Generic Instability in Charles Simic's *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth*

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Abstract

In this article I discuss how Charles Simic's 2008 prose collection *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth* demonstrates the fundamental instability of genre classification. Beginning with a consideration of the book's apparent genre (a collection of fragmentary prose extracts from a poet's notebook), I move on to examine how this genre classification is destabilized both by elements of the text and by the book's relationship to other works in Simic's oeuvre. In *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth,* Simic manipulates and subverts the conventions of prose genres in a way that renders how we read Simic's texts fundamentally unstable and open-ended. The resultant destabilization not only subverts any critical attempts to fix Simic's work in a single generic context, but also highlights how genre itself is a malleable concept subject to often arbitrary textual and paratextual features.

Key Words

   Charles Simic, genre, American poetry, prose poetry

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Introduction

Serbian-American poet Charles Simic (born 1938) is most widely known for the surreal images and haunting narratives of his poetry and prose poetry. Barr (1997), writing of his early collection of poetry *Walking the Black Cat*, describes him as being "a kind of Trickster figure behind his poems, requiring the reader, through his or her experience in reading the poems, to submit the world to a 'phenomenological interrogation.'" Barr goes on to describe how, through Simic's poems, the reader is prompted "to see reality as being subject to and taking place within the active process of change and chance, with all possibilities open" (85). This mode of phenomenological interrogation is not, however, restricted to Simic's overtly poetic work. It does in fact occur at its most sophisticated level in Simic's less critically studied prose. As I will demonstrate, the generic instability of *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth* and its relationship to Simic's other published work reveals that Simic's true labyrinth exists not only on the page, but also in the space that connects page with reader, reader with author, and text with text.

Genre and Publication Context

The Monster Loves His Labyrinth is presented as a collection of prose fragments extracted from Simic's note-books. This is not the first time Simic has published such fragments. Some of the passages included in the book have themselves been previously published in his 1990 prose collection *Wonderful Words, Silent Truths*, a fact acknowledged in a post-script to *Monster*. Not acknowledged, however, is the inclusion of further paragraphs from Simic's 2002 memoir *A Fly in the Soup*, presented in *Monster* here as discrete fragments rather than as the more integrated, linear components of the prose narratives in which they originally appeared. Another previous prose collection, *The Unemployed Fortune Teller,* while containing no material printed in *Monster*, does include a thirteen page section of notes titled "The Minotaur Loves His Labyrinth" (101–114). These notes are presented on the page as fragments in the same way similar passages appear in the much longer *Monster*. *Monster* is, however, Simic's first collection devoted exclusively to such excerpts, gathering together in one volume fragments of writing previously published only in a scattered and haphazard manner.

With their inclusion in prose collections such as *Wonderful Words* and *The Unemployed Fortune Teller*, in which they are presented alongside essays and more lengthy linear memoirs, these short texts take on the appearance, almost, of page-fillers. In *Monster*, however, they occupy a far more central position, held together in their own kind of textual unity. Initially, in fact, the book appears to work against the fragmentary nature of the note form. By bringing together such texts into one volume, what might be otherwise interpreted as fragmentary or miscellaneous prose is transformed into what seems a more significant form: each unit of text seems a part of the larger, unifying form of the overall collection, the book itself. Yet *Monster* is far from being a straightforward unified text.

Ultimately, *Monster* constitutes a kind of container—an empty field—in which fragments are brought together only so that the spaces that lie between them can be revealed. Structural frameworks are demonstrated as being intrinsically mutable and capable of being disassembled and reassembled into new patterns. The end result is a kind of textual constellation, a scattering of texts that do not exist as part of a fundamental unity, but which can be considered as components of larger structures without sacrificing their status as discrete (yet incomplete) objects.

