"The Third Image": Ekphrasis and Memory in Charles Simic's *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell*

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Charles Simic's continuous engagement with art has yielded insights about his own aesthetic ideals, resulting also in the creation of an idiosyncratic poetic discourse that provokes interdisciplinary questions and comparisons. As a Serbian-American poet, who "feels the European yesterday on his pulses" (Young 141), Simic determinately situates himself between European and American traditions, often working across national as well as cultural divides. Informed by a traumatic family history and the formative experience of childhood in war-torn Belgrade, his poetry exhibits a deep awareness of both shared historical heritage and a need to find an adequate aesthetic form for the expression of both private and collective consciousness. As observed by Diana Engelmann,

> [w]hile it is true that the experiences of Charles Simic, the "American poet," provide a uniquely cohesive force in his verse, it is also true that the voices of the foreign and of the mother tongue memory still echo in many poems. Simic's poems convey the characteristic duality of exile: they are at once authentic statements of the contemporary American sensibility and vessels of internal translation, offering a passage to what is silent and foreign. (44)

In his aesthetic explorations, which seek to create passages between the familiar and the foreign, between the self and the other, the poet has also ventured into the interstitial space between literature and visual art, and this particular venture, especially in relation to memory and the unconscious, is my main subject.

I intend to probe the functions and possibilities of Simic's ekphrastic poetry as exemplified by his volume, *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* (1999). Cornell, considered by critics as one of the most "literary" artists (Levy xviii)—a poet among painters (Motherwell qtd. in Caws 16)[1]—has inevitably attracted numerous poets, including Marianne Moore, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery, all of whose work has exhibited diverse gestures of affinity with the American artist's idiosyncratic practice. His original approach, which oscillated between abstraction and surrealist symbolism, created multiple paths for interpretation, and spurred a rich critical reception of his works. Similarly intrigued by the artist's idiosyncratic style, Simic

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describes Cornell's installations as a "third image," a heterosemiotic space, which acts like a screen for the projection and cross-fertilization of verbal and visual representations of the human consciousness.

In the poem "The Gaze We Knew As a Child," Simic comments on the peculiar nature of the Cornellian image: "There are really three kinds of images. First, there are those seen with eyes open in the manner of realists in both art and literature. Then there are images we see with eyes closed. . . . The images Cornell has in his boxes are, however, of the third kind. They partake of both dream and reality, and of something else that doesn't have a name" (*Dime-Store* 63).

In an attempt to define the specific nature of the third image, along with that "something else that doesn't have a name," I propose three broad but interrelated propositions, to be investigated in more detail, by recourse to the intermedial dialogue between Simic and Cornell. The first proposition is that, paradoxically, Simic turns to the ekphrastic mode in an attempt to undo the traditional understanding of the term, whose function, as insightfully defined by Murray Krieger, is to still literature's mobility vis-à-vis the spatial work of art (1992). Simic, as I shall argue, goes beyond the semiotic framework of "ekphrastic gaze," using ekphrasis not so much to rival the visual representation but more as a means to confront the alienating "other" informing his discourse, and to re-establish the continuity between his split selves.

The second proposition is that "the third image," which emerges in Simic's ekphrastic confrontations, works as a "productively remembering look"—a concept introduced by Kaja Silverman (182). The critic's terminology derives from the psychoanalytical concept of subject formation, in particular, from Jacques Lacan's inquiry into the formation of the unconscious. The French psychoanalyst was attracted to the role of the image and social environment in the formation of subjectivity. In his 1977 essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I' as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," he developed the notion of the image as formative for the ego (93-100). To explain his theory, Lacan uses the child's prototypical identification with its own reflection in the mirror, arguing that, in the process, the child's fragmented self regains a sense of unity and wholeness lost by its separation from the mother. The image thus becomes a stabilizing element which fixes the subject in an illusion of completeness—"'an orthopedic' form of its totality" (97). At the same time, however, being an exterior and illusory form, the reflection alienates the self, introducing a radical distortion, a discontinuity, or otherness, to the very foundations of

one's identity (99). In its self-reflection, the subject "experiences between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates—the child's own body, the persons and things, around him" (94). In this scheme, the mirror-image functions as "threshold of the visible world" (96) establishing "a relation between the organism and its reality between the *Innenwelt* and the *Unwelt*" (97). For Lacan, this relation, based on a misrecognition of the self as the other, lies at the heart of our mental development and structures our unconscious.

