernist American authors such as Williams, Stevens, or Ashbery, Serbian criticism has until very recently focused only on his origin and on the influence of his birth country on his work. By giving an overview of Simic's major thematic and tonal elements placed within an American context, supported by numerous examples from his poems, we position him firmly within the American poetic tradition, while at the same time pointing out some elements of Serbian poetry relevant for his poetic development, like the influence of Popa, Tadić and Ristović. Shining a historical light on the reception of Simic's poetry in Serbia, we uncover both the political and poetic reasons for the confusing inclusion of this American poet within Serbian culture.*

Keywords: American poetry / Simic, Charles / literary reception / literary influences / Serbian literature / translations to Serbian

## Introduction: the trouble with labels

Poets who defy neat critical classifications often find themselves having to explain their work, or at the very least, have the uncertain pleasure of watching critics and reviewers bend themselves backward trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, with the square peg being a poet's work, and the round hole their biography. These two elements often coalesce into rather narrow readings that somehow still manage to pigeonhole their genuinely unclassifiable writings. Elizabeth Bishop, for instance, was one such poet, and her unwavering refusal to belong to any poetic "school" or "movement" made the role of critics a lot harder, given how they have had to analyze her work as a phenomenon unto itself,

while at the same time acknowledging her formative influences and the role they played in molding her poetry. Her life, too, was often a source of critical frustration, as, on the one hand, it was full of trope-like elements that undoubtedly shaped who she became as a person and a poet – loss of parents, familial mental instability, sickly constitution, queer female identity, restlessness and deep-seated wanderlust – and on the other, it never played as critical a role in her poetry as, say, the life of Sylvia Plath or Lord Byron, which, coupled with Bishop's famously shy and taciturn disposition, often made reviewers and commentators work much harder when trying to understand and explain her work. Bishop has been gone for decades, though, so we have no way of knowing how she would have fared in today's world of information overload and technology that makes interviews easy to conduct and make available to readers and students at a single tap of a finger. Unlike Bishop, Charles Simic, another poet whose work is notoriously difficult to define and whose life circumstances are just exotic enough to provide lukewarm, ready-made answers to those who only scratch the surface of his poetry, is more than willing to graciously answer questions pertaining to his origin, his language, and his poetic style, while acknowledging that "my views are like anybody else's views. ... I'm not that smart or unusual." (Neubauer 252)

Reviews of Simic's work more often than not start with his Serbian origin and early years spent in Yugoslavia during WW2, before his emigration to the U.S. at the age of sixteen. D. J. R. Bruckner, for instance, states that "perhaps it is natural that his early experience should still arouse powerful emotions; for him poetry is bound up with finding a new life and a new language," while Adam Kirsch mentions "the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia, the ensuing partisan war, and the imposition of communist tyranny." The latter quote, in particular, illustrates the American exoticization and generalization of the eastern European experience: misinterpreting Simic's famous quote that his travel agents were Hitler and Stalin, Kirsch takes the Stalin bit to mean "communist tyranny" instead of the Allied Bombing, even though Yugoslavia was never behind the Iron Curtain, and even as Simic specified that "Germans and Allies took turns dropping bombs on my head" (Sansom). This only goes to show that certain elements resonate with critics too much to be questioned or ignored, and promises of neatly explicable ideas and easily identifiable traumas function as a siren call to many a reviewer's ear. American and Serbian theorists alike fall victim to this seduction, with the former interpreting anything unusual in Simic as vaguely "European," and the latter appropriating him almost

as a national poet, with nothing more to account for it than his country of origin and his last name.

The logic behind this appropriation can seem baffling – for all his self-mockery about his “atrocious Slavic accent” (Simic, *New and Selected* 101) and his reminiscences about Eastern European food and battles with the Turks, Simic uses his chosen given name “Charles” and pronounces his surname in the Americanized way, approximating it with “civic.” We will delve deeper into the reasons for this peculiar Serbian interpretation later on in the paper, but for now, a comparison might suffice: it would be as if Joseph Conrad were treated as a Polish author, even though he wrote all of his major works in English, just because he used to be called Jozef Korzeniowski and spent his childhood and early adolescence in today’s Poland. Still, the wounds of small nations often run too deep to heal, and the successes of people whose ancestry they can boast generally serve as a balm for the bruised national ego. This is an understandable, if sad and illogical practice.

