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ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES OF FUTURE REPRESENTATION OF CHARLES SIMIC AS A POET, ESSAYIST AND TRANSLATOR IN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE CURRICULA

Abstract

The paper explores the main motifs, symbols and layers of ideas in Charles Simic's literary work. Simic's poetry, essays and translation work are analyzed in the first part of this paper. In essayistic and poeticized prose, special attention is paid to this author's ideas about language, literary translation, metaphor, philosophy, poetry, truth, the relationship between the world and language, language and truth, truth and imagination. The second part of the paper explores the possibilities of representing his work in languages and literature curricula, both through regular and additional classes and extracurricular activities. Charles Simic's work is an excellent starting point for various forms of project-based learning, which includes intradisciplinary (literature – language) and interdisciplinary correlation (English and Serbian language, literature and philosophy, literature and sociology, etc.) Rich intertextuality, reflected in Simic's literature (to mention only some of the influential names the author references, including Descartes, Wittgenstein, Jasper Johns and Kant among others), opens up possibilities for connection with many subject areas. Charles Simic, as an author who for many years "thought and wrote in a language spoken with an accent" (as he himself described his own language situation), is an interesting

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example of the challenges and creative possibilities provided by bilingualism as a phenomenon in the modern world.

Key words: poetry, philosophy, translation, intertextuality, language and literature curricula, teaching

1. Introduction

Charles Simic (Dušan Simić), a Serbian and American poet, essayist and translator (or, more precisely, “an American poet with a Serbian background”, as he described himself (Simic & Djordjević 2010: 9), but also a renowned translator of poetry from Serbian and other languages), was born in Belgrade before World War II (1938), and died last year (2023) in America, where he lived and worked most of his life. Between those two dates at the beginning and the end of the journey stood a rich and unusual biography and bibliography of one of the most significant authors of our time. Simic won several important prizes for poetry, prose and translations, but became world famous as a Pulitzer Prize winner for *The World Doesn't End* in 1990 (previously also a two-time finalist for the same award).

He wrote in English and translated from Serbian (i.e. the former official Serbo-Croatian language, in all variants), both of which he spoke with an accent, as he himself said. Simic introduced the poetry of Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Slovenian, and Macedonian poets to English-speaking readers around the world. That is, he translated poetry from all the South Slavic languages spoken in the former Yugoslavia. He also translated from the French language.

The representation of Charles Simic's works in high school curricula, more precisely the way in which it would be implemented, probably represents a significant pedagogical and methodological challenge. Simic is a writer who “doesn't fit in”, as he himself stated¹, and the same can be concluded from many of his written texts – in verse and in prose.

¹ That was Simic's response to the interviewer's question:

TBR: During World War II, you fled Europe as a small boy with your family. Those memories have been some of the sources for your poetry over a lifetime. In *A Fly in the Soup*, you also write: ‘Consciousness as the light of clarity and history as the dark night of the soul.’ Soul is often taboo in American poetry. As a poet with a long writing, translating, and teaching career, do you feel like you fit in?

Precisely because he is not a conformist but a humanist, and because his perception of reality is both objective and lucid, while his response is constructive, Simic's work deserves full attention. Despite a certain justified pessimism in his thoughts on the world, there is always hope in his response – both through art and life – expressed with humor, curiosity and an openness to great possibilities, starting with a good metaphor that can emerge in verse, which remains a form of positive attitude toward the world.

What particularly makes him highly inspiring and welcoming to young readers is the fact that, despite being bilingual and living in a multicultural environment, he created literature of high artistic value through his exceptional translations and presentation of valuable literary works from the former Yugoslavia, thus connecting us to the world in the most dignified way.

In this paper, we will first shed light on those biographical and literary facts, texts, ideas and views of the author – both regarding issues of life and the world, as well as poetry and art in general – which are important for the final consideration of how Simic's work can be integrated into different subject contents in teaching programs (history, philosophy, psychology, sociology), particularly in project-based learning.

2. Memory of early childhood from the war years in the texts of Charles Simic

This is one of the most important themes and motifs in many of Charles Simic's poems, as well as in essays, interviews and other prose texts.

Overcoming WWII-related traumas turns out to be a need and motivation for writing – and not only for writing, but also for reading and searching for answers in the texts of other authors, with philosophy being the most important source.

^{CS}: Is the soul taboo nowadays? I didn't realize it. It's not the word to overuse in poetry. I'm sure dogs have souls and a few humans here and there, but the rest of us? As for fitting in, I'd be surprised if I did. Conformity and the arts don't go together. Anyone who does anything independently or thinks on his own is regarded as an oddball. We are supposedly a country of individuals, while the truth is we are terrified of standing alone on any issue. I don't lose any sleep over not fitting in" (González 2002).

Note:

The interviewer was Ray González, the poetry editor of *The Bloomsbury Review* (TBR).

The entire essay “Reading Philosophy at Night” (Simic 2015), for example, essentially addresses the issue of loneliness and discusses the need to use philosophy to find answers to deeply personal questions connected with difficult and traumatic experiences of the war and post-war periods of life (in Simic’s case – childhood and teenage years). At the same time, it is a lucid review of the most important names and certain directions in the history of philosophy, with a clearly expressed personal attitude toward them, because, ultimately: “Whoever reads philosophy reads himself as much as he reads the philosopher” (Simic 2015: 11). It is a testimony to his own exciting, passionate night readings, when he grasps Kant’s and Hegel’s philosophical systems and cannot put the book down, but above all, it is about looking into oneself, about the unusual experience of observing oneself looking at oneself. As in the beautiful poems of Wallace Stevens about lonely readers, the night is for reading philosophy, which becomes a kind of “homecoming”.