Such a textual constellation is possible because of the way *Monster* generates meaning not only from the words upon the page, but also through the way these words are arranged and self-referenced in the work itself. Typography and paratextual elements such as tables of contents and chapter titles are central to this kind of self-contextualization, working either with or against the text's thematic tendencies to give it, in the mind of the reader, a specific generic classification. There is a tension, however, in the way *Monster* performs its own generic identity. While the book presents itself as an anthology of otherwise orphaned texts, the way in which these texts are brought together works against any definitive sense of ordered structuring. Simultaneously, however, themes and commonalities are permitted to reveal themselves from text to text, tenuously binding together the open work.

Genre and Internal Structure

The Monster Loves His Labyrinth is divided into five sections. The book, however, lacks a table of contents or any kind of preface or introduction. Because of this, its structure and themes can only be discovered through

a direct reading. Furthermore, none of these five sections is titled, the beginning of each being marked only by a Roman numeral. Each section does initially seem to be grouped along broad thematic lines, however there is no narrative development and, in most cases, the apparent thematic unity quickly dissolves into what seems to be a more haphazard arrangement of unconnected texts.

　The texts that are included in each section are very short, for the most part no more than a single brief paragraph in length. The passages included in section I exhibit a predominantly autobiographical tone. Many of these passages, in fact, deal with subject matter included in differing forms in Simic's previous prose collections: the child Simic's experiences of Nazi occupation in the then-Yugoslavia and subsequent exile to the United States, the young adult Simic's life in New York City, and so on. Section II differs significantly in subject matter, being made up of passages narrating surreal events and imagery. Unlike section I there is little, if any, sense of realism or autobiography. These passages are also significantly shorter than those included in section I. There, the longest pieces extend up to a full page, while here few narratives are sustained for more than three lines. This brevity is the rule for the rest of the book. Section III initially appears to deal with topics pertaining to literature and poetics, but quickly diverts from this theme into surreal and absurd vignettes, as for example in the paragraph: "A horror movie for vegetarians: Greasy sausages kept falling from the sky into people's bean soup" (59). Section IV also initially appears to have a set topic, in this case the role of poets and poetry in society and politics. Soon, however, the section dissolves into random, surreal vignettes and quasi-aphoristic scraps of thought. A section that begins with seemingly serious passages, including lines such as "In no other century, in no other literature of the past has the image been this important" and "no preconceived aesthetic sense can guide the poet and the artist in American cities, where chance rules" (57) ends with more surreal, frivolous passages such as "Eye to eye with the fly on the wall. 'My luck quit for a while,' he says. 'I see yours is holding still,'" (90) and the rhetorical, unanswered question: "'Why is it that we never laugh when we tickle ourselves?'" (93). The sense of focus and direction set up in the opening passages of these sections thus disrupted, their thematic scaffolding effectively collapses, dissolving any sense of coherent argument or development into random play.

　This dissolution of form comes to a head in the final and fifth section of the book. Here, the initial pretense of thematic integrity present in sections III and IV is abandoned. The section begins as it means to go on, with a series of disconnected vignettes delivered in a range of tones:

ROUND MIDNIGHT

　I like the black keys better.
　I like lights turned down low.
　I like women who drink alone
　While I hunch over the piano
　Looking for the pretty notes.

　In my dream, I took a taxi to China to see the Great Wall.

　There's a picture of me when I was five years old. I'm grinning while some unknown grown-up's hands

cover my eyes.

The hope is that the poem turns out to be better than the poet.

We live in nameless present convinced if we give things names we will know where we are. (97)

Initially, this section appears to be very similar to section II; a collection of random and frequently surreal fragments. A closer examination of these opening passages, however, reveals a more subtle kind of self-referencing is at play. While the first four sections of this book present themselves (initially at least) as dealing with autobiography, surrealism, poetry and/or politics, this section from the outset refuses to restrict itself to any one of these subjects. The whimsy of the first two texts recalls section II, while the image of the child, identified with the personal pronoun, connects with the autobiographical passages included in section I. The next two passages make the kind of philosophical statements found in sections III and IV. In presenting these different kinds of excerpts in no real order, this section enacts the failure of the preceding sections to contain their own material. No attempt is made to structure this section along any kind of thematic line other than all-inclusiveness. A fragment of childhood memory is juxtaposed with a metaphysical statement; a stark visual image is paired with a quote from Kenneth Patchen or Memphis Minnie. The structure of the book is thus revealed as one that denies any one fixed framework, but that instead allows the reader to draw connections at will amongst the multitude of passages on display.