Despite this, any true connoisseur of poetry would have no trouble placing Simic firmly within the American tradition. Even Kirsch, for all of his questionable ideas about Yugoslav communism, does not doubt it, saying that Simic

draws on the dark satire of Central Europe, the sensual rhapsody of Latin America, and the fraught juxtapositions of French Surrealism, to create a style like nothing else in American literature. Yet Mr. Simic’s verse remains recognizably American – not just in its grainy, hard-boiled textures, straight out of 1940s film noir, but in the very confidence of his eclecticism. (Kirsch)

What jumps out at the reader in these lines is the already mentioned difficulty of classification: Simic is undoubtedly and recognizably American, but is also “like nothing else in American literature.” Neubauer agrees, stating that “Charles Simic has created a new category of poetry, one that is easier to describe than name: dark and irreverent, it has an abiding humor, an underlying mysteriousness if not mysticism, a deceptively plain line and diction and often a plain subject” (237). Nonetheless, his themes, motifs, imagery and language can be interpreted as belonging to a particularly American brand of an “international” style, one that owes a lot to his Modernist ancestors and Postmodern contemporaries, as we will attempt to show in the next section.

## That little something: English language, American idiom, surrealist humour

In a 2011 interview, when asked if he could be able to “follow any poetic inspiration in Serbian,” Charles Simic replied, “Not really. I mean, I’ve written poems in a couple of languages, but English is my language” (Klemencic). This is quite obvious in poems such as “Concerning My Neighbors, the Hittites,” in which Simic plays with the English phrases and idioms with the mastery of a native speaker and the playfulness of a born poet. The American heritage is present not only in the poets who informed his style, but also, as Kirsch mentions above, in the very eclecticism of that influence. In his Golden Wreath acceptance speech, Simic lists his many literary ancestors: “Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Vasko Popa, Zbigniew Herbert, Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo and at least a few dozen equally famous and not-so-famous poets I was reading” (Simic, “Why Poetry?”). In one of his early poems, “The Bird,” the titular bird calls the poet “from the shadow” (Simic, *New and Selected* 25), chilling his feet and heart, until he can only conclude that, in his dream, he saw “the stern eye / of that bird / watching me sleep” (26). The haunting atmosphere and the avian perception, along with the laconic verses, immediately calls to mind Wallace Stevens’ classic “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Stevens is a constant in Simic’s work, so much so that he enters into an explicit intertextual dialogue with him in “Dance of the Macabre Mice,” indicated not just in the verses themselves, but in the title as well, as he borrows it verbatim from Stevens. That he should choose Stevens as one of his sparring partners is not surprising: even though his own formative influences are many and varied, from English Romanticism and the American tradition to Modernist European practices in poetry, painting and philosophy, Stevens, too, is often “the odd one out,” a poet whose poems are best analyzed one by one, and who seems to have sprung onto the Modernist scene as a thoroughly *sui generis* poetic phenomenon. Moreover, he and Simic have something else in common, a feature typical of much American poetry, and not particularly common in its Serbian counterpart: humor.

In his text on Simic, aptly named “The Smiles and Chills in the Poetry of Charles Simic,” Bruckner mentions that Simic’s vision is often “hilarious,” but he “can spring a chilling surprise.” This is often due to his unusual, surrealist imagery that blends the humorous with the ominous, like the ants in “Solitude” who put on “their Quaker hats / and [set] out to visit you” (Simic, *New and Selected* 32), or Death’s sur-

prisingly mundane life in “Eyes Fastened with Pins,” where the reader cannot help but sympathize with poor Death, getting caught in the rain “with not even a newspaper / to cover his head,” unable to find the house of “someone with a bad cough.” (50) This juxtaposition of the everyday with the surreal, propelled by the use of conversational tone to depict scenes of both childlike and disturbing imagery also has a lot in common with the playful postmodernism of Ashbery and even the alluring black humor of Plath. Ian Gregson, for his part, says that Simic’s urban poetry is “also about New York and its surrealism alternates between the dark elliptical kind he usually writes and the urbane playful kind more associated with Ashbery,” concluding that Simic (and Gary Snyder) “read like new recruits for Ashbery’s postmodernist Village People” (214).

The humorous element in Simic is often directed at himself, both as a poet and as a thinker. In “A Letter,” thus, he recalls a conversation with his friend Bob, “who said to me: / ‘We reach the real by overcoming the seduction of images.’ / I was overjoyed, until I realized / such abstinence will never be possible for me” (Simic, *New and Selected* 100). As his poetry has often been seen as a postmodernist continuation of American Imagism (“Watermelons,” for instance, is a perfect little imagist riddle), Simic naturally finds it amusing to poke fun at his own tendency towards striking imagery. In a conversation with Pearl London, Simic commented on this, explaining the evolution of his imagery, and agreeing that an image in itself should not be enough, as “a good image leads to some intellectual content” (Neubauer 243), citing Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways . . .” as a perfect example of an intellectual poetic image. Self-parody is also present in “Explaining a Few Things,” where the speaker offers worn-out platitudes to his cat, “Since there was no one else around” (Simic, *New and Selected* 143).

