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PETER SCHMIDT

*Notes on Charles Simic's New White (1997)*

"to begin is to begin again"

William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

Originally published in 1972 and then revised in 1980, Charles Simic's only long poem, *White*, has been reworked once again and is now in its third incarnation. Since 1980 *White* has consisted of two sets of ten poems of five couplets each, in which the poet addresses his muse, White, and the multiple alter-egos she assumes, followed by two slightly longer poems in which the poet's muse replies ironically to the poet's aspirations. *White* is a poem about the impossible quest to recover origins, original intentions, newness. It therefore should not surprise us that its author feels the need to rewrite it about once a decade, as his own notions evolve about the paradoxes of "beginning again." In an earlier essay on *White*, I called it Simic's "thumbnail epic." Simic seems wary of epic pretensions and yet irresistibly attracted to the traditional epic story, which is that of the discovery of a fresh beginning, the founding of a new era, out of the ruins of the old. (An acerbic poem in *Austerities* is entitled "My Weariness of Epic Proportions.") But rather than tell his version of this ancient story using a long narrative form, like so many other poets in this century Simic constructs a (relatively) long form by using a sequence of short lyrics.

Simic's *White*, like his other poems, is governed by a blues aesthetic; his work has always focused on turning poverty and austerity into a source of strength rather than an absence. He seeks to discover the virtues of improvisation, stoicism, and tragicomic irony—how to make new forms out of what is rejected and refused. This emphasis on turning a sense of belatedness and diminished expectations into a virtue, into a kind of ironic anti-heroism particularly appropriate for this violent century, is shared with Simic's spiritual compatriots—Robert Johnson and other blues poets, including Langston Hughes; plus Char, Follain, Vallejo, Celan, and Szyborska, to name just a few. But we should also think of one of Simic's favorite predecessors, Novalis, the eighteenth century German poet-philosopher who made a living as an inspector of salt-mines (!). Novalis said: "For the poet language is never too poor but always too general. He often requires commonplace, used-up words." What follows are a few thoughts on Simic's latest changes to his long poem and how we might interpret them. I will start with a brief map of the first and second sections of the 1997 version of *White*, then offer some ideas for interpreting selected themes that arise and evolve in these sections. I'll end with a discussion of some revealing changes Simic has made to the concluding

lyrics, *White's* two poems replying to the poet's quest.



First, a tropological map of the 1997 *White*. It's simplified and won't note all the details others will find when they explore *White's* landscape on their own. But it can provide orientation. I have numbered the poems in each part for the reader's convenience, but these sections are not numbered in Simic's poem and exist floating each in their own white space on separate pages. My notes about which poems are new and which ones revised are based on a quick preliminary comparison/contrast reading; I hope they're substantially correct. In the 1997 *White* the most striking changes are in Part One: six of the ten poems are new. In Part Two just two poems are new, though all others are revised.

[Part One]

1. The epic goal announced: "Out of poverty/ To begin again," yet accompanied by a sense of belatedness and dissolution or "fraying." This lyric is revised but retains its place as the poem's opening.

2. A defeated self, comic and grotesque; the stoic sense of "fading" now becomes more violent, suggesting death by hanging. A new lyric.

3. Song to breath/spirit as a flame, and then to the dark that "claps" it out. Revised and moved from the second set of lyrics to the first.

4. Bo-Peep's flute provides both comfort and a challenge to complete an impossible task. A good example of Simic's adaptation of nursery rhymes and fables. Revised from its first appearance in the 1980 *White*, where its position was I.7 (Part One, poem # 7).

5. A threatening old crone (one of *White's* many incarnations?) confronts a young child holding a piece of paper. Revised and moved (it was I.4 in 1980.)

6. Now the poet and his imagined muse/antagonists (such as the dark in I.3 or the crone in I.5) are both shown to be controlled by higher and more invisible forces, a kind of puppeteer who "holds us up by our feet" as they are swayed over the earth "to and fro." New.

7. This lyric begins with a marriage reference and appears to be a more benign vision of a poet's potential union with his muse, but it quickly turns tragicomic: the marrying preacher is a crow; his book is black and blank and frost is everywhere. Compare with the crow in Stevens' "No Possum, No Sop,

No Taters"? New.