The powerful metaphor of homecoming is explained in poetic and poignant images, evoking memories of dreams, a grandmother, an abandoned house and more. Some things endure – among them, the pebbles engraved in consciousness in early childhood, in the nightmare of war, forming the clearest image and the source of profound amazement, that huge, ontological wonder before the riddle of existence. They remain in consciousness as the greatest proof that something *exists*, in the general atmosphere of disappearance and destruction.

Here we will let the poet himself share something important, which explains much of what follows:

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

“It is not ‘how’ things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists,” says Wittgenstein. I felt precisely that. Time had stopped. I was watching myself watching the pebbles and trembling with fear. Then time moved on and the experience was over. (Simic 2015: 12)

Pebbles are much more than “things”, more than Simic’s mere “it” itself. Speech is *less*, but in poetry less is more, as we will see.

The pebbles stayed in their otherness, stayed forever in my memory. Can language do justice to such moments of heightened consciousness? Speech is always less. When it comes to conveying what it means to be truly conscious, one approximates, one fails miserably. (Simic 2015: 12)

The earliest memories of childhood, therefore, are the bombing of Belgrade, the destruction, the chaos of flight and confusion, and pebbles and stones as a firm foothold and proof of existence, something on which, as a foundation, one should rebuild the destroyed world and one’s own understanding of it.

It is not only the temporal, but also the ironic and self-ironic distance in relation to what happened “long ago”, seasoned with jokes and humor, that will additionally enable a different matrix that contributes to shaping the author’s poetics:

My bad luck, on the other hand, loves to entertain me with its practical jokes. I had just learned how to say, “more cookies Mom,” when a German bomb fell on the house across the street. No sooner had I learned how to ride a bike than luck decorated the trees along country roads with men hanging from their branches. And so it went. (Simic 2008: 82)

That is how it started, and it continued with memorizing the verses of great French poets while attending school in France. The boy hated reciting at school because of his foreign accent, but those poems still brought tears to his eyes and that was when he truly became interested in poetry. Later, he would read philosophy at night, often with his father who had returned after many years during and after the war. He also loved philosophy. Reading philosophy at night is an important part of Charles Simic’s life and work. At the same time, it is the title of one of his essays where he explains it in detail (Simic 2015: 10–16). Finally, he started writing poetry in the English language, in America.

The need to turn images into words remained until the end, in search of, or waiting for, a good metaphor to come. And that often happened. When poetry was not enough, philosophy became a consolation and refuge:

Wittgenstein puts it this way: “What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses ‘itself’ in language, we cannot express by means of language.” This has been my experience many times. Words are impoverishments, splendid poverties. (Simic 2015: 12)

“Poor poetry.” (Simic 2015: 16) – states the author, adding with this elliptical sentence construction a pronounced emotional tone to another good oxymoron of his (“splendid poverties”) and to this idea of the power/powerlessness of words as a means of expression. Yet we know that this is only a poetic figure, an effective epithet behind which lies a deep love for poetry. Powerful poetry.

The philosophers whom Simic read also spoke about this kind of power through the “setting upon a world” in which there is beauty, and also that special, artistic truth. Simic’s poetics is inseparable from philosophy.

In short, the beginning is like this:

Born in Belgrade in 1938, on the eve of World War II, Simic lived through bombings, periods of hunger, the ten-year exile of his father, and the imprisonment of his mother. “Hitler and Stalin conspired to make me homeless”, he has said. Not until he was in his mid-teens was his family reunited, settling in the United States. Simic began writing poetry as a high school student in the Chicago suburbs. (Simic 2010: 266)²

At the same time, it is necessary to create a world, from nothing, starting from a pebble in consciousness, which implies flights of imagination to the paradoxical and surreal. That is why Simic cannot accept the ideas of logical positivism, which are limiting in the field of creativity. He would agree with Wittgenstein that words are insufficient to express many things and ideas, but somewhere in the mists of imagination – consciously, unconsciously, or subconsciously – they come together in unusual ways according to the inscrutable laws of aesthetics. And yet, they can still grasp some truth, a poetic one. So, it is possible to build a world in poetry, at least one in which the pen is not merely an object with measurable dimensions, an appearance, and a useful function, having nothing to do with the world of thoughts and feelings, as “logical positivists” might think, but rather

² The opening part (of the interview) by Pearl London, who led the conversation with Simic, April 19, 1995.

something that can, in verse, become an “intelligent pencil in love with music” (Simic 2015: 13). “In other words, what these people regard as nonsense, I suspect to be full of imaginative possibilities” (Simic 2015: 13). As a counterbalance, he needs a clear consciousness, a truth that he can reach through philosophy.

