

A Meditation on Charles Simic's *Watch Repair*

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In its essence, a lyric poem is about
time stopped. Language moves in time,
but the lyric impulse is vertical.

Charles Simic

In his poem *Watch Repair*¹ Charles Simic invokes the style and more prominently the philosophical spirit of Haiku, using images that invoke a sense of the natural while suggesting a broader meaning. Simic exposes the very mechanism of how we measure time as well as how that mechanism is a part of our lives. He reveals the clockwork of our consciousness, showing how our measured perception of time is both a reaction and adaptation to mortality. Simic presents the self-inflicted incarceration that rises from our ultimate fear of what comes with death. It is in our notion of mortality that we sacrifice our spiritual freedom, clinging to the clockwork of time, hoping to preserve it through observation, and gaining a sense of control by infinitely dividing the finite.

Born in Yugoslavia in 1938, one of Simic's first sets of memories is of the Germans' bombing his hometown of Belgrade in 1941. Simic has stated that his first notion of stopped images, of mental pictures, rises from those memories.² That disrupted world and its discontinuity left a fundamental impact on Simic's poetry. The wholeness of the image he presents in *Watch Repair* is indicative of his style, capturing life in pictures. In associating images with mechanisms, he surpasses the inadequacy of standard language, showing the infinite while contrasting it with the boundaries of human experience. At its heart, *Watch Repair* is a portrait of "time stopped." It embodies the lyrical image of humanly defined time, something that Simic is observing from his own disjointed sense of "stopped time." It is perhaps the trauma of

¹ See *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 4th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 1782.

² Helen Vendler, "The Voice at 3 AM," *New York Review of Books*, 46, no. 10 (10 June 1999): 24.

war that liberates Simic from the standard human perspective. Trauma by nature alters the consciousness of its victims, forever altering their perspective on life. War brings the cessation of life, leaving the living amongst the dead, ultimately destroying the lives of the living. Traumatic experience leaves the memory of a prior life while forcing the existence of a new one. In this sense our lyric poet is walking always with one foot in this world and one in another. According to Kierkegaard, "it is great to lay hold of the eternal, but it is greater to hold fast to the temporal after having given it up."³ This is just what Simic seems to be doing in *Watch Repair*.

The structure of the poem yields to the importance of every image; each stanza brings forth a relevant and self-contained image, though its meaning is often dependent upon the previous stanzas. Consequently, there is linearity to the poem. The seven stanzas progress in a listing progressive fashion. In an apparent order, Simic first describes the face, then the hands, then the opening of the watch, then the little parts, and then the hidden mechanism of the watch with all of its parts. The description of the internal process that is ultimately an invisible one requires tangible objects with characteristics beyond their images. The whole image is one of mechanical and trapped but fluid movement, incremental measurement corrected by tools of "arctic starlight." It is an image of a local mechanism calibrated by distant points of reference.

The first indication of animation is paradoxically a hint at death. The "small wheel" of the face shivers like "a pinned butterfly." A seeming symbol of uncontainable movement is pinned as though to be studied and observed in an almost scientific light. Nonetheless, this symbol of life still shivers, as if still alive, moving in its constraint. Later, this theme of an overlying mortality is echoed in the third stanza: "Number 12 presides / Like a beekeeper / Over the swarming honeycomb / Of the open watch." The number twelve, the final hour on a watch face, presides to reap the benefits of all of the movement inside. The internal comparison of the mechanisms in the watch to a beehive suggests something about intricate structure and ordered movement. The clockwork is the structure in which life exists and is contained. Even further, a sense of hierarchy, order, and finality is suggested, echoing the mortal human order of young to old, the figure of death reigning over all. The notion of death reaping the final benefit of all our movement, the fruit of our labor, morbidly and ironically points to the notion that the ultimate fruit of our *measured* lives is death. It is a powerful image of the emptiness of measurement, as this structure, this mechanism, exists to measure time.

The composition of this machine contains "—Other wheels / That could fit / Inside a raindrop." With this said in the fourth stanza, Simic extends the

³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 18.

comparison between the naturally fluid movement of life and the clockwork. This time, the comparison places the tiniest of the mechanical within a small quantum of fluid water, which falls as rain does. This natural and fluid gravity of the mechanical implies that in its smallest parts, it is fluid and even contained in the natural world. By choosing a drop of water, a drop of our most vital sustenance, as opposed to a pebble, as the container, he creates an internal association between the parts of the mechanism and parts of the life-giving world. This heightens the paradox of meanings in the poem—that the world bears life. And yet, we find similarity between the mechanism of bearing life and mechanism of anticipating death. The notion that our obsessive observation of time is the manifestation of our consciousness of death permeates the poem.

Inserted between the first and second stanzas is the description of the now still hands of the open watch “pointing in all directions: / The crossroads / One enters / In a nightmare.” For all of its measurement, time at any moment offers no comforting direction and no suggestion of a path to follow in life. It is the *nightmare* of any aimless moment entered without some sense, some notion, of place and time. Linking the implication of direction with the loss of the ability to measure time suggests the relationship between our corporal senses with our sense of time. Entering into those crossroads, removing the sense of time’s very movement, is in turn linked to the horrid fear of being lost, without beginning and ending. More specifically, it is the nightmare of “time stopped.” It is in the progression of time that we sense life.