In his *Seminar Book I*, Lacan posits further that the conscious subject is partially subjected to an unconscious structure (the Other), which is closely linked to language and symbolization. The ego-ideal emerges as "the other in so far as it has a *symbolic* relation to me [mois]" (Lacan, *Seminar* 142). The symbolic, for Lacan, is "transindividual," that is, it lies beyond individual consciousness, being rooted in culture, language, traditions, myths, memories, particular vocabularies, social structures, patterns of interactions, and image-repertoires that constitute the Symbolic Order. All those elements leave both conscious and unconscious imprints on the ego's psychic structure (Lacan, "Function" 259).

On the basis of those considerations, Lacan formulated his later distinction between the eye or the look (visual perception), the gaze (specular reflection, or the look of the other which is constitutive for the subject and our apprehension of the world), and the screen (cultural image-repertoire which intervenes between the look and the gaze, and introduces social and historical variability into our apprehension) ("Split" 78). As evidenced in the mirror-stage, the subject both sees and is seen, and the formation of subjectivity entails the experience of the gaze of the Other, which is often internalized. For Lacan, the subject under the gaze is "caught, manipulated, captured, in the field of vision" (qtd. in Miller 92). As a result, it loses control: "the subject in question is not that of the reflexive consciousness, but that of desire" (Lacan qtd. in Miller 89).

In between the eye and the gaze, Lacan postulates the third category of the screen, which is a space where the projected and perceived images meet ("Split" 68), creating a space of symbolic vision. This distinction became the basis of Silverman's concept of the remembering look, which derives from the fusion of the three categories, for it denotes a mode of memory which is embedded in the look of the other, and which opens our eyes to the ungraspable, invisible reality that nevertheless participates in the visible. It is defined in opposition to the knowing gaze, as it is always exposed to the risk

of the unexpected, which disrupts the logic of knowledge. The remembering look leads to an understanding that is uncertain, emerging in the gaps between seeing and knowing, and transforming the remembered image through diverse psychic processes and discursively "implanted" "synthetic" memories (see Silverman 174-85). Based on this conceptualization, my second proposition is that Simic's ekphrastic vignettes work as a "productively remembering look" which creatively reconstructs and redefines the poet's relation to his past.

The last assumption relates to the logic of the images, and the value conferred upon them in the larger heterosemiotic field of Simic's ekphrasis. Using Lacan's notion of "the screen," I argue that the "synthetic" images, forged out of the verbal-visual encounters between Simic's and Cornell's works, serve as a tool of memory, both cultural and private, creating conscious and unconscious connections between events, figures, and artifacts. The synthetizing thrust of Simic's "third image" enables the transmission of diverse elements of culture and the private as well as collective experience of the past. For Simic, "the third image" also plays an important role in reaching the traumatic in his experience. If, following Lacan, we can say that the unconscious is the "censored chapter"—"that chapter of our history that is marked by a blank" ("Function" 259), Simic's engagements with Cornell's art often lead us past the censorship of the self into the unpredictable, ambiguous, and inarticulate inscriptions of the Other.

Cornell's practice is particularly appealing to Simic because, as observed by Lincoln Kirstein, "[t]he Cornell box, with its fragments of printed materials, and its enumerations of suggestive objects, maintains a tension between the verbal and the visual" (135). This tension, along with "the archival fever"—as the artist was obsessed with collecting and filing his treasures—gives shape to the *metaphysique d'ephemera* [metaphysics of ephemera] (Cornell qtd. in Caws 307) informing the artist's abstracted forms. Furthermore, the tension also proves productive for the Serbian-American poet, who employs Cornell's work to examine his own complex attitude towards American and European cultures and his own past. What Simic finds particularly useful in Cornell's imagination is its capacity for absorbing contradictory impulses within his art projects. The artist's concerns and aesthetic practice, as noted by Lindsay Blair, include the continuous interplay between apparent oppositions: nostalgic/modernist, traditional/innovative, poetic/homemade, erudite/anti-intellectual, mystic/mechanic, aesthetic/scientific, exotic/local, high/low, contained/fluid, symbolic/mechanistic, and so forth (34). Those "antithetical forces shaping his art" (Blair 35) have become a fertile

ground for Simic, who has constructed his own vision in the interstices between the edges and contradictions of Cornell's idiosyncratic form. In Simic's engagement with the artist's boxes, ekphrasis functions as the look that confronts the poet with the fragmented and imperfect knowledge of the self.