Hence so many paradoxes and oxymorons in his language expression, because he carries within himself, according to his own admission, “both Don Quixote and Sancho Panza”, and he must express this unity of opposites. Emphasizing that “the pleasures of philosophy are the pleasures of reduction – the epiphanies of hinting in a few words at complex matters” (Simic 2015: 15), he adds: “Both poetry and philosophy, for instance, are concerned with Being” (Simic 2015: 15). On the other hand, there is history, which is “anti-reductive” (“Chaos! Bedlam! Hopeless tangle! My own history and the history of this century like a child and his blind mother on the street,” Simic 2015: 15).

Apparently, in poetry and philosophy together, he must search for a way out of chaos, through the clarity of philosophical thought and the dim but endless expressive power of imagination in the poetic shaping of the world.

The ideal is “truth in a calm world”, as in Wallace Stevens’ poem “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” (“It happens! The world and the mind growing so calm that truth becomes visible,” Simic 2015: 15). And the day dawns with Heidegger, in solitude, because – perhaps especially in the night of reading philosophy – “no thinker has ever entered into another thinker’s solitude” (Heidegger, as cited in Simic, 2015: 16). Only in that solitude does consciousness become so clear that philosophy, poetry and history come together. This complexity of searching for answers and rebuilding the world after it has been ruined, represents a huge potential and a pedagogical challenge in the process of education and upbringing. Project-based teaching, which will be discussed in the last chapter of this paper, offers particularly significant possibilities.

2. 1. Simic about the post-war period and the difficulties of learning from history

As an adult and mature man, Simic often thought about the war and the post-war period, shaped by his own personal memories, the perspectives of

those closest to him – his family and environment, with frequently opposing points of view and the ideas and writings of important intellectuals and authors who wrote about that time.

The complicated family situation, administrative problems, the impossibility of finding a “place under the sun” as a home, remained in the soul of the slightly older boy as even more hazy and difficult memories (“Once you have no papers, you do not exist. Anyone in authority can do what he wishes with you, as millions found out after the war,” Simic 2015: 248).

Based on facts, stories and memories, he also discusses the victorious euphoria after WWII on the one hand, and the terrible hatred and need for revenge on the other. The most devastating fact is that “revenge” was carried out by those who had the least right to it – and they often did it to those who were not guilty of anything. In that chaos, many atrocities were committed on all sides, affecting many innocent people.³

If this comes as a shock, one must not forget that given the opportunity, sadists in every ethnic group will have their fun. It would not surprise me to learn that some of these Germans were completely innocent and some of their torturers were Nazi collaborators. That was often the case. (Simic 2015: 246)

Simic considers the issue of “collective guilt” to be one of the most questionable and fundamentally inadmissible concepts.

Collective guilt, whatever form or justification it takes, has to be one of the most evil notions the human brain has concocted, most likely the cause of more suffering of innocents than any other vile belief in history. (Simic 2015: 246)

With an allusion to the ancient Latin phrase “*Historia magistra vitae est*” (“History is the teacher of life”), Simic states:

If the scale of human misery was unimaginable in 1945, it is not easier to grasp today. Perhaps the reason we never learn from history is that we are incapable of picturing the reality of war and its aftermath... (Simic 2015: 244)

What Simic himself learned from history came at a high price, as we have seen, but it resulted in the high value of his words, even though the author occasionally expressed doubts about their own power.

³ See e.g. Buruma 2013, to whom the author mostly refers in this text.

Considering that “learning from history” starts from the earliest period of his life in Belgrade, Serbia (then part of Yugoslavia), and although he would later become an American poet writing in English, Simic never breaks the connection with his country of origin, its history, culture and language. This bond is primarily established through his excellent translation of poetry from Serbian, but also from Croatian (then a variant of the official Serbo-Croatian), and includes works translated from the Slovenian and Macedonian languages.

2.2. On the characteristics of Simic’s poetics: between image, “thingliness,” poetry and philosophy

The images in Simic’s verses are full of seemingly quite ordinary, simple things that may appear profane on the surface. His poetry, however, hides deeper, Heideggerian meanings, which were soon recognized and acknowledged for their quality and artistic value.

Nevertheless, there was still a discussion about what could or could not, should or should not be the content of an artistic creation of high value. The question of taste and affinity, the view of art, is at work again: is such ordinary, profane “content” – in the sense of details, motifs, the included elements –allowed in the text of a truly talented poet? Is he wasting his talent in this way? In fact, Charles Simic shared a charming anecdote about precisely that in an interview. As a young poet, he sent his verses to the editor of a magazine for publication.

Back in 1965 I sent some of my object poems (“Fork” among them) to a literary magazine. They came back with a letter that said something like this: “Dear Mr. Simic... you’re obviously a sensible young man, so why do you waste your time by writing about knives, spoons, and forks?”

I guess the editor’s premise was that there were things worthy of poetry and that the fork in my hand was not one of them. In other words, “serious” subjects and “serious” ideas make “serious” poems, etc. He was just trying to give me fatherly advice. (Simic 2015: 21)

The reaction was interesting, and the advice given was certainly well-intentioned, coming from a perspective to which the editor in question

had every right (from his own point of view), but time has shown that he was still wrong.

It is not about whether the poet writes about “spoons, and forks,” but about how these things are “illuminated” in the poem, what hidden, allegorical and symbolic meanings they carry and what beauty they radiate when illuminated in that way.