8. More ironic contrasts between visionary expectation and its results. Links the poet's dilemma to the violent history of failed utopias in this and previous centuries. Also includes a possible allusion to Hart Crane. New.

9. A marriage ceremony again, with the interesting variation that the poet is "given away" in marriage by his mother, another mask for White? Here, too, initially positive imagery turns sinister by the end, suggesting storm and loss. New.

10. More ironic contrasts between intentions and results. On making an epic poem about diminished expectations, unintended consequences, what remains undone. New.

[Part Two]

1. Vaudevillian-like imagined dialogues between the poet and his shadow/muse. A comic teasing and taunting that is cruel but also intimate, even affectionate—as if the poet and his muse have been long married. Revised.

2. Revision as erasure but also as a new "blossom-like" beginning. Versus revision as scarification, merely negative. A new lyric.

3. The comic anti-hero's song. Changed in several ways from earlier versions, including adding a clever shift in syntax in the last stanza ("Nor can I call myself good-for-nothing"), so that now the poet mocks even his rhetorical formulas for wooing his muse through self-deprecation. Moved from its 1980 position as II.2.

4. More comic/heroic struggles to make do with little. Revised to make it more compact and cryptic, this lyric is now eerily Beckett-like. Moved from II.3 in 1980.

5. A lullaby? Contains a curious equanimity stronger perhaps than in any other lyric in the 1997 *White*. Confident that poverty and emptiness signify the presence, not the absence, of White, the energy of renewal when "all's well and white." Revised and moved from being I.8. in the 1980 version.

6. The boy-poet confronts the crone again; revised from a new poem in this same spot in the 1980 version. There is a marked shift in tone from lyric #5 in the first sequence described above: the concluding image of the poet's tongue as a noose may suggest a strangling of his voice or that the poet may

be able to undo the old woman's spell over him. These lines about the tongue-as-noose appear only in the 1997 version.

7. More parodic marriage reenactments. Revised in 1980.

8. The poet's decomposition/undoing begins as a kind of lullaby but ends as a curse poem, its tone both sinister and comic. Revised from the 1980 *White*, where it was the penultimate poem in Part Two. The ants are now clearly named as "Time's" ants.

9. Mock epic quest language again—or perhaps rather an elegiac use of "high" literary/archaic language. The penultimate couplet, which contains the phrase "holy escutcheons," may be read as an ironic variation on the traditional 12-syllable hexameter line once thought suitable for epics. Substantially revised from a 1980 lyric that was the concluding poem in Part One.

10. This concluding lyric is new and emphasizes more strongly than ever before the poet's aging body, as he turns signs of aging into the subject of his writing.



"The man who sees only one source knows  
only one storm. The chances in himself are  
thwarted."

René Char, *Leaves of Hypnos*

A comparison of the two opening lyrics in 1997's version of *White* with the 1972 version will quickly show some crucial shifts even while the poem's haunting opening lines—"Out of poverty / To begin again"—have remained constant. The 1997 version stresses an elegiac sense of "fading" in the very first lyric. The poet's words of invocation are now imagined to "fray" as soon as they are spoken, and their dissolution mimes their surroundings, "the fading, / The already vanishing / Evening light." Note the way the entire poem is suffused by a sense of perpetual ending, yet syntactically it is written using infinite and imperative tenses ("to begin," "say a word") that make all these imagined events exist in a realm of pure possibility, though they will become trapped in time as soon as they are enacted.

In the second lyric this elegiac vision becomes nightmarish. The quest for *White* is a quest for the ability to live in the present moment, seeking unification with a "shadow"-self "watching and listening." This shadow-self may be a (negative) image of *White* herself, or it may be suggest the lost or displaced selves the poet must unite with in order successfully to invoke the descent of *White*, his muse of rebirth. But this shadow-figure is also tor-

mented:

With its gallows-like  
Contorted neck  
Bloodied by the sunset,  
To my own heart beat.

