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## CHARLES SIMIĆ AND VASKO POPA: POETIC ENCOUNTERS

**Abstract:** From their first encounter in 1970 Vasko Popa and Charles Simić became close associates and friends. Since then Charles Simić has translated more than eighty of Popa's poems. Simić has also written extensively on Popa's poetry placing his early work in a wider context of Surrealism. In his analysis he focuses on the free play of images and the way Popa unlocks the extraordinary meanings of ordinary things. Besides, he traces the origins of Popa's poetry to myth and folklore. Simić holds that Popa draws heavily on Serbian folklore as a source of his mythical as well as Surreal imagination. Simić holds that by making use of the famous Surrealistic displacement in the description of chairs, pabbles or hatstands, for instance, Popa gradually deconstructs our perception of the familiar objects and uncovers their hidden mythical potential. In the same vein Simić explores Popa's understanding of language, and his exquisite mythography based on the expressive possibilities of words. Simić's observations of Popa's language call to mind Simić's own poetic method which, like Popa's, draws on myths, riddles and the exploration silence within the discourse of the poem. In this paper I propose to analyze Simić's work on Popa's poetry in a broader context of cultural and lingual crisscrossing as well as Simić's own poetic endeavour.

**Keywords:** Simić, Popa, poetry, criticism, Surrealism, mythography, folklore, poetics.

When Charles Simić and Vasko Popa first met in 1970 the older of the two poets, Vasko Popa was already internationally esteemed. By the late 1960s Popa's poetry had been widely translated and he had participated in poetic festivals and poetry readings round the globe. His reputation in the Anglophone world was first established in England during the sixties as Vasko Popa was a frequent guest at poetic gatherings at that time. His visits

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and lectures were hosted by influential poets, such as Ted Hughes and Al Alvarez, among others.

Popa's engagement with English poetic circles was partly due to the general interest in East European poetry. It was first inspired by the series of BBC broadcasts that ran from 1961–1964. The British poet Al Alvarez hosted the programme with the aim of introducing East European poets to a Western audience. The interest which the poetry aroused surmounted the broadcasts. The series paved the way for a huge project of promotion and translation of East European poetry. Along with Alvarez, British poets Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort supported the project of the eastern European translation boom as they "found in East European poetry something which was "plainly unlike anything being written in Britain and the United States". (Simić 1999). The project was accompanied by various poetic gatherings such as the annual Poetry International readings at the South Bank Centre in London which was founded by Ted Hughes. Those gatherings presented a huge opportunity for the East European poets in the days of Eastern political oppression to get in contact with other poets and Western translators. It was in the course of these events that Vasko Popa met his first English translator, a Cambridge professor Ann Paddington. The most important outcome of the eastern European translation boom was the Penguin series of translated East European poetry.

The Penguin project ran for 12 years. As a part of this project Popa's *Selected Poems* were published in 1969. Ted Hughes' sophisticated introduction into the collection and the beautiful, aesthetically refined and affectionate translation of Anne Padinngton secured Popa an influential position in the British poetic world.

Ted Hughes viewed Vasko Popa as one of the most important voices of the Eastern European poetry of the 1960s and 1970s. Even more, Hughes placed Popa "amongst the purest and most wide awake of twentieth-century poets" (1969: 10). To Hughes Popa's poetic world explores "what does exist" (1969: 11). In Popa's poetic imagination "the desolate view of the universe opens through eyes of childlike simplicity" (1969: 14). What is more, the real world is created against the backdrop of history and the silence of the unspoken by "making audible meanings without disturbing the silence... (1969: 11). Hughes writes that Popa "never loses his deeply ingrained humour and irony" and is capable of "turning the most grisly confrontations into something deadpan, playful: a spell, a riddle, a game, a story" (1969: 14).

The reception of Popa's poetry in England serves as a prelude to his meeting with the young poet Charles Simić in New York. However, Simić's first encounter with Popa's poetry took place a few years earlier when he was "a habitué of the New York City Public Library's reading room on 42<sup>nd</sup> street" (1987: 14). Simić was doing his own research on Serbian folklore. Coming across Popa's books one day he discovered with enthusiasm that, "here was someone with similar preoccupations" (Ibid). In his enthusiasm he "spent hours copying (Popa's) poems in (his) notebook" and "immediately started translating them" (Ibid).

Their meeting in 1970 marked the beginning of a fruitful professional and personal friendship. In his essay "Charles the obscure", Simić writes about visiting the monastery of Mesić, near Vršac with Vasko Popa. Simić, the atheist, confesses in this essay the significance of the visit which made him question his beliefs. They met the praying nuns, the silence of centuries, "the peace of a world outside time, the kind one encounters at times in fairy-tale illustrations, in which a solitary child is seen entering a dark forest of gigantic trees" (Simić 2015: 21). That visit and Popa's religious propensity showed Simić the "oldtruth". Simić then writes:

Today I think as he [Popa] did then. It makes absolutely no difference whether gods and devils exist or not. The secret ambition of every true poem is to ask about them even as it acknowledges their absence. (2015: 21)

Simić's worlds may account for his tireless exploration of the uncanny part of the visible reality. Besides, the experience of mysticism and serenity of the monastery seems to agree with the explorations of silence which is an abiding interest of both poets.