There is postmodern symbolism in it, and in these semantic fields, among the key multi-meaning lexemes, we find *trees, shoes, jackstraw, rain, umbrella, grains of sand, street, smoke, pigeon, letter* and – “it,” “the something,” which is infinitely indefinite and endless, as elusive as life itself.

This is precisely what Heidegger, one of the philosophers with the greatest depth and sensitivity to the issues of the art, language and poetry, spoke about. Martin Heidegger states that “every work has its thingly character” (Heidegger 2002: 3), but in the next paragraph he adds that “artwork is something over and above its thingliness” (Heidegger 2002: 3). Regardless of the matter as a “thing,” the medium in which it is expressed (whether it is a sculptural or architectural work in wood and stone, an artistic text in the matter of language, a musical work in tones) and regardless of the “thing” that is concretely depicted – art always points to something more, something else. “This something else in the work constitutes its artistic nature” (Heidegger 2002: 3).

Heidegger points out that “it is an allegory” (2002: 3), meaning that, “over and above” all the things made, present or depicted in a work of art – or in which the work is made – there is a deeper and more abstract meaning. The work is a symbol.

Allegory and symbol provide the conceptual framework from within whose perspective the artwork has long been characterised. Yet this one element that makes another manifest in the thingly element in the artwork. It seems almost as though the thingliness in the artwork is the substructure into and upon which the other, authentic, element is built. And is it not this thingly element which is actually produced by the artist’s craft? (Heidegger 2002: 3)

Charles Simic, a poet of concise, effective form charged with meaning, believed that less is more in poetry and expressed this attitude several times in various statements, whether for the media, in scientific interviews, or elsewhere. How he came up with his intense, strong stanzas and short poems, Simic explained in one interview:

Short poems are not written but found in longer poems. I've written many longer poems that were going nowhere until I realized there was another, much smaller poem in them and that it said all that needs to be said. I believe that in poetry, less is more. (González 2002)

In the interview with Pearl London, Simic stated: "Depending what the relationship is, a metaphor could be symbolic at the end or simple.... But a good image leads to some intellectual content" (Simic 2010: 271).

3. The combination of the incompatible and the meaning of the ambiguous in life and poetry: "All good-looking oxymorons are in love with me"

Charles Simic's view of the world is deep, humanistic, serious, aware, imbued with painful experiences from early childhood, memories from the war. On the other hand, it is also a view from a joker's angle, comical and humorous, sometimes accompanied by a sad clown's smile, slightly ironic, but still not cynical. "My aspiration is to create a kind of non-genre made up of fiction, autobiography, the essay, poetry, and of course, the joke!" (Simic 2015: 67).

Dušan "Charles" Simić is an authentic phenomenon in every respect, which is exactly why he is a representative example of an artist of his time, despite how contradictory that may seem. After all, Simic himself wrote in a very interesting way about the contradictions that are the basis of both the world and poetry: "Ambiguity is the world's condition. Poetry flirts with ambiguity. As a "picture of reality" it is truer than any other. Ambiguity is" (Simic 2008: 42–43)⁴. And about how much great poets have in common: everything – and almost nothing:

The last hundred years of literary history have proved that there are a number of contradictory and yet, nevertheless, successful ways of writing a poem. What do Whitman, Dickinson, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Yeats, Williams, and Stevens have in common? Plenty, and nothing at all. (Simic 2008: 44)

⁴ Note by the publisher: "Selections from this book first appeared in *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1990. © 1990 by Charles Simic. Reprinted with the kind permission of the publisher." (Simic 2008: 105; see also Simic 1990)

Simic is a poet of “harmonic contradictions” (though are they really harmonious?); in literary theory, however, it is the official term for all figures that represent a combination of mutual contradictions, the joining of the incompatible. His poetry is exactly like that, but even in his search for philosophical answers, he usually arrives at the same point – the confrontation with the contradictions that are the basis of life and the world. He is a “connoisseur of paradox”:

Here’s what Nietzsche said to the ceiling: “The rank of the philosopher is determined by the rank of his laughter.” But he couldn’t really laugh. No matter how hard Friedrich tried, he couldn’t really laugh. I know because I’m a connoisseur of paradox. All the good-looking oxymorons are in love with me and come to visit me in my bed at night. (Simic 2015: 15)

As an intellectual, Simic is ready to look at life’s reality in all its complexity, without denying that he is a pessimist – and it has always been that way. Yet, pessimism is not so explicit in his poetry. It is hinted at, but not obvious. Still, he is a kind of “pessimist” with hope, open to possibility. At least when he is waiting for a “good-looking oxymoron” or a great metaphor.

Charles Simic divided the intellectual types of the 20th century based on their attitudes toward philosophical contradictions: “Some twentieth-century intellectual types: Those who welcome the philosophical contradictions, those who ignore them, and those who despair because of them” (Simic 2008: 40).

Based on everything he wrote and declared, it is clear that he counted himself in this first category. He also divided poets into those who think before writing, during writing, and after writing. It is not difficult to conclude that he placed himself in the third category, as he was a poet who allowed the poem to guide him and let the metaphor happen. (In the first group – and it is easy to come to this conclusion – is his friend Vasko Popa, with an intellectual attitude towards poetry, planning everything in advance, calculating, and knowing years in advance what his poems will be.)