The self-reflexive orientation of Simic's poems has helped him probe both the limits and possibilities of the established concepts of poetic ekphrasis. In *Picture Theory*, a seminal study of word-image relations, W. J. T. Mitchell observes that "[e]kphrastic poetry is the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic 'others,' those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or 'spatial' arts" (154). In *Dime-Store Alchemy*, Simic returns to the tradition of ekphrasis, but with the intention of breaking the traditional expectations and principles it carries. Mitchell locates the meaning of ekphrasis in the ancient rhetorical tradition, which was informed by "ekphrastic hope," that is, a trust in the possibility of "mobilizing the language in the service of vision" (153). Ekphrasis, in its general application, was understood as a rhetorical power of linguistic expression to "make us see" the visual representation "before the mind's eye" (Mitchell 152, 153). Thus, the word's function was to activate the image in the reader's mind. Krieger, examining the concept from within the discourse of semiotics, expanded this definition by identifying the main principle behind the ekphrastic mode as that of bringing language to a "still point," which means arresting the temporal movement of words so that their "design" approximates the spatial form of the artwork (qtd. in Mitchell 153-54). "Not just vision," Mitchell sums up the argument, "but stasis, shape, closure, and silent presence ('still' in the other sense) are the aims of this more general form of ekphrasis" (154). The goal of ekphrasis for Krieger is, thus, either to "endow the mute image with voice," or to "freeze" language to make it as iconic as possible (qtd. in Mitchell 156). Both definitions suggest the idea of a tension, struggle, and rivalry, a paragonal competition between the sister arts, where one always dominates and subsumes the other to mark its own distinctiveness. Mitchell sees a chance to reconcile the binary division in a semantic perspective, from which

> there is no essential difference between texts and images and thus no gap between the media to be overcome by any special ekphrastic strategies. Language can stand in for depiction and depiction can stand in for language because communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called "speech acts" are not medium specific. (160)

Similarly, for Simic, ekphrasis functions as a communicative act—a part of the poet's conversation with the expressive power of Cornell's image which, however, leads to a self-discovery. Simic's poetic response to Cornell offers an original engagement with the tension between "ekphrastic indifference," which sustains the word/image gap, and a more utopian "ekphrastic hope," which pushes language towards overcoming that gap by probing the iconic and plastic potential of the word. The poet sees both media as members of a complex dialogue, a conversation, where the difference and inter-articulations between the text and the image mimic the relation of the self and the other, and where, in Mitchell's words, "the word and the image are not abstractions or general classes, but concrete figures, characters in a drama" (162). Echoing Mitchell's claim, Simic defines the role of the image in his poetry: "In my poetry images think. My best images are smarter than I am" (qtd. in Santos 71).

Simic's concern with the power of the image as the look of the Other, a "character in a drama" (Mitchell 162), is also related to the poet's interest in the past, that is, in history and memory. It is also for that reason that he is attracted to Cornell's box assemblages: these idiosyncratic collages can be read as a peculiar form of nostalgia. Accounting for his attachment to objects in one of his journal entries, Cornell writes of "the mystical sense of the past empathy for antiques—nostalgia for old books, period documents, prints, photographs, etc." (qtd. in Caws 387). In his largest dossier, *GC 44*, he similarly writes about commonplace elements of reality, absorbed into his art projects because they are able to

> evok[e] something elusive (but real) of the past which made the present live with a significance more than sensuous enjoyment of spectacle (scenery, people, etc.) a feeling that a particular moment of the past was transmuting the present with an unnamed but significant touch (a lyrical feeling although there was the ever lessening strain of morbid obsession with the past—a thing from childhood never outgrown). (qtd. in Blair 74)

Cornell's "obsession" with the past was translated into the idiosyncratic form of his work, which uses the physicality and materiality of objects to explore memory as a form of construction, as well as crystallization of the past for the present. Based on the artist's compulsive collecting of diverse materials, from Victorian souvenirs of nature, through prints, toys, magazine illustrations, beads, miniature objects, to scraps of fabric and newspaper cut-outs, his projects reveal the past perceived in metonymic and spatial terms,

whereby objects become transcendent relics of the vanishing world through which the past synchronizes with the present.[2]

Cornell's collages, boxes, films, albums, journals, as well as thematic dossiers consisting of photographs, cut-outs, prints, and other memorabilia, such as *The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice)* or *GC 44*, testify to the artist's relentless desire to both appropriate and salvage the past, foregrounding the importance of imagination in the process of remembering. Tony Fabijanic aptly observes that Cornell's fantasy-driven boxes "operate through a nostalgic sense of the past" (234). Their bric-a-brac arrangement invites the viewer to "peer inside" and reconstruct their meaning. In Fabijanic's words, "*Durcharbeitung* [through study] [which is built into the aesthetic of the boxes, and which is necessary to their meaning] suggests a past that exists because it can be rebuilt" (234).