To understand Simić's fascination with Popa's poetry, however, one has to understand the nature of Simić's own imagination and to look back at his poetic beginnings. In an essay in which Simić describes his New York days back in the '50s. He acknowledges how hard it was to recognize his own poetic voice. He found it hard to reach the audience by what he was doing. The poet recalls what his friends would say:

"Your poems are just crazy images strung arbitrarily together," my pals complained, and I'd argue back: "Haven't you heard about surrealism and free association?" Bob Burleigh, my best friend, had a degree in English from the University of Chicago and possessed all the critical tools to do a close analysis of any poem. His verdict was: "Your poems don't mean anything." My official reply to him was: "As long as they sound good, I'll keep them." Still, in private, I worried. I knew my poems were about

something, but what was it? I couldn't define that "something" no matter how hard I tried. (1997: 1–2)

Yet, is it not the dream of all surrealists, to take notes of the free flow of the words pouring down from the mind, sitting "in a little luncheonette on 8th Street reading the sports pages" (1997: 3)? The "free flow of images" captured in words ran as follows:

In New York on 14th Street  
Where peddlers hawk their wares  
And cops look the other way,  
There you meet the eternal—  
Con-artists selling watches, silk ties, umbrellas,  
After nightfall  
When the crosstown wind blows cold  
And my landlady throws a skinny chicken  
In the pot to boil. Fumes rise.  
I can draw her ugly face on the kitchen window,  
Then take a quick peek at the street below.

Simić's surreal imagination although often acknowledged by the critics, provoked a whole lot of different comments. Vernon Young, in a 1981 review of Simić's *Classic Ballroom Dances*, describes his "transpos[ition] of historical actuality into a surreal key" (Young in Clegg 2014: 42). Castro acknowledges a "surreal, metaphysical bent" in Simić's poetry – how he combines "history and myth [with] surreal images and folk tales narrative to describe his [own] experience of history" (2001: 8) Buckley points out that all of Simić's prose poems contain "the somewhat surreal observations of an incredible world" (1996: 98).

Mark Ford, in his essay on Charles Simić, claims that "the term is overuse(d)" (2005: 234). However, as John Clegg claims, it is "[t]his overuse [that] has prevented proper critical analysis of Simić's relations with a genuine Surrealist inheritance (2014: 43). Ted Hughes also tries to define the difference between French ("genuine") and East European version of surrealism:

Folktale surrealism, on the other hand, is always urgently connected with the business of trying to manage practical difficulties so great that they have forced the sufferer temporarily out of the dimension of coherent reality into that depth of imagination where understanding has its roots and stores its X-rays. There is no sense of surrender to the dream flow for its own sake or of relaxation from the outer battle. (1969: 15)

As early as 1972, in the interview to Dodd and Plumly, Simić himself rejects this description of his work: “No, I don’t think of myself as a surrealist. I don’t think of myself as anything. But I would say my greatest debt is to surrealism” (1985: 20). Simić’s further clarifies his point, “What I like about surrealism is when the archetypal surfaces” (Ibid).

Popa’s surrealism seemingly follows the same poetic lines. Reaches to the past for both formal and thematic sources. It is grounded in folklore, history and the national heritage. Ted Hughes denies it as the “shift from literary surrealism to the far more and deeper thing, the surrealism of folklore. This type of surrealism, if it can be called surrealism at all, goes naturally with a down-to-earth, alert tone of free inquiry” (1969: 15).

However, the tension between the said and the unsaid, the word and the silence, or the word as a vehicle of the meaning varies in their respective oeuvres. The difference in the poetic voice stems from the different understanding of the Other of everyday perception. In Simić’s poetry it follows Heidegger’s lines. The verse incessantly questions the beyond of the language, contained in that liminal space between the word and silence. Simić comments, “It is important to experience this contradiction fully, rather than to resolve it. That paradox is the only absolute I’m sure of” (Hulse 2002: 37).