These sinister lines, new to the 1997 version of *White*, suggest that it is not only poverty but also brutality that the poet must make his subject. Yet Simic's writing here seems somewhat overdetermined and melodramatic; I'm not convinced it is a superior revision. I am also struck by the strong sense of lateness, that is to say, belatedness, in the changes made to *White's* opening lyrics. This makes me wonder whether the spectre of violence may signify not so much the atrocities of this century (Simic's frequent topic) but the poet's own fears as he revises his long poem that he may murder his own lyric voice, or discover it is dying. This is the deepest kind of poverty for a poet, one that Wallace Stevens knew well (consider "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad," for instance). It is also not the necessary poverty of new beginnings but a vision of an inevitable end. Contrast the 1997 opening with that of the first *White* (1972). The first lyric was a hymn or prayer that "out of poverty" the poet may "Touch what I can/ Of the quick." And the light that pervades this lyric is far different. The poet will speak and then wait, "As if this light // Will continue to linger/ On the threshold." The second lyric in the 1972 *White* was charged with a similar sense of immanence:

All that is near  
I no longer give it a name.

Once a stone hard of hearing.  
Once sharpened to a knife.

Now only a chill,  
Slipping through.

Enough glow to kneel by and ask  
To be tied to its tail

As it goes marrying  
Its cousins, the stars.

The poet erases his own powers of naming but does so with a kind of magisterial confidence. As the lyric develops this élan changes to a child-like prayer, an almost comic vision of the self holding on with all its might to larger forces. But if this is humility, it is also confidence in new beginnings, in flight and ascension. I much prefer this original second lyric in the poem, and not just because its imagery seems more optimistic. (It was also in the 1980 *White*,

with minor changes.) These older lines abound with a sense of play, paradox, and mixture, with rapid shifts of tone and reference and scale; such energy seems to me absent in the adjective-heavy description of constriction and death in the 1997 lyric. Other lyrics in all versions of *White* contain visions of violence, some comic and some foreboding, that perhaps make redundant these new references to gallows in poem #2. Using Char's insight, we may ask whether in fussing over *White's* beginning Simic is simplifying his own sources of inspiration for this poem, not to mention its suggested meanings.

Many of the changes Simic has made in the 1997 version of *White* are clearly successful, though. I can't begin to discuss them all. But here is a representative example of how he has revised one particular lyric. Originally in "Part Two" of the poem, this 1972 lyric to the poet's spiritus read:

This is breath, only breath.  
Think it over, midnight.

A fly weighs twice as much.  
The struck match nods as it passes.

But when I shout  
Its true name sticks in my throat.

It has to be cold  
So the breath turns white.

And then mother, who's fast enough  
To write his life on it?

By 1997 this lyric has been reworked and is now the third poem in Part One.

This is breath, only breath.  
Think it over, friend.

A shit-house fly weighs  
Twice as much.

But when I tell the world so,  
I'm less by a breath.

The struck match flares up  
And nods in agreement

Before the dark claps it  
With its heavy hands.

The language is now earthier and the reference to the match flame memorably reimagined. Like the previous two lyrics in the 1997 opening sequence, this

poem's mood becomes more foreboding as it develops, but this time such a shift is made with force and economy.



"Poetry dissolves alien existence into one's own."

Novalis

Overall, the 1997 *White* contains the same structural or dramatic development that characterizes the earlier versions. Part One's lyrics tend to focus on examples of the ironic contrast between the poet's hope for renewal and what he actually experiences, and they tend to give this contrast a tragic edge. The poems yearn to imagine White's presence, her multiple incarnations, but almost always they turn and become meditations on loss, absence, or a presence that is a deception, disguise, or threat. Part Two's poems have similar dramatic turns but they seem more comic than tragic. They have acquired a sense of humor about diminishment that suggests not defeat so much as a kind of stoic strength, an ability to survive. I am of course oversimplifying here, for Simic at his best is always a poet of the tragicomic, of learning to find equilibrium in paradox and antinomy. But overall I think the above generalization holds about the poem's primary shift in tone, perhaps especially now that Simic has darkened *White's* 1997 opening lyrics to emphasize their fatalism. The last poem in 1997's Part One, for example, turns on the contrast between the poet's quest for a "world unobserved" by him, "The nameless/ In its glory." Such elevated language is unusual in Simic and bound to be deflated, and the lyric ends ironically, lamenting that the poet could find "no way/ To speak of it" yet did try to describe it and therefore misrepresented it. Part Two opens very differently, with a lyric that is slightly revised from 1972 to sharpen its sassiness. It strikes the keynote change for Part Two, turning imagery of torture into an escape-artist's boasts and bravado:

What are you up to smart-ass?  
I turn on my tongue's skewer.