This obsessive determination to find a form and medium able "to keep the past alive" seems especially intriguing for Simic, whose ekphrastic volume describes his own confrontation with the artist's desire to still time, to arrest life's elusive flow, and to do so through his aesthetic "alchemy," which includes selection, containment, arrangement, purification, distillation, and transformation (Blair 74). Always on the hunt for a "collectible" quote, Cornell noted down a comment about Andre Maurois's radio adaptation of *Swann's Way*. This remark best captures Cornell's own vision of art: "Perhaps the theme could be expressed in one sentence by Proust himself: 'Time as it flows, is so much time wasted and nothing can ever truly be possessed save under the aspect of eternity which is also the aspect of art. Yes, art because it gives the past a form, saves it from change and disintegration'" (qtd. in Blair 67). Thus, in the artist's view, change and disintegration have to be arrested, and one way of doing so is by returning to the memories and tropes of childhood. Cornell's boxes, often containing "trash-turned-treasure," allow us passage into the secret world of children's keepsakes—tokens of an idealized, ostensibly secure reality—"incorporating the past literally as well as figuratively" (Blair 67).

Recognizing this quality of Cornell's art in the poem "Poetics of Miniature," Simic writes of the "child faces that stare out of the boxes," with "the dreamy look of children at play" (*Dime-Store* 41). The poet observes further that "[t]here is the happy solitude of a time without clocks when children are masters of the world. Cornell's boxes are reliquaries of days when imagination reigned. They are inviting us, of course, to start our childhood reveries all over again" (41). Indeed, Cornell's boxes, such as *Soap Bubble Set* (1936), *Medici Slot Machine* (1942), *Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall* (1946),

or *Medici Princess* (1948), each take us into imaginary realities of a childhood dreamer. The artist reveals that they are "poetic theatres or settings wherein are metamorphosed the elements of childhood pastime" (qtd. in Andersen 431).

As noted by Blair, for Cornell himself, early childhood was a relatively safe psychic zone and a stabilizing ground for a poet's phantasmagoric imaginary. Raised in a comfortably prosperous middle-class household, surrounded by a large, close-knit, and loving family, with cultural and artistic aspirations (see Blair 13-14), the artist tried to recapture the atmosphere and sense of security from that early period of his life. That comfort was lost with the death of Cornell's father, which altered the family's financial situation considerably, forcing Cornell's mother and her three children to move to much less affluent neighborhoods, where they had to struggle for a living. The situation was further aggravated by his brother Robert's cerebral palsy, which was diagnosed a year after his father's death. As noted by Blair, "one reason his art remained so self-concerned was because he sought always to recreate the remembered qualities of his childhood" (14). Indeed, Cornell appears as a poet-artist heavily committed to nostalgia, trying to lift objects out of time and immortalize them in his peculiar, box-like forms. "Many of his boxes became 'dream catchers' of a kind, giving access to alternative worlds where the imagination was free to roam" (Brink 153).

This pursuit of lost childhood innocence also contributed to the mixed critical reception of his early work, an example of which is the famous *The New York Times* review of Cornell's exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1943. The harsh review, written by Edward Alden Jewell, deeply hurt the artist, but it well captured the polarity of artistic visions in the war-torn scene (Solomon 156). Jewell dismissively called Cornell's works "amusing clever bibelots for the Christmas season" and "toys for adults" (8):

> Cornell's art I shall have to leave altogether, I'm afraid, in the reader's hands (but handle with care, for it is fragile). Somehow, while looking with curiosity at his neat little bottles filled with this and that, his pretty shells and devious gadgets and the doll enmeshed in silver twigs, I remembered that there was a war, and after that, try as I might, I couldn't find my way back into Mr. Cornell's world. (8)

