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Charles Simic's *Dime-Store Alchemy*: *The Art of Joseph Cornell* Guy Rotella

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BOOK REVIEWS

Charles Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell*. Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1992. 77 pp. \$19.95.

"It goes without saying."

So nothing stays. But husks remain. As in "Deserted Perch." What's fled or flown can be evoked: the solace soothes; it menaces, too.

Nostalgic, enigmatic, even coy, Joseph Cornell's recuperating, scari-fying work has urged a pride of poets to comment or verse. Octavio Paz wrote "Objects and Apparitions" for Cornell, calling his cased and uncontained constructions "cages for infinity." Elizabeth Bishop translated Paz's poem and made a "Cornell box" herself. In "Pantoum," John Ashbery enlists Cornell with other "connoisseurs of oblivion" who inhabit our "short, brittle" days. And Stanley Kunitz admires a Cornell work—"The Crystal Cage"—for its "basket of gifts," its "snowbox of wonders." Kunitz also senses the threat that the fragility of Cornell's art expresses while (and by) resisting it; he asks, "What if the iron overhead / suddenly starts pounding? / What if, outside, / a terrible storm is raging?" In "Joseph Cornell," Frank O'Hara discloses Cornell's uncanny shifts of scale—his intimate immensities (the phrase is cribbed from Simic on Dickinson, one of his favorites, as she was of Cornell)—discloses them like this: "It's not a sky, / it's a room." (Of course, if we hadn't already taken housed compression for immensities of sky we wouldn't need revision.) In "Closet Drama," Richard Howard registers a set of "object lessons" from Cornell, those he learned and couldn't take: things are "pregnant with sudden meaning"; "Any apartment lobby is a necropolis, / every dresser drawer a forbidden city"; "The tiny is the last resort of the tremendous." And in clinician's prose, Marianne Moore, Cornell's fellow bricoleur, finds his "pulverizings, recompoundings, and prescribings . . . as curative as actual." She says that Cornell's "use of early masters," "sense of design," and "rigor of selection" "constitute" for her a "phase of poetry."

It is as a phase of poetry, a usable imperfect master, that Charles Simic—painter, then poet—now in his turn takes up Cornell. His title, *Dime-Store Alchemy*, follows Cornell in merging kitsch and the admirably ordinary, magic true and false, and those surreal and other scientific transformations that derange and sometimes unify. Simic's book resembles Cornell's work in this as well: it is a hybrid of

hybrids. Prose poems, quotations, translations, homages, and imitations are bedded, no, not bedded, boxed, in a scholar's monograph, complete with the accustomed frames, the critic's apparatus: acknowledgments (even the identifying numbers of the microfilm consulted), a list of illustrations, a preface and chronology, several pages of notes. This is solid, even stolid stuff, and in Simic's hands it as surely suffers a sea change into something rich and strange, a spirit's song in praise of art's conversions, its transforming force, but sung with Prospero's minor-key alertness to the possibly baseless fabric of our redemptive pageants: objects and apparitions, visions and things.

Dime-Store Alchemy not only contains prose poems, it is one. In *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, Marguerite Murphy stresses the form's liminality, its generic oxymoron, and its ethics and aesthetics of disruption, which is a politics, as well. She also shows that just such indefinite features are this unconventional genre's own conventions, its definitive characteristics, since even defamiliarizing art depends upon the familiar patterns it inscribes or invokes in order to have them present to disfigure and estrange. The prose poem's generic conventions include, then, the norm of opposing norms, especially as the lyric and ludic qualities associated with verse challenge the sobriety and logic associated with prose—a mode assumed to be of use by bureaucrats. But this antihierarchical foregrounding of generic dissolution cuts two ways, for as the prose poem subverts prose conventions by infecting or curing them with the poetic, it puts poetry in question, too, resisting *its* conventions, infesting or investing them with prose: crossdressing. These oppositions, challenges, and questions resonate from literature to the largest constructions of culture, interrogating not only the arrangement by which the critic's act is kept sequestered from the artist's, but also, say, what isolates our Dionysiac and Apollonian urges from one another, or the quotidian from the sacred, the here and now from the transcendent, the past from the present, the rulers from the ruled, our sense of truth as discovered from our sense that we invent it.

But this is analysis, awkward. Simic is lighter on his feet; he does the same work faster, as when he borrows—for the epigraph to his collection of prose poems, *The World Doesn't End*—Fats Waller's chirpy invitation: "Let's waltz the rumba." Collapsing categories (say, those of "high" and "low" culture, poetry and saloon piano), this is a dancing school for prose poem method. It plays with pace and measure, pairs the tamely Eurocentric with the "marginal" or "ex-

otic" Afro-Cuban, injects a posed propriety with the expressively erratic and openly erotic (and the other way around), and confuses and conflates the rhythmically smooth with the syncopated. This turns and counterturns, since even the disruptive must be regular enough; how else would we feel the beat and dance? Prosaic and poetic, art and appraisal, interpretation and imitation, cohesive and disjunct, *Dime-Store Alchemy* is characterized by just such imbrications.