It is the beginning and end, like celestial stars, by which we demarcate and charter our lives. Our notions of birth and death seem to be the “tools / That must be splinters / Of arctic starlight” with which we set, or fix, our watches. Arctic stars that hang in the sky for entire seasons seem to be the long lasting guides, their light lasting for some time until they pass completely. Splinters of their light are but tiny parts of their entirety, mere fragments, just as birth and death are in life. Just as we use stars for navigation, we use birth and death as points on our temporal compass; they provide our ultimate sense of direction, even amidst the nightmarish crossroads we face in life.

It is not lost to Simic that despite our acceptance of time, and—in turn—death, we are very much hesitant to embrace the complete passing of our lives. The “grinding” of “invisible coffee beans” into grinds, making coffee to consume, is like the breaking up of large increments of time into an eventually palatable and actually enjoyable fluid, hot and tempting: “When the coffee’s boiling, / Cautiously, / So that it doesn’t burn us” in its *boiling* and frenetic state, “we raise it / To the lips / Of the nearest / Ear.” Testing, tempting, and risking pain we taste the passing of our lives, listening to the seconds

pass, affirming the coming of “the number 12.” We can take life in the smallest increments, dividing it into an infinite number of moments—tiny sips.

A sense of irony is most obvious in Simic’s observation that people in their awareness of death organize their lives and their actions around their final hour. Our sense of what we have done and how we have lived is enhanced, and our consciousness of life is defined by the knowledge that life has a beginning and end, our birth and death. We charter our lives on a path of days and hours, as if we are compressing our lives into a box of time. So we divide it and count it, carefully making sure that every moment is noticed. Our lives become a fluid flow of tiny increments, seconds, taken cautiously as it is eagerly anticipated in its coming and feared in its passing. The tension of structure and movement bears forth an awareness of life itself.

Time is what we use to measure, to grasp, change. Its presence in our description of the world around us paradoxically implies change while the greatest comfort it offers is the demonstration of consistency. It is the abstract structure in which people collectively live, an agreed upon one-dimensional map, accepted and imposed, a path that passes beneath our feet. This way, we at least have direction, a sense, but we never actually *have* time. We simply experience change and count seconds. One may often say, “Do something with your time,” but this seems to be an erroneous statement. It would be more appropriate to say, “Do something in your time.” The *mad*, intoxicated, and socially disjointed often first lose track of time. People, as an expression of longing or rejoicing, often say “that was then, this is now.” We hardly recognize that we are accepting death in a very simple way by accepting incremental and unalterable change. It is our continuous consciousness of the *now* that makes us feel alive as we separate it from the “that was then” of the past. What we seem to fear most is the final passing of time, the big one, the change for which we have no mutually defined hour and no meeting time or place, death. After death, *when* and *where* unite in the grave. We have no language, nor map, of life after death, no communication with the dead. Time and language seem to play a similar descriptive role, or rather dependent roles. Our descriptions of kinetic things are laden with definitions of time, and describing our own present state is a frustrating race with time as we constantly change. Each word must pass into a sentence like a second passes into a minute, and each sentence passes into a form as minutes pass into hours and hours into days, and so on. So all our structures of description move with an underlying clockwork—or grammar. At times, this breaks.

This clockwork-grammar is a mechanism with which a collective and impersonal structure is maintained. Some personal definitions and schedules are sacrificed for the sake of a common language and life. The existence of this communal structure implies some common source of definition. Most basi-

cally, it is our corporal world that is common. We have night and day, the seasons, and the moon for time. We have bodies and senses that are in some way a meeting point. If we can be standing next to each other, then place and time exist. On the personal level, our bodies are unique, and we can never physically stand in the same place at the same time, so we accept minute differences in definitions of time and place for ourselves. So people are late, early, and lost, and some are always on time and always on target. Nonetheless, we can use a recognized point outside of ourselves, a defining *separate* thing such as the frequency of a vibrating Cesium atom⁴ or the bull's eye on a target to define the standard times and places. These things add up to a map of common experience, something both comforting and oppressive. Removing these road-signs and clock towers would break the smoothness of the grammar and clockwork of our lives. In some cases this is needed, as we like to travel and partially escape stagnation. In other cases the outcome is painful. When we lose beloved places and people to death and destruction, the foundations of our social humanity erode, common experience diminishes, and all sense of permanency is replaced by a sense of the ephemeral. Granted, these changes are inevitable, and, over life, changes can be wonderful in their outcomes. In instances of war, however, things can be swept away with painful brutality, as all things can.

Such is the earliest memory in Charles Simic's life, a moment of destruction, where people die, places are destroyed, and one is left with no markers, no beehive, no clockwork. That *Watch Repair* is something *we* do, as Simic says; the fact that a watch is something common, yet personal, to all people means that this is also a social act. Collectively, we all experience life, and—as we live—we all approach death. Our increments of description, even like the parts of this very poem, fit together following a path *in* time. Just like language, time is both social and personal, a means of grasping life together and alone.

Charles Simic
Watch Repair

A small wheel
Incandescent.
Shivering like
A pinned butterfly.

⁴ This measurement is used to define one second: one second is the time it takes for the atom to vibrate 9,192,631,770 times.

Hands
Pointing in all directions:
The crossroads
One enters
In a nightmare.

Higher than anyone
Number 12 presides
Like a beekeeper
Over the swarming honeycomb
Of the open watch.

—Other wheels
That could fit
Inside a raindrop,

Tools
That must be splinters
Of arctic starlight...

Tiny golden mills
Grinding invisible
Coffee beans.

When the coffee's boiling
Cautiously,
So it doesn't burn us,

We raise it
To the lips
Of the nearest
Ear.