As the author of a poem in prose, Simic also saw evidence of a contradiction in this: “The prose poem is the result of two contradictory impulses, prose and poetry, and therefore cannot exist, but it does” (Simic 2008: 65). Despite all the contradictions, he strove for ease and simplicity: “It is possible to make astonishingly tasty dishes from the simplest ingredients. That’s my aesthetics” (Simic 2008: 59). In other words, what

he wants is impossible. Here we are at Simic's often quoted sentence: "The poem I want to write is impossible. A stone that floats" (Simic 2008: 40). But even poetry itself is impossible, and yet it exists. Finally, it is often forgotten why it exists:

How many literary theorists and teachers of literature truly understand that poems are not written merely for the sake of oneself, or for the sake of some idea, or for the sake of the reader, but out of a deep reverence for the old and noble art of poetry. (Simic 2008: 66)

That is why another form of his work on poetry is so significant and valuable: through translation from language to language, it introduces distant readers to the most valuable of the "old and noble art of poetry", thus establishing new acquaintances and bridges, opening up unexpected horizons.

4. Translating poetry from the native language

Simic's cultural merit also lies in his introduction of some of the most important poets from the former Yugoslavia to the world. Owing to him, English speakers— and thus a global readership — can read poetry originally written in the former official Serbo-Croatian (a language that now has four names and separate language policies in the countries of the former republics of Yugoslavia, but is, in a purely linguistic, Saussurean sense, one language), as well as in Macedonian and Slovenian, which were also official languages in the former federal state of Yugoslavia. It is clear how important Simic's translation work was and remains for Serbian and Yugoslav culture, especially if we consider his esteemed position in American poetry, his extensive education, and the significant reputation he holds both as a writer and an intellectual, alongside his Serbian and Yugoslav background. As a translator, in the most dignified way and at the highest level, he introduced the world to the literary works from the pen of several outstanding poets.

In the introduction of a bilingual book of poetry by Milan Đorđević (Simic & Djordjević, 2010), which he edited and translated for English-speaking readers around the world, Simic talks about the challenge of translating, especially the works of great poets of a small language, such

as his mother tongue. That is exactly how he started translating, when once upon a time he came across a book by the Serbian poet Vasko Popa in a library, “fell in love with it” and decided to translate it.

The reasons that further motivated him to start translating Popa’s poetry can be inferred from his essay “Metafizičar male kutije: Vasko Popa” [*Metaphysicist of a SmallBox: Vasko Popa*] (Simić 2006: 5–21), in which he clearly states what is lacking in previous translations of Popa’s poems, especially the cycle “Vrati mi moje krpice” [*Give Me Back My Rags*]. And that is “zadirkivački ton originala i akumulativno dejstvo tog glasa” [“the teasing tone of the original and the accumulative effect of that voice”], then humor, specifically, “obešenjački humor” [“prankish humor”], “nepokoran kao poezija” [“disobedient as poetry”] (Simić 2006:13). Also: “...prirodno je da sam uzdržan u pogledu izbora pojedinih reči” [“...it is natural that I am restrained in terms of the choice of words”], “Popa uključuje mnogo šareniju dikciju” [“Popa includes a much more colorful diction”], and in translations it is “daleko formalnija i jednoličnija” [“far more formal and uniform”] (Simić 2006: 17).

Simić then translated this famous Popa’s poem, in which not only are there no mentioned shortcomings that bothered him in earlier translations, but it is also not inferior to the original.

Emphasizing the impressive talent of Djordjević, who belongs to an exceptional generation of Serbian poets “together with Novica Tadić, Radmila Lazić, Duško Novaković, Nina Zivancević and one or two others” (Simić & Djordjević 2010), Charles Simić in Introduction to this book also sheds light on his own position as a translator of Serbian poetry:

Being an American poet of Serbian background made this entire endeavor much more than a literary exercise. I found myself between two cultural identities, two ways of looking at the world, and having to negotiate between them. To translate is to be aware not just of the differences between two languages and literary traditions, but equally of the way in which so much of what the native reader understands and appreciates in a poem is not to be found in the words on the page, but remains unspoken. (Simić & Djordjević 2010)

In his various texts – prefaces, essays, interviews – Simić spoke about his own need to translate poets from his country of origin into English, as well as about translation in general. For Simić, translation is the closest connection with the poem, and he was inspired to choose mainly works

of high aesthetic scope – polysemic, with modern, symbolic and hermetic expression. Some of these works are reminiscent of the poetry that Simic himself wrote.

A few more remarks about lyricism from Simic's point of view. There is no closer relationship to poetry than translating it, and there is nothing more similar or related to it than the blues – and both exclude hatred and division: on the contrary, they establish connections and build bridges between cultures and peoples.

Simic also considers the translation of lyrical poetry to be something that is impossible to do – yet it is done. Translation is the closest reading of a poem. Nevertheless, true lyricism is something that exists in the zone of untranslatability (“Lyricism, in its truest sense, is the awe before the untranslatable. Like childhood, it is a language that cannot be replaced by any other language,” Simic 2008: 73–74).

Lyricism excludes narrow, separatist, nationalist, racist, and other similar views of the world, as true lyricism is almost the same as the blues.