The artist's biographer, Deborah Solomon, in light of the "Jewell affair," proposes that "the central irony of [Cornell's] career" was that "he spent his life pursuing visions of childhood purity in a style that's the height of aesthetic

impurity, mingling sources from high and low culture in defiance of the lofty rules of art history" (156). The technique, Solomon concludes, revealed the artist's desire to "master" nostalgia on his own terms rather than yield to it uncritically (157). Cornell's own response to Jewell's trivializing remarks was the famous *Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery* (1943), a box relating to the experience of the Second World War, whence the artist exposes violence and darkness informing the imagined innocence: the unusually violent colors with which he hand-tinted cutouts of a cockatoo and parrots, the dramatic splotches of paint against the predominantly white background of the box, and the mock-bullet hole piercing the glass case match the violence, bloodshed, and chaos of the war. And yet, despite the fact that Cornell's life coincided with various historical and social "cataclysms" (Myers 115), such explicit engagements with the external reality and contemporary concerns were rare in his work. The dominant pull of his installations, film projects, including the boxed portfolios in which he collected diverse materials for his collages, was towards the Neo-Romantic fantasy of innocent childhood, sublimated sensuality, and escapist and timeless dreamscapes that insulate the mind against the encroachment of history.

The tension between purity and impurity, however, which underlies Cornell's oeuvre, resonates more forcefully in Simic's poetry, including the ekphrastic *Dime-Store Alchemy*. As previously indicated, Simic's life was directly affected by war. As he himself admits, his experience was that of "an orphan of History," and his childhood was shaped by "the education of Stalin and Hitler" (Simic qtd. in Santos 61). In his memoirs and poems, Cornell often returns to the horrors of the Second World War and the experiences of violence, extreme poverty, and ensuing emigration to the USA (Santos 61). Given his experience, Simic developed a different attitude towards the past. Born in Belgrade in 1938, with his earliest memories including blackouts, curfews, bombings, soldiers, and "thousands of deaths, corpses lying everywhere" (Simic, *Fly* 11), the poet confronts the shifting and traumatic reality of wartime and post-war exile.

In his 2000 memoir, *A Fly in the Soup*, Simic revisits his childhood in war-torn Belgrade, recalling the image of a ruined building across the street from his family home: "Our wartime equivalent of jungle gyms, slides, tree houses, forts, and mazes were to be found in that ruin across the street. There was a part of the staircase left. We would climb up between the debris, and all of a sudden there would be the sky!" (9). He also recalls evenings spent at his grandfather's house in the country, where they would sit in the garden "in full bloom," sipping wine and listening to the bombing of Belgrade, which

pierced "the silence of the small village" (15). In Belgrade, he "was in the business of selling gunpowder," which he traded for "old comic books, toys, cans of food, and God knows what else" (21). Those memories, which in a surrealist manner interweave the image of a children's playground with the debris of a bombed-out house, capture the experience of displacement, extreme violence, brokenness, and deprivation.

The dark past is frequently echoed in Simic's poems. "So much darkness / Everywhere," he writes in "Knife" (*New and Selected Poems* 13), offering the eponymous knife for a poem; in "Cockroach," the enduring but abject insect, "with a false passport," serves to illustrate the poet's immigrant status (*New and Selected Poems* 3); in "The Landscape with Crutches," even the landscape carries the "wounds" of the catastrophe, for there are

> so many crutches. Now even the daylight
> Needs one, even the smoke
> As it goes up. (*New and Selected Poems* 47)

Suffering from insomnia "as big as the stars," and forced to confront "a hurt" that "comes and keeps coming" ("Stream") (*New and Selected Poems* 63, 64), the poet frequently problematizes the "increasing / unreliability /of vision" against the "deepening / gloom" of his memories ("Elegy") (*New and Selected Poems* 67). Inescapably then, the trauma of the war and post-war exile create a different ground, or "memory-screen" (borrowed from Lacan, *Écrits* 518) for the poet's imagination, especially when juxtaposed with Cornell's early childhood as an elusive but safe and emotionally nourishing zone.