Clegg justly claims that, “the influence of Popa on Simić’s work is most discernible at the level of diction: both poets employ an uncomplicated syntax and a sparse, restricted vocabulary...” (2014: 50). In other words, their respective versions of the economical verse rely on the echoes from the depth. Simić’s “significant silence” contains the age-old battle between the being and its Other – the struggle over domination and the never-ceasing agonies of the mind for the knowledge about its own self. As for Popa the silence places the emphasis on the word in its mythological sense, acknowledging the echoes of the magic in its core. It is what Ted Hughes defines as the debt to folklore – the whole lot of significations which stem from the folk tradition and the search for knowledge and meaning through the irrational. Although the landscape of Popa’s poetic universe may resemble dreams, it is not the chance image, popping up from the unconscious mind, that Popa is after, but the deeper level of the unconscious – the workings of the unconscious mind of the whole community. “The archetype which dreams on the archetype”, holds Simić.

In his introduction to Popa's poems in his own translation, Simić holds that it is the language, that is the pivotal point where the paths of the universal and the ordinary meet. "No myth without a funny bone", claims Simić, pointing to the common source of myth and humour as they both renew the meaning of words, putting them to a new cause, presenting them in new attire. They both put emphasis on the idiom, brushing up the old "words". As Simić explained, for Popa all sorts of meanings, mythical, ritual and symbolic are inscribed in the language. This is the nature of all languages – that dormant treasure. Popa listens to the language, in its potential utterances and its potential silences. "For Popa, writes Simić, language was not an abstract system but a living idiom, an idiom already full of poetic invention" (2008: 81).

Simić further explains that although Popa is considered a Symbolist there are not "a whole lot of symbols in his poetry" (2008: 80). What he is really up to is to show how symbols are created. Simić views the "surrealists [are] some of "the great mytographers of our century" due to their "trick... to present the known in terms of the unknown" (so as) to recover its mythical potential" (1987: 9).

There are many crisscrossing paths inside the poetic worlds of Vasko Popa and Charles Simić. They seem to coincide in the realms of three main areas – history, ordinary life and silence. At some deeper level of understanding all of these paths stem from myth, both as a narrative and a type of imagination. Popa employs myth both as an immense pool of sense and a universal language of the psyche.

In his poems about ordinary objects, Hughes sees "a surprising fusion of unlikely elements." (1969: 14). Simić explains further: "Popa lingers over the images. He frames and explores them" (1997: 10). For instance, a potato in the poem "Potato" has probably never been described before as "mysterious". To arouse our curiosity, the potato is suggested to be "as mysterious as the earth itself." So we are summoned to hear to what "he" has to say. "He speaks/With midnight fingers /The language of eternal noon".

He sprouts  
With unexpected dawns  
In his larder of memories<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: Anne Pennington.

In actuality he “lives” the mystery of mysteries, the eternal natural and mythical cycle of dawns, sunsets, “because/ in his heart/ the sun sleeps.”

In another poem about “ordinary objects”, “Chair”<sup>2</sup>, Popa describes a chair which is “always on her [weary] feet”. Here Popa creates an image of a weary old person, after roaming and “wandering” many paths of life in the image of “the weariness of wandering hills [which] give shape to her sleeping body, dreaming, perhaps of dancing (“in the moonlight of the skull”), on some ravishing night or just in the enthusiasm of the youth or having a kind rest “on someone else’s curves of weariness”.

Popa’s “object” poems “defamiliarize perception”, writes Charles Simic (Ibid). In fact, he dismisses their usual presentation and makes us see them as persons. However, the personification of objects does not here have the function of individualization but of listening, paying attention, opening one’s mind to the incessant whispering of matter. Human emotions and the eternal cravings are among the other voices of nature which can be heard out there in close proximity, as close as a chair, or a potato might be. The stories told from the standpoint of the objects which we are all familiar with are just to remind us how poorly we listen, how little we know as a consequence. It also shows the “double nature of language [where] the language is both the contract ... and an option” (Simić: 1997: 11). A word which labels invokes an image which houses the meaning.

Simić’s own object poems employ “ontological and metaphysical inquiries” (Scarry 2004: 4). Fork”, “Spoon”, “Ax”, etc. often named as “object” poems reveal Simić’s focus on “the rock-bottom reality, [...] the reality in front of my nose.” (Ratiner 2002: 83). They are not “framed” for us to “see”, rather they are put under scrutiny, questioned and investigated, disarmed of their attire of words which traditionally pin them down with the name. That “dialogue” with aspects of the ordinary objects “point paradoxically to the beyond [the words on the page]” (Scarry 2004: 20).

Simić puts to work various traditions associated with those objects to uncover disparate realities behind the “reality” of simple objects (see: Jovanović 2017: 434). To this end he often locates his metaphysical inquiries within the most ordinary objects while imbuing those same objects with the weight of history as well as the personal experience.

In the poems “Fork” and “Broom” for example the might of brooms that is a result of some deeper understanding of the world is acknowledged:

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<sup>2</sup> Translation: Anne Pennington.

Only brooms  
Know the devil  
Still exists.