With compressed brilliance, Simic performs the scholar's ordinary task of introducing, explaining, and evaluating his subject. The facts, circumstances, and significances of Cornell's life are crisply given. A range of contexts evokes the forces urging his art: reclusiveness, faith in Christian Science, intense romantic yearnings for permanence and unity felt most in the presence of ruins and fragments, interests in surrealism and in symbolist correspondences, a preference for both cryptic codes and multiple suggestion, New York City as labyrinth, museum, flea market, dump, and bazaar, a collector's love of talismanic objects. Observed kinships with other artists—Breton, de Chirico, Rimbaud; Dickinson and Poe—help define his practice. And nuanced discussions of representative works indicate his subjects, materials, and methods: women and children threatened or lost, butterflies and birds, clay pipes, maps of seas and stars, ballerinas and starlets paired with manhole covers and springs, Medici princes in Coney Island photo strips in slot machines—and none of this is painted, drawn, or sculpted; Cornell's art is all selected and arranged; its principles are these: "We Comprehend by Awe" and awe results when chance and necessity meet, when found objects are found to belong together. Simic also clarifies Cornell's hopeful dislocations of scales of time and space, his predilection for series (whether created by extension, repetition, or division), and a good deal more. Throughout, his critical acuteness is buttressed by original archival work and yet stays delicate enough to let his readers feel for themselves the frisson of the fact that Utopia Parkway was the name of Cornell's ordinary street.

But other books have done almost as much almost as well, although more blowzily. What sets *Dime-Store Alchemy* apart is its sincerest flattery of imitation, the appropriation of the methods it describes. Alongside servicable prose like this: "Joseph Cornell was born on December 24, 1903, in Nyack, a town on the Hudson River," we find, "Here's the long pole given to us by the god of sleepwalkers. Here's the hoop of the dead girl and the parrot and the cockatoo

that flew out of the pet shop into the snow when we were little. / Emptiness, this divine condition, this school of metaphysics." Those words depict a Cornell work, analyze it, and recreate its meaning and its mode in Simic prose/poem/prose. It happens again and again: insightful obscurities phrase and praise the appraised; creation and criticism merge; vacuums empty and plenums fill. Scholarly prose is renewed, and readers learn with pleasure, as antique Horace said we should.

Marianne Moore observed that "it is a curiosity of literature how often what one says of another seems descriptive of one's self; she also said, "appraisal is chiefly useful as appraisal of the appraiser." Simic reveals himself in revealing Cornell. Affinities first. Both artists evoke what's fled in ways that console and threaten; they uneasily mix idealist and near-nihilist visions; and they practice carnivalesque styles typical of prose poems and collage. Both make arrangements of what's found, trust reverie and silence, and renew the domestic by displacing it from standard habitats. And both deploy impersonal devices on timebound materials in seeking a route to timeless or mythic spots.

There are differences as well. Simic shares Cornell's interest in correspondences, but is rather less sure that anything underwrites them. He is not so likely to cross the line from sentiment to sentimentality. He is perhaps a more deranging than transcendent surrealist, and perhaps no symbolist at all. Where Cornell has nineteenth-century divas and ballerinas, Simic has Hop Wilson's blues. Simic is also more direct about sexual longing, loss, and lack, although these often seem to be Cornell's (implicit) subject, too. And where Cornell's characteristic note is plaintive and plangent, Simic's is mordant, and often funny. Earlier, I quoted Richard Howard's view that in Cornell "The tiny is the last resort of the tremendous." For Cornell, the phrase "last resort" might call up a faded postcard, an imagined grand hotel on a melancholy shore, say, "Dover Beach" by Arnold, where a miracled little room might implicate the sky; for Simic, the mournful cosmic echo might be Hechtically comic, recalling "The Dover Bitch."

Finally, though, the differences diminish in respect. Simic's extension of the prose poem—he exposes it to more than the usual dose of the discursive; he expands its conventional brevity (as others have)—these honor Cornell's boxes: collages with depth. At one point, Simic calls his subject Cornell-Orpheus. There is a Simic-Orpheus as well. In both Cornell's and Simic's work Ovidian meta-

morphoses attempt noble, impossible tasks: to re-member the lost and scattered, to retrieve the dead; the process meditates on art's transforming power and its diminished expectations. That said, it comes to this: having looked into Cornell again, this time through *Dime-Store Alchemy*, through Simic's open, closed, alert, and visionary eyes, "We've recovered our old amazement." Thanks.

Guy Rotella