Many authors point out that it is difficult to define the blues, and that the widespread belief that the blues expresses only sadness, despair, and mourning is wrong (see Wald 2010: 1–7; also: Blues, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/popular-songs-of-the-day/blues/>). There is also blues with an almost cheerful rhythm, and the motifs in poetry are quite diverse. Exactly this complexity and elusiveness of the blues, which is difficult to define, was captured by Simic, who offered his own definition, which appears to be comprehensive and very accurate. In his essay *No Cure for the Blues*, Simic wrote:

The blues prove the complete silliness of any theory of cultural separatism which denies the possibility of aesthetic experience outside one's race, ethnicity, religion, or even gender. Like all genuine art, the blues belongs to a specific time, place, and people which it then, paradoxically, transcends. The secret of its transcendence lies in its minor key and its poetry of solitude. Lyric poetry has no closer relation anywhere than the blues. The reason people make lyric poems and blues songs is because our life is short, sweet, and fleeting. The blues bears witness to the strangeness of each individual's fate. It begins wordlessly in a moan, a stamp of the foot, a sigh, a hum, and then seeks words for that something or other that has no name in any language and

for which all poetry and music seek an approximation. (Simic 2015: 57–58)

At the same time, by doing so, he brilliantly explained his own idea about the closeness, almost the “sameness” of lyricism and blues.

In this musical and poetic genre, there is a period when verses and rhythms express protest and resistance, particularly during the years and decades of great social unrest and WWII (Blues as Protest, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197401>) – a period which closely mirrors Simic’s own personal history.

That is another interesting “contradiction” in Simic’s understanding of poetry, individuality and community, because he is a poet who “goes inside himself to meet everyone else”. “Inside is where we meet everyone else; it’s on the outside that we are truly alone” (Simic 2008: 45); and also: “Only poetry can measure the distance between ourselves and the Other” (Simic 2015: 65). Is that not what happens in both blues and translation? Both “paradoxically transcend” all divisions. There is a desire to connect through meaning, emotion and lyrical/blues sound.

5. About the representation of the poet Simic in the regular curriculum of literature

Regardless of the fact that Charles Simic’s texts are demanding and require significant intellectual effort, a great deal of knowledge, and a high level of reading culture, there are titles among them that are well-suited to be part of student reading lists and analyzed in class as part of the regular high school literature curriculum.

On this Very Street in Belgrade
By Charles Simic

Your mother carried you
Out of the smoking ruins of a building
And set you down on this sidewalk
Like a doll bundled in burnt rags,
Where you now stood years later
Talking to a homeless dog,
Half-hidden behind a parked car,

His eyes brimming with hope
As he inched forward, ready for the worst.
(Simic 2013)

This is one of the many poems by Simic that could be included in the reading books for high school graduates – impressive and poignant, offering many aspects for analysis. These range from the war scene, striking and cinematic, to the motifs of “things”/“beings” (mother, smoke, escape, doll, dog, car). There is also the contrast between the terms “hope” and “readiness for the worst”, and finally moments of versification (rhythm of free verse). The unique “lighting” through which the lyrical self illuminates “thingliness,” and the entire scene lends strength to the expression, allowing for a layering of meaning and ideas.

Equally, a good selection of essays could be made that would be suitable for inclusion in reading books. High school graduates learn philosophy, and in Charles Simic’s texts, philosophers are frequent “interlocutors”. “Whoever reads philosophy reads himself as much as he reads the philosopher. I am in dialogue with certain decisive events in my life as much as I am with the ideas on the page” (Simic 2015: 11).

However, Charles Simic’s work is, above all, a challenge for more complex and demanding forms of work, those that go “outside the box”, but with a starting point in the regular curriculum. These are different possibilities for organizing project-based learning that would connect different intra-subject and inter-subject contents and encourage students’ creativity and activity.

While we wait for Simic’s texts to be included in the mandatory, regular school reading, there is a possibility that they will already start being represented in classes.

In this paper, we investigate the potential inclusion of Charles Simic’s work in high school curricula in Montenegro⁵, with occasional comparisons and insights into the curricula in the areas of the former Yugoslavia. For example, I paid attention to the fact that in the Program for Slovenian Language and Literature of the Government of Slovenia, the poet Tomaž Šalamun is represented with three poems (Slovenščina 2008: 31). Since

⁵ In this paper, I primarily focus on Montenegro, the country where I live and work because the situation in education there is the closest and most familiar to me. Additionally, given the fact that Charles Simic is a Serb and a Serbian-American/American poet and writer, it is understood that everything that is discussed in this paper refers in a certain way (even if only as a suggestion) to the curricula and programs in Serbia.

Šalamun is a contemporary of Simic, and one of the many poets Charles Simic translated into English and edited their books (see, e.g., Šalamun 1988), it is quite logical and expected that Simic would become part of mandatory programs, primarily in his native Serbia, but also in other countries of the former Yugoslavia – especially given the fact that his translation work contributed something valuable to each of them.

Researching high school curricula in Montenegro – Predmetni program za opštu gimnaziju [Curriculum for general high school], for subjects such as the mother tongue and literature - officially titled Crnogorski-srpski, bosanski, hrvatski jezik i književnost [Montenegrin-Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian Language and Literature], Engleski jezik [English Language], Sociologija [Sociology], Filozofija [Philosophy], and Psihologija [Psychology] – I find enough space for the representation of Simic's life and literary work.