Immediately we “see” it as a person, the carrier of the traditional view of brooms, perhaps, as a vehicle of witches, who of course, “know”. Not without humour Simić suggests that the knowledge is, in fact, the collective unconscious of the broom. In the lines that follow Simić invests his simple invocation of the image of brooms with a set of associations opening the world of the poem for various meanings. “[They know] that the snow grows whiter/ After a crow has flown over it”. Crows are the traditional companions of witches implying their uncanniness for their overall association with death, and the macabre side of humanity. In common perception they are intelligent and mean. These lines are followed by a sharp contrast to the previous image saying that, “a dark dusty corner”, where brooms are kept “appeased” in any household, devoid of their nastiness” is “the place of dreamers and children”. Why?, the reader invariably asks? Because in their innocence they are drawn to the mystery of the unknown. On the other hand, the two images revoke the eternal duplicity of all things. The last stanza underlines that view, presenting “a broom (as) a tree/ in the orchard of the poor”. The various associations of the tree (Christmas tree, the tree of life, a tree in a garden) that shuts the door to the poor, leaving them to their own resources with brooms, with “hanging roaches” for decoration. In the last image of a “mute dove”, the poet perhaps finds harmony for the rich and for the poor, for the innocent and the wise in the silence of the dove.

Simić’s object poems “offer a kaleidoscopic view of how (those objects)... can be seen.” (Mijuk 2002: 81) In the poem “Fork” Simić again explores the blurred line between the familiar and uncanny. The same as broom of the previous poem fork can be found in every household. However, in this poem “one is also aware of larger claims than that which the image of a fork usually contains” (see: Jovanović 2017: 435). As the broom comes alive in the poem dedicated to it, so is the fork illuminated for us in this unusual light, “this strange thing must have come right out of hell” through which we become aware of its uncanny component. Its resemblance to a “bird’s foot” displaces our sense of the purpose of the fork and directs the attention to other voices that the image might invoke. In the image of the “bird’s foot which is “worn around the cannibal’s neck” the ordinary perception of a fork as a tool for eating acquires diabolical undertones. The ordinary fork does

indeed fragment bodies in the innocent act of eating, not very different to the cannibal's habit of fragmenting the bodies with, we presume, his teeth. However, the scene of fragmentation underlines both acts. Leading to the inevitable idea of the uncanniness which underlines even the most innocent of scenes. "As you hold it in your hand/ As you stab with it into a piece of meat". It is possible to imagine the rest of the bird/ Its head which like your fist/ Is large, bald, beakless, and blind". What was once alive is dead as a consequence of the eater's or cannibal's "fist", or rather, power and might. The mighty, cruel or powerful will eat the weak. As simple as, birds will be birds. For, anyone can be that bird, as we all have that uncanniness, the Other, as well as the ordinary, in us. (see also: Jovanović 2017: 434-435).

In Simić's "object poems" the ontological issues such as the nature of Being, the locus of the Other, or the place of nothingness as a Pure Other (Heidegger<sup>3</sup>) are always present in the descriptions of the "the rock-bottom reality". In the poem "My shoes", for instance, "shoes" (are seen as) "the secret face of (the) inner life". The poet sees them as the "Two gaping toothless mouths/ Two partly decomposed animal skins/ Smelling of mice-nests". Those things, as he describes them, "Know" more than is to be known by learning. The personal history is, as in the case of the brooms, inscribed in them, they hold the knowledge of unborn children that they were destined, or rather, not destined for. The poem reveals that, "My brother and sister who died at birth/ Continuing their existence in you." They know the mystery which is in the sacredness of ancestorship, "Guiding my life toward their incomprehensible innocence". They acknowledge the inscriptions of religion, tradition and past on any individual being, "The Gospel of my life on earth/ And still beyond, of things to come?" The secrecy and wisdom it holds in its simplicity which is "Kin to oxen, to Saints, to condemned men" is the real and "the strange church... / With you as the altar." The shoes, like sacred objects should, keep "The secrecy and silence", and above all the "mute patience", of divine or noble beings. By ascribing these extraordinary features to simple shoes Simić transfers his poetic voice beyond visible reality. His voice inhabits the silence behind the words which reflects the "silence and the patience" of the shoes which contains some other reality – the individual past of the owner reaching to the universal.

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<sup>3</sup> In *Existence and Being* Heidegger holds that, "[n]othing, conceived as the pure "Other" ... is the veil of Being" (1949: 392).

The form of the riddle, frequently present in the poetry of both Simić and Popa, aptly accommodates their humour and their mutual habit of reaching beyond visible reality. For Simić, whose objects often suggest ontological issues in which the “drama of the self” is always present, the utmost riddle is human nature.