The existential horror in Simic is thus never allowed to take root, transforming into surrealist humor instead, as can be seen in many of his urban life poems, like “Mirrors at 4 A.M.,” where one’s fear of introspection is turned into the horror-movie fear of actual mirrors. Kirsch states that “this kind of black comedy is one of the elements that makes Mr. Simic’s poetry so appealing,” while Orr draws attention to the duality of his style, saying that there are

[t]wo sorts of poets [who] write repeatedly about the world making no sense: true, cold-eyed absurdists (for whom arbitrariness is liberating) and disappointed Romantics (for whom arbitrariness is a broken promise). Simic’s heart is with the latter; his head with the former. This division gives many of his poems a self-reflexive quality that prevents them from descending into smirki-ness – itself a form of moralism. (Orr)

Orr goes on to place Simic among those poets whose “sinister imagery” suggests “the existential questions that trouble our day-to-day lives.” (Orr *web*) This puts him thematically, although not tonally, alongside authors like William Carlos Williams, another staple of American poetry, whose famous explorations into the everyday showcase the revelatory features of the mundane. Simic once said that one aim of his poetry was “to restore strangeness to the most familiar aspects of experience” (Neubauer 240). His poems are full of strange “grandmothers,” of rats and cats and mice, shining the light on the wondrous – and the monstrous – in the ordinary (one such memorable poem is “Note,” which features a rat bludgeoned to death during a school nativity play). Following in the footsteps of Whitman and Williams, Stevens and Ashbery, Plath and Creeley, Simic mixes art and life, history and present day, fantasy and realism, earning his rightful place among the American greats.

But does his birth country agree?

### **Roots above all: Simic’s early reception in Serbia**

The reception of Charles Simic in Serbian literature is more extensive than that of any other twentieth-century American poet, covering translations of seven poetry selections, nine books of essays, memoirs and conversations, as well as magazine and newspaper interviews. This is, without a doubt, due to his Serbian origin, a fact further proven by the scarce translations of Simic’s work in other former Yugoslav republics. The first Serbian translations of Simic’s poetry were published in *Savremenik* magazine in 1970, when he had only two collections to his name, *What the Grass Says* and *Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes*. At this time, Simic was more intensely engaged as a cultural agent, that is, as a translator of contemporary Serbian poetry into English. In 1970, American audiences saw several of his translations: Ivan V. Lalić, *Fire Gardens: Selected Poems 1956–1969*; Vasko Popa, *The Little Box: Poems*; *Four Yugoslav Poets: Ivan V. Lalic, Branko Miljkovic, Milorad Pavic, Ljubomir Simovic*. Given that Lalić and Pavić were the first Serbian translators of Simic’s poetry, it can be deduced that his reception in Serbian literature was jumpstarted by private connections, and not by any wider awareness of the importance of his poetry in his native, American culture.

In 1969, Simic started his correspondence with the poet and translator Ivan V. Lalić, and at first it was linked to Simic’s translations of

Lalić' poetry, to the *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (*Antologija moderne američke poezije*, Belgrade, 1972) which Lalić was editing, and to Lalić and Pavić's translations of Simic's poetry. In October 1973, Lalić wrote to Simic to tell him that he and Pavić had completed the selection of his poetry and would send it to the publisher. The book was, however, not published until 1983, when *Selected Poems 1965–1982* (*Izabrane pesme 1965–1982*) finally came out. Generally speaking, though, the book was published at a time when Simic's popularity in the USA grew, and critics started to pay more attention to his poetry. As Peter Schmidt says, "*Classic Ballroom Dances* was reviewed in places ranging from small but important publications like *Field*, a little magazine read by those who write what is in the others, to the *Yale Review*, in which Helen Vendler annexed Simic into her personal pantheon of contemporary poets worth watching" (528–529). The first Serbian selection of Simic's poetry included poems chosen from his collections *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980) and *Austerities* (1982), and the translators were David Albahari, Raša Livada, Ivan V. Lalić, Milorad Pavić and Charles Simic himself. Even though it took a long time for the book to be published, none of the translators wrote an afterword to acquaint the readers with Simic's work. This is surprising, considering that the magazine *Gradina* published Lalić and Pavić's translations of Simic's poetry in 1976, alongside a biographical note on the poet, which could have been used and expanded for the book. This note was written by an anonymous author (who may reasonably have been Lalić), and it mentions some biographical facts on Simic, his Yugoslav origin, his university career and work as a translator. The author does not move further from the influence of the "mother tongue that wasn't meant to be" and Serbian poetry on Simic's early work, emphasizing the impact of Momčilo Nastasijević, Vasko Popa and Vuk Karadžić, the latter as a collector of folk literature. Nevertheless, the author seems to be aware of the fact that features of folk literature like brevity, astuteness and wit are actually intrinsic to Simic's poetics, and that it is, therefore, difficult to discern how much folk literature in fact influenced his writing. The text also points out some important characteristics of Simic's poetic expression, like his analytical observation of everyday situations, unusual metaphors and images.