What do you baste yourself with?  
I spit bile laced with blood.

Do you sprinkle pepper and salt?  
I bite words as they come into my mouth. [1997]

Generally consistent over all three versions of *White* are the various masks of the poet's alter-ego, such as the shadow-self already mentioned above. In the poem these figures vary greatly in manner and appearance, from



child to old crone, from an antagonist or fellow sufferer to a welcoming entity appearing to offer shelter or even marriage. Consistent too is our fundamental dilemma about who these mysterious personae are. Are they all variations of the poet's identity, figures whom he must confront or unite with before White (his muse) will appear? Or are they guises of the muse herself in all her aspects? Neither individual poems nor the lyric sequence as a whole gives us a way of resolving this mystery, only a sense of its deepening complexity. Particularly intriguing are the varying references in *White* to the possibility of marriage between the poet and these personae, whether they be his alter egos or the guises of White herself. Much effort goes into imagining the ceremony, how the bride will appear, etc. The tone is ironic, either mentioning failure or suggesting that the marriage is eternally hypothetical. But the poet's lines have resiliency too, making light of the impossibility of black ink trying to represent whiteness and immanence:

Do you take this line  
Stretching to infinity?

I take this white paper  
Lying still before me.

...Then you may kiss the dot  
Where your pencil fell on its lead. [1997]

These lines are somewhat like mathematical proofs, but they are also song-like, with strong roots in oral traditions, proverbs, and spells. Such roots to Simic's language are more prominent in the poem's second half, implying that the poet gains strength from knowing that his dilemmas are not just personal or contemporary but eternally those of language itself.

The last poem in Part Two is particularly revealing. It is new to the 1997 version and provides a way of reimagining the conclusion to the poet's invocations to his muse. It superbly embodies the tragicomic balance and understatement that is the signature of Simic at his best. It begins with the poet addressing himself, reminding himself that the subject of his poems is not eternity but time's passage:

Pssst. The white hair  
Fallen from my head

On the writing paper  
Momentarily unidentified.

I had to bend down low  
And put my eye next to it  
To make sure, .  
Then nudge it, ever-so-slowly

With the long tip of my pen  
Over the edge of the table. [1997]

A little drama about the link between writing and aging. The poem is wry and self-deprecating, portraying the poet with his nose almost touching the page as he makes marks that are not writing but a kind of pre-writing, a pressing of the pen that is also a repressing. What is nudged aside—not merely to the margins of the page but off the table—is of course the poet’s inescapable subject, the one topic that is always now central for him, though he has trouble “identifying” that this is true. Poetry may dissolve what seems “alien” into the poet’s “own” identity, but it also makes that identity irrepressibly strange.



“Ars Poetica: trying to make the jailers  
laugh.”

Charles Simic, from *Notebooks, 1980-84*,  
in Weigl 193.

What of the famous conclusion to *White*, when White’s voice suddenly takes over the poet’s voice and speaks to him in two sets of riddles, as if from a whirlwind? The 1997 conclusion retains much of the sublimity of the earlier versions. It is also more compact; individual lines are often shorter and pack more punch, and each of White’s two poems are now 18 rather than 20 lines long. As before, White imperiously boasts of her elusiveness and negates all of the poet’s attempts to define her. In the first reply poem, for example, the poet’s black ink scribbles are mocked as “just a fly you’ve got there” on the white page—specks associated with ceaseless activity but also with meaningless noise and decay. It is also important to stress that White’s reply comes in two poems, not one—as if there can be no single last word from her, only a set of conflicting figures of speech, an aporia.

In the second poem of White’s, the imagery does modulate slightly in the middle of the poem towards being more tender and maternal in tone: “I’m the great nothing that tucks you to sleep,/ The finger placed softly on your lips[.]” White even reveals that she and the poet share the same loneliness: “The same unknown mother left us on a doorstep,/ The same four walls made us insomniac./ Late night piano picking out blue notes[....]” Yet in the poem’s last lines, completely rewritten for the 1997 version, the tone darkens inescapably. White’s imagery alludes to the crooked neck of the shadow-self and the sense of Time running out prominent at the very beginning of *White*:

Time has stopped. Your shadow  
With its gallows-like crooked neck  
Has not stirred on the wall.