In Simić’s poem “Position without a Magnitude” the first riddle comes with the title. What are we to expect, some cosmic analysis or a more mundane approach – a story about an insignificant matter which only a poetic handling can illuminate into significance? Like a “dark star”, invisible. The questions are numerous. The attentive reader is invited to the darkness of the theatre, when someone / You haven’t noticed before/ Gets up /... And projects his shadow / Among the fabulous horsemen/ On the screen. Describing that insignificant moment that we have probably all experienced in any ordinary theatre when someone stands up before the lights go on. The poem proceeds with the chilly revelation that it is “us” or rather “only you/ On your way/ to the blinding sunlight/ Of the street”. Do we know that shadow? How come we didn’t recognize it? Does the brightness of the sun in the street outside only underline that darkness of the theatre, of our knowledge of ourselves, of our own insignificance in the Universe?

Simić himself claims in his poem “White”, “the most beautiful riddle has no answer”. Or, the answer is, as Simić seems to suggest, hidden in the eternal meandering between the image and the shadow of the self, which are in the poem presented as the illumination of the screen and the bright day and the darkness of the theatre and the Cosmos.

Simić places the riddle in the broader context of Popa’s use of folklore and myth. “The riddle is the clearest model for Popa’s own undertaking (1987: 11).” He further clarifies his ideas analysing Popa’s poem “Horse”<sup>4</sup>: the poem opens: “Usually/ He has eight legs”. However, “... the riddle-like strategy is there to displace its form as we all “know” the answer – horse.” As Simić points out, in Popa’s poetry the “riddle is not only the mental puzzle” (1987: 12).

Popa’s use of the form of the riddle implies “the riddle-like strategies ... [in order to] displace our expectations” (Simić 1987: 11) The opening of the poem horse, “ Usually/ He has eight legs” is not the answer to unasked question – it rather emphasises its absence. , The “answer” (the real concern of the poem), though, lies far beyond the physicality of a horse, in the

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<sup>4</sup> Translation: Anne Pennington.

condition of men, perhaps, who “came to live from his four corners of earth” in the image of his misery of dreaming a better and kinder life as he “bit his lips to blood (as) He wanted/ To chew through that maize stalk”, which is so akin to human, or all misery on earth. Besides, the idea of the horse brings to mind the traditional hardships of any horse’s life, in the field, in barren mountains, in poor surroundings, as well as the use, or the abuse of horses in wars, carrying the image of the horrors of war. On the other hand, the horse can be pinned in our imagination as a magnificent animal, sacred, mythical. Worshipped for its strength, intelligence and artfulness. Its beauty and kindness could be traced only in “lovely eyes” (where) “sorrow has closed into a circle”.

“The question of the riddle is never completely answered by the description” claimed Simić (1987: 12), as we are not sure why an ordinary horse has eight legs, or are we? If we follow the extraordinary logic of the poem, which includes both of the complementary visions of the world reason and fantasy as indispensable parts of any knowledge, we may come to the same conclusion. Simić’s remark about the “double-nature of language” (1987: 11) give us a clue.

In the same vein Simić claims that Popa’s virtue of listening and revoking the dormant voices inside the words is in practice here:

Its language is thoroughly idiomatic. In it one *hears*. In it one hears the purest native and lyrical strain. In the riddle, the word truly becomes *mythos*, becomes the place of its origins. Popa’s poetry is a painstaking effort to disclose this ground... (1987: 12).

In Simić’s description of Popa’s use of language in which we hear “the purest native and lyrical strain” echo the words of the Mexican poet and Popa’s friend Octavio Paz: “poets have the gift to speak for others,” but that “Vasko Popa had the very rare quality to hear the others.” (Paz in Flint 1991: 20). Apart from listening to myth, history, common beliefs, old wives’ tales, fantasies, witchcrafts, popular sayings, superstitions and many other forms of human experience of the world, Popa had that extraordinary ability to make the reader hear those loose voices in his verse. Including those voices in his verse constitutes the essence of Popa’s mythopeia as they establish the most vital link with Serbian folk tradition, that is the experience of the reality of generations of oral poets and their audiences. As Simić claims, “Popa’s poetry is a sacred action. It demonstrates how the laws of the imagination work (2008; 80).”

As Simić remarks “the origins of myth and humour are the same” . The ability “to present ordinary as extraordinary” lies in the (imminently eminently? poetic) ability to “see” reality – to see it despite its tags. Popa’s ability to see the “extraordinary”, twisted, or grotesque faces of common objects agrees with Simić’s own humorous approach to reality. Simić reveals:

I prefer Aristophanes to Sophocles, Rabelais to Dante. There’s as much truth in laughter as there is in tragedy, a view not shared by many people. They still think of comedy as nose-thumbing at the serious things in life. (2008: 82)

The array of voices which is included in the verse of both poets while not being in the fore, opens to a huge land of charged silence. Simić makes a claim about the silence

“In the beginning, always, a myth of origins of the poetic act . A longing to lower oneself one notch below language, to touch the bottom-that place of ‘original action and desire,’ to recover our mute existence, to recreate what is unspoken and enduring in words of the poem...” (1985: 110). As Giorgio Agamben would have it, “silence appears as the experience of an impossibility of saying, as a privation” (2012: 95). Both Simić and Popa leave silence to be heard in the crevices of their sparse language. Writing about Popa’s silence Ted Hughes likens it to Beckettian – only more contained. Richer. (see: 1969:10).