Simic himself emphasized the importance of his friendship with Popa during the 1960s more than once, mentioning how Popa had told him about folk tradition and the connection between folklore and surrealism. But even on these occasions, he would stress the importance

of Theodore Roethke and his similar approach to the American folklore. He would underline folk tradition, not folk literature, focusing instead on the universality of folklore inspiration, which also served as a correction of common oversimplifications of Popa's relationship with folklore as purely national tradition in Serbian literary criticism. When it comes to Simić's poetry, this folkloric tradition is crucial only in the early stages of his career, just as the influence of Popa on his poetic maturation is limited, however obvious it may be. Poems like "Bestiary for the Fingers of My Right Hand," "Knife" or "Fork" from *Dismantling the Silence* are eerily reminiscent of Popa's poems from *Kora (Crust)*; not surprising, as they were written at the time when Simić was translating a lot of Popa. These poems were very important for Simić's establishment on the American poetic scene, given how they represented something hitherto uncommon, particularly when it came to folklore and animistic and archetypal elements combined with the use of grotesque and black humor, but they were not especially useful for his reception in Serbian literature, because they brought to mind his similarities with Popa and did not seem original. However, Popa's poetry is extremely hermetic, cyclical, linguistically concise and economical – Simić's work never featured these elements to such a degree, and especially not later on in his career. This clearly shows the difference between the two poets' creative sensibilities. Also, in regard to his focus on the objects he makes central to his poetry, Simić draws parallels between his work and that of William Carlos Williams, not Vasko Popa:

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

This explanation shows how Simić's poetic world is different in its essence – in his poetry, vagueness does not always, or even most often, point to serious themes; instead, his easy-going, playful verses are dominated by idiosyncratic humor and unpretentious tone. As Vendler says, "Simić has been annoyed that critics have spoken of his works as 'parables' ... Simić's inclination is indeed to present deeply literal



details, but they take on parabolic or emblematic significance because so much has been erased to isolate those details in a glaring beam of pitiless interrogation” (104). Simic’s interpretation of Popa’s poetry is, furthermore, linked to Ted Hughes’s readings of Popa, and does not have much in common with the ways Yugoslav critics read his work. Hughes saw Popa as a political poet as well as a hermetic one, similar to Zbigniew Herbert and Miroslav Holub, but also to the existentialist poets such as Beckett (see Hughes 1–2). Simic too points out that, when Popa’s first book was published in 1953, Yugoslav literary circles were amazed by its success, given how there was nothing communist about it. Social-realist critics called it “surrealist nonsense,” and later Serbian literary criticism mostly dismissed the surrealist basis of Popa’s poetry, as surrealism was ideologically marked, and instead placed emphasis upon Popa’s roots in folk literature and national tradition. Of course, in his essay, Simic does not invoke this strange paradox which persistently stresses the role of national literature in the poetry of Serbia’s most translated contemporary poet. Simic says that this is a kind of quasi-rootedness, or a “contemporary ‘sacred’ tablet,” and that Popa is a poet whose “language is remarkable for its elemental surrealism coupled undoubtedly with an animalistic, myth-making approach to reality,” but whose perceptions are “profoundly of his own time and place” (Simic, “Introduction” x). He writes about what makes Popa a universal poet who speaks to contemporary people and whose poetry, as Ted Hughes believed, could have enriched the English poetic scene.

This is probably why the few texts about Simic’s poetry in Serbian literary magazines (mostly reviews of his collections in translation) do not mention surrealist heritage as a key poetic definition of his work. These early critical texts show that Serbian critics did not easily navigate the waters of modern American poetry, and in numerous later interviews they asked Simic to explain his poetic work and ideas himself. Even the critics well-versed in American poetry implicitly start the analysis of Simic’s work in Serbian literature, illustrated by the fact that they do not emphasize the key features of Simic’s poetry, but focus instead on those elements that can be understood from the perspective of Serbian poetics. Humor in poetry was particularly foreign to these critics. In 1983, the magazine *Delo* published a special issue on Simic. It featured a conversation between Simic, the poet and translator David Albahari and the poet Raša Livada, entitled “The Poem is the Point where Space Turns into Time and Time into Space.” Here, Simic explicitly said that for him, poetic tradition started with Poe, Emerson and Whitman, and listed surrealism and Williams as his formative influences. His com-

ments on Serbian and Yugoslav poetry were quite restrained, and he admitted that he did not follow it particularly carefully.