Genre and Textual Form

This structural indeterminacy does not, however, stop at the borders of the book. As I have mentioned, *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth* contains texts previously included in other Simic collections. Just as the five sections of the book reference each other, the collection as a whole is thus forced into an intertextual relationship with the rest of Simic's oeuvre. The importance of *Monster* in this relationship lies in its own unstable generic identity. The striking difference between its apparent genre and the generic categories within which Simic's earlier prose has been positioned thus provokes a reassessment of all such generic designations and a re-evaluation of how those texts signal their generic classification.

Genre cannot be reduced to the thematic or structural features of texts; it is never fully fixed, but can shift according to the frame of reference the producer or reader of the text positions it within. Nonetheless, certain basic structural features or textual traits are genre-specific. Basic features such as lineation and stanza division, for example, enable texts to be easily marked off as belonging to the verse poetry genre. In the case of prose poetry, however, occupied as it is with the subversion of such categories, such traits are not so easily identified. Monte (2000), in fact, has argued that prose poems, when "stripped of much of their context – author, title, publication date, and the like," can prove impossible to differentiate from other prose forms (2). As he demonstrates, a passage from a novel can easily be passed off as prose poetry if removed from its original context and presented in isolation. In the case of *Monster*, the framing of the collected passages as excerpts from a notebook provokes a reconsideration of the identity of much of Simic's previous prose work.

This reconsideration is triggered by the fact that many of the fragments included in *Monster* formally

resemble the prose poems Simic published in his earlier book, *The World Doesn't End* (1998). In that book, for example, is this text:

> Thousands of old men with pants lowered sleeping in public rest rooms. You're exaggerating! You're raving! Thousands of Marias, of Magdalenas at their feet weeping. (48)

In *Monster*, the reader is presented with very similar pieces of writing:

> Ariadne plays the piano with one finger at a time like a funeral in the rain. Theseus wants something we can all dance to. The Minotaur whom everybody here calls dumbbell nods his head happily. (23)

The two texts are both thematically and stylistically similar. The subject matter is the same blend of the mythical and mystic with the tawdry and every-day, public restrooms juxtaposed with Christian imagery, characters from classical myth placed in a setting that suggests a cheap bar-room or shabby apartment. Stylistically, both pieces are constructed from the same kind of simple, short, conversational sentences. Description is kept to a minimum, generating a sense of immediacy as if the speaker is telling the reader something that they are co-witness to, an event unfolding before their eyes. This suggestion that the reader is included in the text itself is heightened in the first example by the use of direct address: "You're exaggerating! You're raving!" In the second it is brought about by the inclusive use of the phrase "something we can all dance to." These features further establish a strong sense of orality, with the lyric connotations that implies. As Johnson (1982) has analyzed it, lyrical poetry is founded upon a "fiction of the live performer and his audience," a fiction generated by the speaker's "urgency and immediacy" and an insistence on "the reality of his experience" (16). The reader is being spoken to by someone who does not need to create an elaborate illusion of reality and veracity, someone who relies upon the directness of their address to convince the listener—although, in the case of Simic's work, just who is speaking and exactly how their mysterious, surreal world fits together is not at all clear.