Both poets have poems about stones – the epithomes of silence – the source of various meanings for both Simić and Popa. In Simić’s poem “Stone”, “[f]rom the outside... the stone is a riddle” and it remains so, unless you know “to knock on it and listen”. There are “sparks... / When two stones are rubbed” notes the poet,

So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;  
Perhaps there is a moon shining  
From somewhere, as though behind a hill—  
Just enough light to make out  
The strange writings, the star-charts  
On the inner walls.

Making a simple stone a mystery and imagining it as an (emotional) “being” which is worth listening to, makes one think of what a stone can “remember” and, finally, whatever can be inscribed on its “inner walls”, as in the inner, hidden landscape of the human mind.

Popa’s stone poems create the poetic cycle “White Pebble”. Popa’s “white, polished, virgin corpse” immediately comes to life as an age old

“being” which “with shameless pace of time... holds each thing/ in its passionate inner embrace”. “It smiles with the eyebrow of the moon”. The next six poems tell about the heart of the pebble, the dream of the pebble, the love of the pebble, the adventure of the pebble, the secret of the pebble and the friend of the pebble. A pebble appears as a double-edged, trickster-like goblin, age-old and playful, simple and resourceful, emotional and cold. In all these roles it is impenetrable. The riddle-like poems pose questions and hide answers and remind one of the many games played in childhood with pebbles. Popa’s pebble poems are about pebbles which inscribe the whole world, they never refer to people. Strangely people, if they appear at all, mirror the matters of nature, as if in the “Dream of the Pebble” where a hand... throws a pebble in the air.”

Where is the pebble  
It didn’t return to earth  
Nor did it come to heaven

What happened to the pebble  
Did the heights devour it  
Did it change into a bird

Here is the pebble  
It remained stubborn in itself  
Neither on earth nor in heaven

It listens to itself  
Among the worlds a world<sup>5</sup>

Despite the riddle form, we know from the beginning that the answer is displaced. But where? Another riddle whose answer is somewhere clothed in silence is the ultimate vessel of meaning.

The silence in the work of both poets is best demonstrated in their respective treatments of history. When Simić writes, “Our life stories are scary and droll,/ Like masks children wear on Halloween (“History”), he suggests a vision of history as an image of horror and pain. The suggestion of Halloween masks implies their universal strain. Further, the image indicates the recurrence of “scary and droll” stories which occur almost as a ritual of life, like Halloween. The individual drama is intimated by the indication of the contrast between the horror and the innocence (the joy of the disguised

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<sup>5</sup> Translation: Charles Simić.

children). The game, “as they go from door to door/ Holding the little ones by the hand/ In some neighborhood long torn down” turns into catastrophe as “the neighbourhood” – their homes, have already been demolished. These lines come ever more closely to horror: an allusion to orphan-hood contains the almost innocent question, “whose children are they”? Parading all alone in a destroyed city, or, is this all in a fantasy, are they just apparitions which populate someone’s dreams (even more horrific). “Where people ate their dinners/ In angry silence or quarrelling loudly – meaning where people were alive, indicated by the use of the past tense. “When there was a knock on the door” followed by the questioning dinner party’s faces, “What’s this you’re wearing, kid?/ And where did you get that mask?” Which made “everyone laugh” as if they didn’t know that they are already history. Only the boy, with his deeper vision of god-like imagination that Wordsworth made famous “knew” and that’s why he was “staring” silently at the threshold. The lines of the poem point to the scenes of wars, orphanage, displacement and abandoned innocent beings. The silent narrations reveal the poet’s attitude towards history – the recurrent image of human misery as the individual suffering is silence, almost hidden.

Simić elsewhere explains his understanding of history, “Sappho rather than Homer as [a] model” (1985: 127). Silences in Simić’s verse contain the stories of the individual suffering and pain which is invisible in the grand narrations of history.

Popa’s poems about history are more concrete, as they usually refer to single “events”. However, they seem to follow the same logic of the universal, rather than time-bound organization. The involvement of silence, like a huge pause in discourse, displaces the meaning of the story to an indefinable space “above” the words, as if to haunt the discourse of the poem. However, the muted narrations offer the interpretation of the poem.