This special issue also featured Simic's essay "Composition," as well as two essays on Simic by American literary critics, clearly chosen as a way to classify and adequately explain Simic's poetry, given all the difficulties Serbian critics had with it. The essays in question (translated from English) were Robert B. Shaw's "Charles Simic: An Appreciation" (originally published in *The New Republic* in 1976) and Jay Barwell's "Charles Simic: Visions of Solitude" (originally part of *Manassas Review* of 1978: "Essays on Contemporary American Poetry: Charles Simic." Vol. 1 No. 2, Winter 1978). They (particularly the former, as it offered a more wide-ranging perspective) served as a possible framework for further interpretation and reception of Simic's work, intended to overcome the superficial and banal determination of his poetry by his origin, his "profound experience" of his native language or "the echo of his homeland," all of which were mentioned in many texts published in Yugoslavia during the 1980s. Shaw outlines the development of Simic's poetry and points to his similarities with Popa and Roethke. He also mentions several aspects of Simic's poetics that would later be reiterated in more serious Serbian critiques of his poetry: dark atmosphere, an arresting substantiality, humor with a menacing edge, and disquietingly animated objects (see Shaw 142–145).

Despite this, the next edition of Simic's poetry in Serbian translation, published in 1989 and entitled simply *Poems (Pesme)*, contained only a short afterword focusing solely on the poet's biography and origin. This selection of poetry encompassed poems from Simic's collections *Unending Blues* and (at the time still unpublished) *The Book of Gods and Devils*, sent to the translators Kostić and Vuksanović by the poet himself. The translation was lower in quality than the previous edition and was later rarely mentioned as relevant. In the afterword, Miodrag Perišić talks about the tendency to define Simic as *ours*, explaining that

The determinator "ours," incidentally, should never be understood as something connected to national origin, although those roots define us more deeply as beings belonging both historically and spiritually to a cultural mode that is more permanent than any single biological fate; therefore, Simić is "ours" according to his sensibility, his spiritual proclivities, and even his weakness for certain things" (Perišić 84).

It is quite indicative that such statements were issued in the period just before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, when the heightened awareness

of nationality sought to differentiate the Self from the Others, mostly by using vague and unconvincing reasons, such as the above quote by Perišić. Simic's work, which had by this time become important and influential in America, was clearly seen as a potential contribution to a nationally defined Serbian culture that was slowly distancing itself from the Yugoslav context. This tendency died down when Simic began to harshly and publically criticize the regime of Slobodan Milošević and the Yugoslav politics of the 1990s (cf. Simic, "The Renegade").

### **Americanness with a Serbian twist: later reception, translation and interpretation**

International literary criticism was consistent in noticing European or Eastern-European poetic features in the poetry of Charles Simic, while never, naturally, questioning his rightful place in American literature. Early Serbian critical texts, especially those by Neo-Avant-Garde poets like Kopicl and Negrišorac, drew the reader's attention to Simic's renewal of surrealism, which was, as was already mentioned, something he had in common with other American poets of his generation, such as John Ashbery. What was most important for Simic's connection with Serbian poetry – certainly much more important than any arguments pertaining to native language or spirit of origin – was the intertextual link between his poetry and the poetry of the authors whose work he translated. Vasko Popa, Aleksandar Ristović (1933–1994) and Novica Tadić (1949–2011) were chosen by Simic as Serbian poets similar to him in sensibility, standing alongside American and other national poets as important kindred spirits. When one looks at the features of their poetry, it is easy to understand why Simic felt this way. Ristović is a poet of everyday life and uncommon details. He describes all spheres of human life, including bodily functions and eroticism, which is exceedingly rare in Serbian poetry, particularly during his time. In his narrative poetry, he makes long catalogues of "high" and "low" elements alike, which can be traced back to Whitman and his influence (Avramović 533). Ristović's poetry, particularly in its late phase, is characterized by the use of grotesque and the theme of alienation, and the period before his death also features political poetry and poetry dealing with the wars happening at the time in former Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, similarities between Simic's poetry and the poetry of Novica Tadić can be found in the combination of grotesque and folklore. In his poems, Tadić uses linguistic innovation to tackle the

motif of devils, monsters, madness and crime, and American readers have often described his work as horror poetry. Just like Simic, Tadić uses these motifs to deal with political topics.