Both these short texts, then, share significant similarities with both prose poetry and the lyric poem. They do however differ in one fundamental way: publication context. The piece beginning "Thousands of old men. . ." has been framed as a prose poem in a collection of prose poems. As befits a prose poem, despite the extreme brevity of the text it is printed on its own individual page. This manner of printing even works to generate the illusion of the piece being longer than it actually is, the large-point print and wide margins of *The World Doesn't End* resulting in it running to four lines in length, a substantial portion of the relatively small page. The piece beginning "Ariadne plays the piano," however, is presented in a very different way. Its publication in a collection of excerpts marks it as not a prose poem, but a notebook entry, a fragment from a mass of other fragments. As befits a notebook entry, the text is not presented on its own page, but is simply one paragraph on one page in a book 115 pages long. The paragraphs surrounding it have only vague thematic connections to it, reiterating the fact that this is a discrete piece of text positioned in a non-linear textual arrangement. Furthermore, the distinctive, prose poem-like paragraph layout of *The World Doesn't End* is not applied here. All of the hundreds of paragraphs included in *Monster* are printed flush with the left hand margin, a blank space inserted between each passage or paragraph. Again, these blank spaces work to separate passage from passage, initially seeming to deny any connection between them. In this case, they also reiterate the seemingly arbitrary relationship of each individual text to those that surround it.

Blank space on the page has long been an important distinguishing feature of certain prose genres. Richards (1998), in his study of Aloysius Bertrand's 1836 collection of prose poetry *Gaspard de la nuit*, draws

attention to how just this issue of textual presentation works not only to orient a text on the page, but also against genre itself. Bertrand, presenting his prose to the printers, gave specific instructions that special attention be given to the "*large white spaces*" between poems (130, Richard's italics). Bertrand, operating in an environment in which prose poetry was unknown, recognized that the white space of the page was an essential factor in distinguishing his texts from other prose forms and orienting them towards the domain of poetry. In a converse move, seminal French prose poet Charles Baudelaire would later have his *Petits poèmes en prose* deliberately printed in the font and block-like style of contemporary newspaper articles (Monte 49). In Bertrand's case, attention was given to the page in order to signal the text's affiliation with poetry despite its prose form. Baudelaire, on the other hand, sought to establish a connection between his texts and pre-existing prose forms, thus enabling his poetry to draw on and manipulate the conventions of these forms while resisting traditional ideas of poetry.

In *Monster* Simic uses both Baudelaire's and Bertrand's strategies. On one level, the white spaces he leaves between paragraphs differentiate his text from the seamless, horizontal flow of most prose, suggesting instead a more poetic vertical orientation. Unlike Bertrand, however, Simic is not presenting his texts to a world ignorant of the existence of the prose poem form. His own use of prose poetry is well known, resulting in an inevitable tendency to read pieces of his prose as belonging to that genre. By limiting the significance of the white space between his texts he orients his passages back towards the domain of conventional prose, making their classification as prose poetry just a little more problematic. Because of this, his texts are able to exist in a space between forms, partaking of elements of different genres yet beholden to none.

Significantly, generic classification has not been withheld from Simic's book. But by assigning to its texts the relatively neutral genre of notebook entry, tensions between prose and poetry play out in a way that may well have been impossible in a work claiming freedom from genre. Here, too, an "active process of change and chance" (to repeat Barr's description of Simic's poetry) is revealed; an intertextual process that is not outside of genre but within it, reaching back to other works and highlighting their ambiguities and aporia. The way *Monster* incorporates fragments from Simic's previously published texts provokes a re-contextualization of those texts on a generic level. If the generic instability of those individual texts goes unacknowledged, however, there is the danger that the fluidity of meaning in Simic's work will be obscured beneath fixed, deterministic interpretations.

What must be remembered, then, is that genre classifications are never fixed; rather, they are perpetually open to interrogation and reassessment. As *The Monster Loves Its Labyrinth* reveals, for every contextualization there is a potential recontextualization, for every stabilization a destabilization. Failure to understand this risks obscuring the full complexity—and the fundamental open-endedness—of Simic's work, and, in a broader context, it risks mistaking the arbitrary categories of genre as more fundamental than they really are.

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