The poem “Imminent Return” is located in a historically-true “Betchkerek prison” in “a cell” in a fleeting moment between hope and despair, when a fellow prisoner, a “Red Army man” awaits execution. As he “escaped from a prison camp” he holds on to an image the of mirage of Moscow where he wants to go. In the face of the immediate execution, he wants the poet to explain to him how to reach Moscow. The tragedy of his hopeless hope, and the irrationality of the act of drawing the map for him on the prison floor “With breadcrumbs” (the ultimate desire of the poor and humble) is all contained in the next image

He measures the distance with his finger  
Claps me on the shoulder with his great hand  
And rocks the whole prison with his shout.<sup>6</sup>

In the last line we almost “hear” the hissing of a bullet and the terrible echo of his last words, “You are not far my beauty”. The margin beyond the words of the poem contain the story about the tragic contrast between the beauty of life and the brutality and absurdity of war which annihilates human kindness and imagination, makes the hidden narration that lingers somewhere beyond the words enabling them tell the story of all wars.

Popa’s poem “Be Seeing You” accommodates again that hope against hope, but on more rational terms – as a way to survive the madness of war.

After the third evening round  
In the year of the concentration camp  
We disperse to our quarters.

We know that before dawn  
Some of us will be taken out and shot

We smile like conspirators  
And whisper to each other  
Be seeing you<sup>7</sup>

The words are used as a charm, as a pledge – the acknowledgment of life in the face of death – “we know what we mean”.

Ted Hughes appreciated Popa’s ability to give a “historical insight” without actually telling a story about history. The universal principles of humanity are stronger than the passing historical circumstances, both poets seem to believe. The perfect unity of rational and irrational, tribal and cultural, oral and written, lyric and epic, or as Simić points out, “Herodotus and Sappho”. s

The poetic liberation from the factual, the evasion of factography and the conventional idea of “truth” leaves the imagination free to rely on other resources of mind for knowledge and significance. Welcome of fantasy and surreal images are often a part of the poetic landscape of both poets. The poem which opens Simić’s collection of prose poems *The World doesn’t End* consists of a set of war images that depict any war, speaking of the absurd

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<sup>6</sup> Translation: Anne Pennington.

<sup>7</sup> Translation: Anne Pennington.

movements which try to fix life in the state of war: “My mother was a braid of black smoke”. The image of the mother as a “braid of black smoke” pictures a woman eaten up by the sorrow and uncertainty of living, thin as a smoke, perhaps with braided hair, which is the iconic image of the country woman. The image of “burning cities” from the next line (“She bore me swaddled over the burning cities”) underlines her agony multiplied by the terror of a traumatized parent responsible for the life and protection of “a swaddled child”, as if “swaddled” and protected by her naked love. Despite of the immediate image of a war with all its connotations, the visions go far beyond their depictions in scarce words. “The braid”, peasant, uneducated, neat, horrified woman, to state the most obvious, running in confusion, with the strength and instinct of a mother, her terror and pain displaced onto the devastated scenery – a woman, desperate to protect her family, her home in the midst of burning homes (in “the burning cities”). Simić pictures her as thin and elusive, like smoke, a macabre image of a terrified woman that haunts dead cities – like a ghost. The closing line with its image of “high heavens ... full of little shrunken dead ears instead of stars” presents the contrast between innocence and death (“little ears”), “shrunken” from cold, or fear until death. The range of surreal images in this poem builds a larger picture of a very real war.

A number of Popa’s poems tell of events which took place in some indefinite past which the poet imagines in a surreal landscape. In one of them, “[the] great-grandmother Sultana Uroshevich used to sail sky in a wooden trough and catch rain-bearing clouds.”<sup>8</sup> The manner of storytelling, oral announcements of “wise old men” stands in a sharp contrast to the content of the story which is being told of a grandmother “doing great and small miracles ... with wolf-balms and others”. The serious and rational business of storytelling is combined with fantastic imaginary. After she was buried and reburied as she went on playfully to “meddle into the business of the living” she was lain to rest in the oaken coffin with one foot booted and the other bare – the image of her evasion of order. The “splashes of fresh mud” on her booted foot, make the poet wish to follow her unrestful soul “to the end of [his] life” in search for the meaning epitomized in “that other boot she lost”. The Self and the Other, as the rational and irrational, or factographic history and popular imagination, like the “two boots” endlessly subvert and restore each other.

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<sup>8</sup> Translation: Anne Pennington.

The larger claims made in the crevices of the language of the poem refer to the tradition of oral telling, to various superstitions and charms, and the universal, archetypal understanding of woman as sorceress. Without the markers of either location or time, Popa invokes the voices of the irrational conceptualisation of the world – the way the world was experienced by oral poets and narrators of history. The atmosphere of tale-telling as a surrogate of history especially for the poor and distant corners of the earth is grounded in myth and the collective unconsciousness, the charm, the rituals, the common beliefs.

In another poem about the grandmother Sultana Uroshevich “Shadow of a Shewolf” the same form of telling is employed.

They tell how my great-grandmother  
The witch Sultana Uroshevich  
Used to have the shadow of a she-wolf.