In his article on Simic, entitled “Chaos Theory,” David Orr mentions this influence, saying that “the writer that emerged from this haunted upbringing often seems to have as much in common with poets from the former Yugoslavia like Vasko Popa and Novica Tadic (both of whom Simic has translated) as he does with fellow Americans.” Moreover, at the time when they wrote, Ristović and Tadić were not considered to be major Serbian poets, and thus were not an obvious choice for Simic to translate. At the time, these poets were in the background, and were only discovered later on, as their themes and poetic conception were not typical of the contemporaneous Serbian poetry. Simic published his translations of Ristović’s poetry as *Some Other Wine* (1989) and *Devil’s Lunch* (1999). Introducing the reader to Ristović’s poetry, Simic describes his reaction when he first read it:

At times one comes across a poet who strikes one as being absolutely original. There’s something genuinely different about him or her, a something that one has never quite encountered in all the poets one has read before. ... When I first read his poems in Belgrade in 1982, I was astonished. “Who is this man?” I kept asking everybody, meaning really, how did he come to write the way he did? Nobody could tell me. The Yugoslavs I showed his poems to were as puzzled as me. Even though Ristović has published fifteen books of poetry and has received two major literary prizes, he is not very well known, since he has never belonged to any official or unofficial literary movement. (Simic, *Wonderful Worlds* 113–114)

Part of this essay reads like Simic’s note on his own poetry. For instance, he points out that Ristović knows small town life, inhabitants and behaviors quite well. In her text “*The World Doesn’t End: Charles Simic’s Spectral Geography*,” Karen Volkman notices that Simic invokes his European upbringing, and speaks “to the uncanniness and latent violence of our provincial American upbringing. ... As essential dislocation seems at the root of most true American originals (while in the wider culture, American artists are more or less provincials by definition)” (52). Functioning in a way similar to the details from Ristović’ grotesque juxtapositions, where the tragic and the comic are intertwined to the point of being indistinguishable from one another, Simic’s “imagistic lexicon – dolls, devils, gods, alarming flies, empty streets, darkened windows, conniving trees – show the ways in which inner spaces people and transform the outer landscape” (Volkman 52).

In the collection *The World Doesn't End: Prose Poems* (1989), Simic wrote a poem "after Aleksandar Ristović," but his closeness to Ristović's motifs can be felt in other poems from this collection, as well as in those from *The Book of Gods and Devils*.

The time of minor poets is coming. Goodbye Whitman, Dickinson, Frost. Welcome you whose fame will never reach beyond your closest family, and perhaps, one or two good friends gathered after dinner over a jug of fierce red wine... While the children are falling asleep and complaining about the noise you're making as you rummage through the closets for your old poems, afraid your wife might've thrown them out with last spring's cleaning.

It's snowing, says someone who has peeked into the dark night, and then he, too, turns toward you as you prepare yourself to read, in a manner somewhat theatrical and with a face turning red, the long rambling love poem whose final stanza (unknown to you) is hopelessly missing.

*after Aleksandar Ristović* (Simic, *New and Selected* 118)

This relationship was also pointed out by Ivan V. Lalić in his afterword to the Serbian edition of Simic's book (*Svet se ne završava*, 1990), as well as later on by the critic Vasa Pavković. In his afterword, Lalić praised the translation done by writer Ljiljana Đurđić, due to its precise linguistic and poetic expression, as well as its appreciation of Simic's discursively rich poetry, the features that translators often struggled with and could not fully transpose in their translations of modern American poetry. In 1992, Lalić issued *Avenija Amerika* (*Avenue of the Americas*), a collection of his translations of Simic's poetry.

Simic's collection *Hotel Insomnia* (1992) was translated as *Hotel Nesanica* only two years after its initial publication, in 1994. The author of the translation and the afterword was fiction author Vladimir Pištalo. Pištalo also lives in America, even though he speaks primarily to a Serbian audience, and this fact greatly influenced his transposition of cultural idiosyncrasies. Nevertheless, he is not a professional translator, and it shows in the way he sometimes loses concentration and makes apparent errors. Critics were positive in their assessment of Pištalo's afterword since this was the first time anyone drew specific attention to cultural differences between Serbia and America. Pištalo realized that Simic's poetry could be made more intelligible to Serbian readers if they were to become more acquainted with the world it was steeped in; the world which was, at the moment, vastly foreign and distant to them. According to Pištalo (92), "in *Hotel Insomnia*, the worldview is innocent and mystical and vivid and rational. The author is constantly searching for the roots of local imagination, the American way of think-

ing and dreaming.” Pištalo emphasizes the tangibility of Simic’s images and the ways they are freely joined together, with no desire to state grand truths, but simply with an intention to confirm one’s presence, and organize these images through an interplay of games and fears.