All these curricula have already foreseen additional content that should be designed by inventive teachers, and they all point to the importance of interdisciplinary correlation.

I will now mention only some of the numerous possibilities.⁶

Montenegrin-Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian Language and Literature:

It is important that teachers use an interdisciplinary approach that is based on the integration of problem requirements from different teaching areas, because this way gifted students are motivated to expand and deepen their knowledge. (Crnogorski-srpski, bosanski, hrvatski jezik i književnost 2020: 76)

Students keep reading logs of works from the curriculum and those they read of their own choosing. (Crnogorski-srpski, bosanski, hrvatski jezik i književnost 2020: 77)

It would be beneficial for students to make their own anthology of poems (poets from ancient times to the most modern) or an anthology of an era over the course of four years. They can also write a preface for it in which they would explain the criteria they followed when choosing the poems. (Crnogorski-srpski, bosanski, hrvatski jezik i književnost 2020: 77)

⁶ Note: For practical reasons, high school subject programs (Podgorica 2020) are quoted here in English translation.

Philosophy:

The curriculum is flexible and presented as a guideline, without detailed operationalization.

The choice and application of teaching methods belong to the area of the teacher's creativity. (Filozofija 2020: 10)

The application of active and interactive teaching/learning methods is also one of the most effective ways to encourage learning with understanding, critical thinking, and foster a culture of communication and intellectual independence among students. (Filozofija 2020: 5)

Contents/concepts: philosophical questioning, the name and concept of philosophy, sources of philosophizing (wonder, doubt, sense), basic fields and problems of philosophical research, philosophical disciplines, basic philosophical concepts (the language of philosophy), philosophy and other forms of knowledge and action (science, art, religion), philosophy and its history, perspectives of philosophy in the modern world. (Filozofija 2020: 5)

[Students should] “draw conclusions about the importance of philosophy in the modern world.” (Filozofija 2020: 5)

The connection between philosophy, literature and art is not sufficiently represented in the curriculum itself, but it is referred to – and Simic's work is highly suitable for establishing this correlation.

As some of the goals of learning philosophy, it is stated:

- helps to reflect and connect different experiences (science, art, religion);
- enables spiritual orientation in the modern world” (Filozofija 2020: 10)

English Language:

In class, we will use as many authentic reading texts as possible (poems, stories, dialogues, letters, prospectuses, brochures, newspaper articles, excerpts from literary works).⁷ (Engleski jezik 2020: 21)

⁷ Note: This type of text is not specifically represented in the program or in the textbook for English Language, but it is recommended in the Curriculum.

Psychology:

Using the example of an artist's life path [students] analyze the role of personal and environmental factors for creativity. (Psihologija 2020: 10)

Sociology:

[Students should] describe cultural pluralism; describe the relationship between cultures and civilizations; explain the term multiculturalism; identify the influence of mass media; explain the terms cultural identity and cultural diversity; describe the key characteristics of globalization; understand culture as a higher level of development of the human race, especially through spiritual dimensions and creativity – art; recognize the role of art in the cultivation and refinement of man. (Sociologija 2020: 9)

- evaluate the value imperative: *Contribution to society is a measure of personal values*;
- explain the negativity of the conformist attitude. (Sociologija 2020 : 12)

In particular, concepts/contents such as bilingualism and language stratification and their influence on the development of personality and culture in modern times should be emphasized.

Charles Simic or the Challenge of Bilingualism could be one of the topics for an interdisciplinary approach and organizing project-based teaching in several subjects.

5.1. Project-based learning⁸

Project teaching, as a special method of learning, should have its starting point in the regular curriculum, but also go beyond it, focusing on the interests, activities, imagination, and inventiveness of students and their teachers – who should correlate different subject contents, scientific areas, and branches of art. As a rule, it is planned in advance and lasts for a long period. A project inspired by the work of Charles Simic can be realized in the final grade of high school, and it should then serve as a truly

⁸ On the history of the idea and contemporary project-based learning, see e.g. Dewey 1897, Kilpatrick 1918, Markham 2012, Bender 2012, Bender 2020.

summary illumination and result of the education acquired during previous schooling, with special emphasis on what is the essence of project teaching – activities, creativity, tolerance, the ability to respond to the challenge of the task, and the student's talent. It is good to start with initial tasks that can later be further modified, depending on the ideas that students may come up with during research and learning.

Over a period of several months in the school year, students read and record observations and ideas. After initial instructions and a meeting organized as a class, with introductory tasks and recommended literature for reading, the students should be left “alone” to better familiarize themselves with the content and prepare for teamwork at home for a while. During the academic year, they will acquire certain knowledge in philosophy, language, and literature, and at the same time return to those subjects they studied in previous grades (in the Montenegrin system of education for general high school, these are the fields of psychology, studied in the second grade, and sociology – in the third grade of high school). In his essays on philosophy, history and literature, Simic engages in dialogue with many thinkers, writers, philosophers, and artists. Those are always challenging discussions, interesting reflections, and rich intertextuality. Some of the many names that Simic refers to are, for example, Descartes, Wittgenstein, Jasper Johns, Kant, Hegel, Plato, Nietzsche, Magritte, De Chirico, Harold Rosenberg, Socrates, Heidegger, Rimbaud, Wallace Stevens, Husserl, Robert Duncan, Gaston Bachelard, Paul Ricoeur, Walt Whitman, Gwendolyn Brooks, Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, E. M. Cioran, Robert Frost, Charles Olson, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, H. D. Thoreau, Rabelais, Mallarmé – and some of them can attract the attention of students interested in realizing some form of correlation with the corresponding subjects.