She would never leave the house  
On moonlit knights<sup>9</sup>

Here the description of the grandmother is intoned as a scary tale which combines traditions about the she-wolf with their close relative from the horror genre – vampires. Folk wisdom has it that vampires are scared of the moonlight. The reference to the wolf is frequently employed in Popa’s poetry, paying homage to the Slavic pagan tradition of the wolf. The wolf is an awesome animal of amazing strength and might. His name serves as a charm, his strength is magic – can protect from illnesses and even death. His violence is vicious and protective. Simić translated Popa’s cycle about the lame wolf, an oxymoron in itself, both lame and mighty. The indications in the titles intimate that tradition pictures the wolf as a dual symbol of kindness and doom – the care-giver and the care usurper. These traditions are held in the language, in its magical use of the word which results in the bulk of folk representations of the wolf. Popa refers to this kind of common perception of the wolf as a symbol, image and word.

A similar compilation of rationality and irrationality in Popa’s poetry is presented in the poem “Under the sign of the Wolves” (*U znaku vukova*) from the collection *Raw flesh* (*Živo meso*). The poem opens to a vivid image of carnage:

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<sup>9</sup> Translation: Charles Simić.

On the highway just outside of town  
They found horses with torn throats  
Harnessed to an empty wagon

And on the top of a mulberry tree  
A merchant changes into a white sheep<sup>10</sup>

One can picture hungry wolves and the scenes of killing in their horrific “joy” (“All night/ The wolves danced/ Around the fruit tree reeking of human flesh”).

The poem continues with an image of another tradition – the admiration of the strength and might of wolves, for those “long-tailed dancers”. (“You would have known how to haggle/ With those long-tailed dancers/ My grandmother tells me”). The feelings of admiration and the strange attraction of the dance transforms into the realization of a wolf in the poets own being as the poems closes, “I stare into her pointed teeth [of the grandmother/ ancestor]/ [...] “Then I run into the backyard/ Climb the snow-covered pear tree/ And practice my howling”“ as if in a ritual of initiation.

Although Charles Simić translated about x of Popa’s poems from various collections over time. Simić frequently reflected in his essays and interviews on how difficult, even impossible it might be to translate poetry:

An idiom is the lair of the tribal beast. It carries its familiar smell. We are here in the realm of the submerged and elusive meanings that do not correspond to any actual word on the page. ... Translation is an actor’s medium. If I cannot make myself believe that I’m writing the poem I’m translating, no degree of aesthetic admiration for the work can help me. (2008: 81)

In his “Introduction” to the collection *Homage to the Lame Wolf* Simić explains that he started translating Popa’s poetry right away when he came across it in a New York Library in the early 1960s, but to his surprise he found it “hard going” as, “each word and image release multiple associations” (1987: 14). The poems that comprise the collection *Homage to the Lame Wolf* are therefore “as much as he accomplished” in his endeavour to “preserve some of the taste of the great original”. As Simić has it that was his “labour of love” (1987: 15).

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<sup>10</sup> Translation: Charles Simić.

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## ČARLS SIMIĆ I VASKO POPA: POETSKI SUSRETI

**Rezime:** Od prvog susreta 1970 godine Vasko Popa i Čarls Simić postali su bliski saradnici i prijatelji. Od tada Čarls Simić preveo je preko osamdeset Popinih pesama. Simić je takođe napisao brojne eseje i tekstove o Popinom delu posmatrajući njegovu ranu poeziju u širem

kontekstu Nadrealizma. U svojim analizama Simić ističe slobodu i igru slika unutar Popinog dela u okviru koje Popa oslobađa neobična značenja običnih predmeta. Osim toga, Simić istražuje vezu Popine poezije sa mitom i folklorom. Simić piše da je upravo srpska folklorna tradicija izvor Popinog mitotvorstva kao i njegove nadrealističke imaginacije. Simić smatra da je upravo uz upotrebu poznate nadrealističke tehnike izmeštanja iz uobičajenog konteksta predmeta poput stolica, kamenja ili stlka za šešire, na primer, Popa postepeno dekonstruiše našu percepciju ovih svakodnevnih predmeta i otkriva njihovo skriveno mitsko značenje. U istom smislu Simić preispituje Popino razumevanje jezika i njegovu naročitu mitografiju zasnovanu na izražajnim mogućnostima jezika. Simićeva opažanja o Popinom jeziku skreću pažnju na Simićev poetski manir koji se, poput Popinog zasniva na vezi sa mitom i srpskom folklornom tradicijom. Ovaj esej baviće se analizom Simićevog dela o Popi unutar šireg konteksta kulturnog i jezičkog preplitanja između poetika ova dva pesnika.

**Ključne reči:** Simić, Popa, poezija, kritika, nadrealizam, mitografija, folklor, poetika.