### Into the new century: poetry and beyond

During the period when the war in ex-Yugoslavia was coming to an end, and new national states were being formed, Simic’s poetry slipped into the background of Serbian reception, leaving the foreground to his memoirs and essays. These essays served as a necessary, sobering view from the outside, particularly needed after 2000, when Serbian society started to critically examine its immediate past in a more open manner. Between 1995 and 2018, nine books of Simic’s prose were published, versus only three books of poetry.<sup>1</sup> Poetry was published more sporadically: poet Marija Knežević’s translation named *Kasni poziv (Late Call)* came out in 2001 (it included selected poems from *A Wedding in Hell*, 1994; *Walking the Black Cat*, 1996; and *Jackstraws*, 1999), then *Iščekujući presudu (Awaiting Judgement)*, a collection of earlier translations and some poems from newer collections came out in 2010, and finally, in 2017, Marija Bergam Pellicani translated the collection *The Lunatic*. The Knežević edition did not do much to further the reception of Charles Simic, both in terms of translation quality and the companion text. It can be noted that reviews of Simic’s books in Serbia have rarely touched upon the quality of translation, which again points to the fact that he has been perceived differently from both American poets in translation, and translated literature in general. The concept of these critical reviews is much closer to the critiques of Serbian poetry collections, which usually address the poet’s previous work, and then analyze the book’s composition and major themes. In his review of *Late Call*, Bogdan A. Popović noted this very thing: “Even though he left his birth country as a boy, the esteemed American poet, essayist and translator Charles Simic is perceived by us almost like a Serbian author” (42). Still, since Simic’s creative techniques could hardly be linked to

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<sup>1</sup> These translations are: *Nezaposleni vidovnjak, eseji i sećanja*, 1995; *Fabrika siročadi: eseji i sećanja*, 1999; *Zastrašujući raj: sećanja*, 2006; *I davo je pesnik: eseji*, 2006; *Alhemija sitničarnice: umetnost Džozefa Kornela*, 2008; *Gledaj dugo i netremice*, 2013; *Đavo gudi na raskršću: razgovori sa Čarlsom Simićem*, 2017; *Tamo gde počinje zabava*, 2017; *Čudovište voli svoj lavirint: beležnice*, 2018.

contemporary Serbian poetics, reviewers did not usually go deeper into analysis, either in terms of language and poetic imagery or in terms of social and ideological notions. One such reviewer, for instance, wrote that Simic is a poet caught between two worlds who is not bothered with ideological differences, and who simply depicts reality instead. Such ideas clearly show how much Serbian literary scene and its players still labored under the illusion that poetry is a privileged form isolated from society, and how much they lacked any awareness of the political nature of language.<sup>2</sup>

*Awaiting Judgement* is a collection that features both earlier translations and some new ones, and can thus be seen as a summary of Simic's reception, and even its new beginning, for some new readers. Poetry like Simic's is today much closer to the horizon of expectation in Serbian poetry, which has moved away from the previously dominant Neo-Symbolism and tendency towards stylistic and semantic completeness and instead largely adopted urban and discursive elements. This change is not something unique to the reception of Simic's poetry; it is also present in the reception of other American poets because they are now read more widely and serve as inspiration among Serbian poets. Unfortunately, Gojko Božović's afterword to this edition did not move away from the discourse of earlier reviewers of Simic's poetry. He does not describe the changes and development in Simic's work, portraying it instead as a static whole, with a thematic focus on myth. His explanation of Simic's creative expression is rather superficial, and he does not offer a single reference from American poetry or culture. This is particularly surprising, given how the book was published after Petar Penda's anthology named *Eight Contemporary American Poets (Osam savremenih američkih pjesnika, 2008)*, which included the authors who were "socially engaged, politically aware, and in search of both individual and collective identity" (Penda 10). In addition to Simic, the collection features Robert Bly, Adrienne Rich, Charles Wright, Michael S. Harper, Louise Glück, Joy Harjo, and Rita Dove. Penda described Simic's poetry as "marked with the political. His childhood in Yugoslavia where a secret police monitored dissent taught him the harsh and brutal consequences of being a political opponent" (Penda 20). But the key context of his work is American political and social

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<sup>2</sup> Compare this with Simic's notion: "The belief in the independence of intellectuals, as so much of the twentieth century proves, is nothing but a fairy tale. The most repellent crimes in the former Yugoslavia had the enthusiastic support of people whose education and past accomplishments would lead one to believe that they would know better" (Simić, "The Renegade").

situation, “resistance to mainstream ideology” and multiculturalism. This was the first time that Serbian criticism defined Simic’s poetry as politically and socially engaged, even though, just like his prose, it has been utilized and spatially defined according to certain socio-political factors. Penda’s viewpoint is supported by Helen Vendler’s claim that Simic is “certainly the best political poet, in a large sense, on the American scene; ... In his plainness of speech, he is of the line of Whitman and Williams, but in the stunning 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 need to be on their mettle if they want to surpass him” (Vendler 115–116).