White seems to freeze the poet's black marks into a single shape, as if the poet cannot move from his desk or alter his writing's meanings, which all converge on death.

In 1972 and 1980 the poem's end was a good deal different. I would like to re-mark these lines now by quoting them, making them be a kind of palimpsest haunting the present version and undoing its illusion of finality.

Time slopes. We are falling head over heels  
At the speed of night. That milk tooth  
You keep under the pillow, it's grinning. [1980]

... it's awake and yawning. [1972]

Once again, I'm afraid I prefer these earlier versions, while not denying the logic of Simic's changes. I think these previous figures of speech are more complex and mysterious as an ending to *White*—not to mention more hopeful. They resist being read simply as pointing either to birth or to death—that tooth's grin could be associated with either a skull or a new-born self. This is hardly true for the 1997 ending, which seems rewritten in the mood of other recent poems such as "At Sunset" in *A Wedding in Hell* (65) featuring a fly, crows, a skull, an execution, and other memento mori.

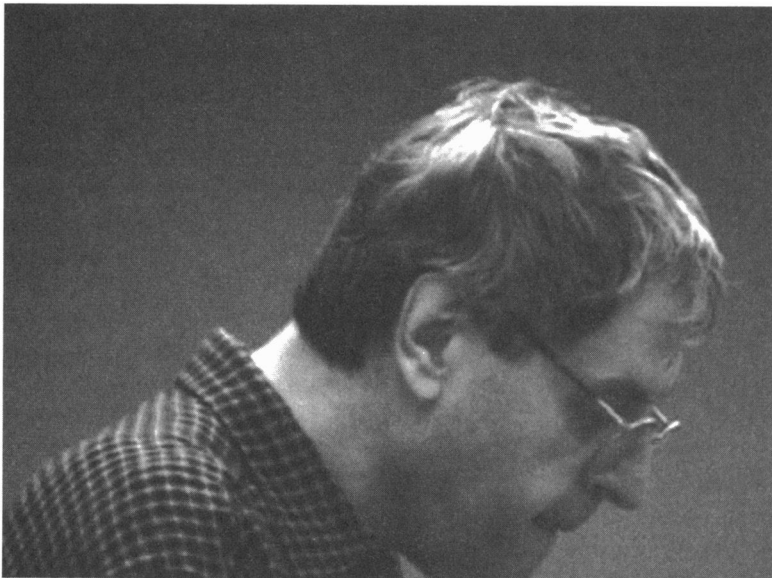
I would also like to mark the erasure of two epigraphs in the 1972 and 1980 versions, where Simic cited first Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and then the European mystic Meister Eckhart: "What is that little black thing I see there in the white?" (Whitman) and "For how could anything white be distinct from or divided from whiteness?" (Eckhart). Whitman's poem in particular gives us revealing insights into *White*, for it was a crisis poem written in 1859, after Whitman's initial burst of poetic inspiration (1855-56) had passed. In it Whitman deals with his fears about the death of his poetic voice by reimagining his origins as a poet. He finds that his voice was paradoxically born out of the cradle of death, out of hearing a mockingbird's lament and the drone of surf off Long Island. That poem of Whitman's also features the poet's muse (particularly in the last lines) as an old woman, a "savage old mother incessantly crying." This figure is not unlike the old shopkeeper who is one of the main masks worn by White in Simic's poem, or the "unknown mother" of orphans mentioned in White's last poem, quoted above. The 1972 and 1980 versions of this line are more clearly Whitmanic: it is a "gaunt shadowy mother" who leaves both White and the poet homeless. If *White* is a miniature epic quest to begin again, in revising his poem in the 1990's—particularly the changes made to the poem's opening and conclusion—Simic has curiously erased some of the ways in which he once marked this poem's sense of its own origins and purpose. Origins or ends, of course, are nothing either a poet or a reader can really name. But for the same reason they cannot be fixed by self-wounding and time-stopping figures of speech such as those in *White*'s 1997 first and last lines, which are filled with tropes

that attempt to define an end to writing poems about the need for new beginnings.

Or is that a crooked question mark looming on the wall of the poem's end?

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At one time we had ten farmhands working for us.