Individual, tandem, and group tasks should be planned to allow personal interests, skills, and talents to come to the fore, as well as to foster the ability to work in tandem and as a team. After a month or two, “creative workshops” should be organized, where teams can gather and work together. Here are some possible tasks and guidelines for the implementation of project teaching inspired by the work of Charles Simic:

- create a small dictionary of characteristic lexemes that Simic uses in his texts, which reflect, for example, the author's “thingliness,” but also his main themes, poetics, ideas;

- discuss the ideas of Simic's essays with the aim of nurturing the democratic spirit of peace and tolerance, humanism, empathy, artistic and literary sensibility (e.g. ideas about freedom, non-conformism, war, various forms of violence in the world, extreme nationalism, collective guilt, and the practical efficiency of philosophical and poetic ideas);
- return to philosophy, with Don Quixote and Sancho Pansa in mind and heart, to explore the connections between poetry and philosophy, in search of answers to life's questions – from reality to ideals and back;
- write poetry inspired by Simic's style and poetics;
- write a script for a documentary or feature film (non-fictional or fictional genre) or a play inspired by Simic's life and literary work;
- write an essay on the work of Charles Simic;
- hold a conversation on (one of) the following topics: "Bilingualism and diglossia in the modern world," "Bilingualism and literature," or "Writing poetry in a non-native language";
- apply a comparative approach to the portrayal of "children of war" in the world of literature focusing on Charles Simic, Danilo Kiš, Vito Nikolić, and others;
- write an essay on the translation work of Charles Simic;
- translate contemporary poetry and other literary genres;
- create a work of art (portrait of Charles Simic, drawing or painting as an illustration of his texts, etc.);
- make graffiti with a quote from Simic's texts (attention! find some ruins of a "Berlin Wall", metaphorically speaking – i.e., *do not touch the new facades*);
- make a selection of quotes, with possible comments.

The crown of the project would be a publication resulting from the overall work, along with a presentation of the project, such as a play, literary evening, or a discussion, depending on the direction the tasks take the participants, guided by their teachers.

Another suggestion as a topic for project teaching:

Charles Simic & the Blues

This topic represents an interesting challenge for students to investigate within the framework of various subjects and through interdisciplinary connections:

- How can we define the Blues both as a musical and poetic genre?
- What are Simic's connections with the Blues?
- How can Simic's wartime experiences be compared to the protest and rebellion expressed in the Blues, especially in the 1930s and 1940s?
- The Blues as an inspiration for painters.

Also:

- Students translate and analyze the most popular Blues songs, including a partial review of the artists' biographies.
- They look for the elements of the Blues in Simic's poetry.

The possibilities are vast and they should be leveraged in the classroom in order to introduce young people to the rich and valuable heritage of this creator of Serbian and Yugoslav origin. Dušan Simić (Charles Simic) truly deserves it.

6. Conclusion

Charles Simic, the renowned and award-winning American poet of Serbian origin, captures the interest of literary critics, historians, scholars, literature lovers, and the reading public worldwide, both with his rich biography and his prolific literary work of high aesthetic scope. As a prose writer, essayist, and especially as a translator, Simic contributed significantly to the culture of his native country. He translated, edited and presented some of the most valuable works of contemporary Serbian poetry to English-speaking audiences. He also translated and introduced a wide audience to the works of poets from across the former Yugoslavia. The difficult wartime childhood and postwar memories left a mark on the life of this great poet, an emigrant of Serbian background, which is felt in his poetry, with some memories and autobiographical allusions being explicit. An exceptional, notable, and highly respected personality – as a human being, intellectual and artist – Simic expressed humanistic, thoughtful, non-conformist, and noble ideas about society, history, and life, promoting tolerance, condemning all forms of discrimination, and opposing concepts like “collective guilt” which lead

to the suffering of innocent people. As a bilingual artist and thinker, he has accomplished a great deal in the field of interculturality. His translations of poetry, as well as his reflections on it, indicate the finest talent, honed through serious work and extensive knowledge. Simic's poetics is deeply connected with philosophy, which he loved to read and knew well, and his erudition is evident in his writing. Heidegger's ideas about art are close to Simic's. In his poetry, the motifs of ordinary, small, everyday things, or "thingliness", receive special illumination and radiate allegorical and symbolic meanings, as well as poetic, artistic truth and beauty that arise from the simplicity of his style and the exceptional sensibility of the artist.

As an author of Serbian and Yugoslav background, whose life journey ended last year and whose work is complete, Charles Simic deserves a place in school curricula, so that young readers can become acquainted with his thoughts and artistic creativity. In the paper, we analyzed the possibilities arising from the Program for different subject areas in the general gymnasium in Montenegro and found that the subject programs provide ample space for inter-subject and intra-subject correlation, as well as the realization of project-based learning with tasks and activities that enable creative engagement with poetry, ideas, and the translations of this artist.

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