The premise that the conditions for a valid, creative reception of Charles Simic have only been met in the last decade was confirmed by M. Bergam Pellicani’s translation of and the afterword to *The Lunatic*. Belying the notion that poets make the best translators, which is deeply ingrained in the Serbian perception of literary translation, Simic was not always lucky with translations done by fellow poets, as they could not really cope with his idiomatic play, his flat or mocking tone, or his discursivity, to name only a few key features. Bergam Pellicani’s translation, on the other hand, shows an awareness of someone approaching language and poetics in a more professional way, without the limitations imposed by the stylistic and rhetorical tropes of Serbian poetry. The afterword, too, provides a wider context of world literature that the collection thematically belongs to, and it also offers references from American culture, like Edward Hopper’s art. The author emphasizes the idiosyncratic features of Simic’s poetry:

It contains enough hints to lure us into symbolic interpretation and content analysis, but the power and originality of his poetic vision produce a poem, or an image – in a certain way, Simic belongs to the American tradition of Imagism – that has its own life and resists logical and theoretical exegesis, surviving it intact. Simic believes that a lyric poem is defined by its inability to be retold, or by complete transparency, which does not allow us to build a theoretical framework around it. (Bergam Pellicani 96)

Bearing this definition of Simic’s poetry in mind, Bergam Pellicani also illustrates the inventiveness of his approach to language, particularly idiomatic language, something that was emphasized years before by Shaw. This makes Simic’s wordplay untranslatable at times, but Bergam Pellicani does not emphasize this to justify her translation, but to raise awareness of the cultural obstacles present when translating an American poet.



## Conclusion: The eternal November of Charles Simic's poetry

As was comprehensively shown, the relationship between Serbian literary scene and Charles Simic is a complicated one. On the one hand, he is very much part of the national poetic consciousness, not only as an author, but also as a translator and a cultural figure. On the other hand, though, the extent to which his work is actually understood and placed in its proper context is questionable at best. For all its appropriation of Simic's poetry, Serbian criticism, for the better part of the twentieth century, failed to grasp the essential Americanness of his expression – this is both thoroughly confusing, given how he is an American citizen writing exclusively in English, and, as was demonstrated, understandable, particularly when one takes into account all the political implications of such misrepresentation. Still, editions such as Bergam Pellicani's translation of *The Lunatic* offer hope for a more optimistic future regarding both cultural comprehension and linguistic transposition of Simic's work.

Simic, too, might have contributed to such a confusing reception of his work in Serbia, though out of good intentions: even though his place in American literary canon is undisputed, as he is a recipient of all major American poetry accolades, including the Pulitzer prize and the post of the U.S. Poet Laureate for the 2007–2008 period, he has never forgotten his Serbian origin and has always graciously indulged (sometimes inane) questions about Serbian and Yugoslav poetry and its influence on his work. Even though some of the poets who informed his writing have indeed been Serbian, like Popa, Tadić or Ristović, the American tradition of Whitman, Dickinson, Williams, Stevens, Ashbery and many other literary ancestors and contemporaries is what truly shaped Simic as a poet and where he undoubtedly belongs. Metaphorically speaking, he is immersed in the American poetic realm, with a tip of his finger touching the world of his birth country and its poetry. This slight duality might actually be what makes Simic's work so unique to the American audiences, critics and lay-readers alike. As he himself once explained, “poetry, I'm fond of saying, is the defense of the individual against all generalizations that seek to enclose reality in a single conceptual system” (Simic, “Why Poetry?”). May that defense always be there to help us see the world in a different way.

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## Charles Simic, ameriška poezija in srbska kritična recepcija

Ključne besede: ameriška poezija / Simic, Charles / literarna recepcija / literarni vplivi / srbska književnost / prevodi v srščino

Charles Simic (1938), ameriški pesnik srbskega rodu, že desetletja velja za pomemben del tako ameriške kot srbske pesniške scene, vendar iz različnih vzgibov. V tem članku bomo obravnavali recepcijo Simicevega dela v srbski kritiki, in sicer s preučitvijo prevodov njegove poezije in njeno kritičsko interpretacijo. Čeprav Simica nesporno štejemo za avtorja ameriškega literarnega kanona, saj so na njegovo ustvarjalnost vplivali ameriški modernisti in postmodernisti (npr. Williams, Stevens ali Ashbery), se je srbska kritika še nedavno usmerjala predvsem v njegove rodovne korenine in njihov domnevni vpliv na njegovo delo. Po pregledu Simicevih poglobitnih tematskih in kompozicijskih elementov v ameriškem kontekstu ga lahko nedvomno umestimo v ameriško pesniško tradicijo, a obenem ni mogoče spregledati elementov srbske poezije, odločilnih za njegov pesniški razvoj, denimo vplivi Pope, Tadića in Ristovića. Kronološki pregled recepcije Simiceve poezije v Srbiji omogoča prepoznanje političnih in poetoloških razlogov za vključevanje tega ameriškega pesnika v srbsko kulturo.

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