Through the ekphrastic mode in *Dime-Store*, Simic attempts to absorb Cornell's art, governed by the urge to arrest time in spatialized forms, into his own wounded and unstable psychic grid, informed by a traumatic image-repertoire heavily marked by violence and emotional unrest. In "Empire of Dreams," he confesses:

> On the first page of my dream book
> It is always evening
> In an occupied country.
> Hours before the curfew.
> A small provincial city.
> The houses all dark.
> The store-fronts gutted. (*New and Selected Poems* 55)

Unlike Cornell's dream projects, which "cultivate the spirit of nostalgia" (Solomon 156), and turn towards ethereal fantasies of arrested beauty, Simic's "dream book" gathers memories and images of devastation and horror. As argued by Tomislav Longinovic, in this book, space is always tinged by the "vision of catastrophe" (149). The cautious unveiling of the nocturnal townscape in "Empire of Dreams" reveals the tension between the misleading "dreamy" tone of an eternal present, with the evening "lifted" out of time, into the perpetual "always," and the nightmarish reality of a desolate town "hours before the curfew." The poet K. E. Duffin similarly argues, "[i]mage is an uneasy home, a dubious kind of immortality" (72), and this uneasiness, which stems also from his inability to "rest" in memory and history, lies at the heart of the poet's engagement with Cornell's work. Fueled by the traumatic past and exilic consciousness, Simic's ekphrastic interpretations become a productive form of the remembering look, since they treat Cornell's boxes as a specular reflection, an object as the gaze of the Other, against which the subject, lost in what Vasco Popa calls "the unrest-field" of the mind and language (see Popa qtd. in Simic, *Uncertain* 92), can recognize and reconstitute itself.

As previously suggested, for Lacan, the gaze is an underside of consciousness that acts as a trigger of memory and desire, opening up a space for the apprehension of reality's otherness ("Split" 178). As if echoing Lacan, Simic notes that "[t]he labor of art is the slow and painful metamorphosis of the One into the Other" ("Totemism") (*Dime-Store* 64). "The Inner Man," from Simic's earlier volume *Selected Early Poems*, addresses this notion of the self's alienation from and within the gaze of the Other:

> It isn't the body
> That's a stranger.
> It's something else.
> (. . .)
> If I'm quiet, he's quieter.
> So, I forget him.
> Yet, as I bend down
> To tie my shoelaces,
> He's standing up.
> (. . .)
> At night
> As I sit
> Shuffling the cards of our silence,
> I say to him:

"Though you utter
Every one of my words,
You are a stranger.
It's time you spoke." (*New and Selected Poems* 6)

The split of the selves, indicated by the form of the poem, which interweaves the outer and inner perspective, leads to a desire for an expression that would break the silence whose origin can be traced to "the censored chapter" of Simic's private trauma. At the same time, however, the desire alienates the self and the Other, for the resulting articulations are that of "a stranger"—making the split and exteriorization of the self-image the necessary conditions for achieving some kind of structured sense of the poet's psychic landscape.

The gaze of Cornell's art enables the poet to confront the otherness of the world and the self, made visible through the screen of Cornell's clean and abstract arrangements of objects. Animated by the complex and shifting contingency of images and representational frames, Simic's imagination is pulled into an interplay between the seen and the unseen, whose function is to locate his traumatic past on the threshold between appearing and disappearing, between recognition and repression.

Sigmund Freud contends in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that recollection is always a form of displacement (29-38). In Simic's ekphrastic poetry, the imperative to displace reigns supreme, and his poetics wholeheartedly embraces the drift and discontinuity triggered by it. "To be conscious," he observes in *The Uncertain Certainty,* "is to experience distancing" (Simic 18). In the opening piece of the ekphrastic volume, significantly called "A Traveler in a Strange Land," the poet evokes Cornell's aviary boxes, especially *Untitled,* known as *Dovecote American Gothic* (c. 1954-56) (Fig. 1.), which is a pure white abstract form with thirty arched compartments arranged in a Mondrianesque grid imitating a dovecote. The grid is filled with white balls, which replace pigeons.

Fig. 1. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled*, ("Dovecote" American Gothic), c. 1954-56. Glass-paned stained wooden box, paint, wooden components, twenty-four woodenballs; 45.4x 31.1x 7.6 cm. The Robert Lehrman Art Trust © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/VAGA, New York
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For the American artist, as observed by Jasper Sharp, the architectural purity and beauty of the design was a tribute to the disappearing custom of pigeon-keeping, originally brought to America by Italian immigrants (214). The minimalist design and the white color of this fantasy evoke the mixed moods of serenity, contemplation, and longing, at once reclaiming and fixing the past in this austere "distillation" of form, and making the absence of the birds more poignantly felt. In one of his journal entries, Cornell wrote of "being overcome by the great WHITE" in one of his boxes (*Cockatoo for Pasta)* (qtd. in Caws 210)*,* revealing the visionary intensity of his all-white designs. By combining whiteness with the carefully structured compartments, *Dovecote* attempts to transform absence into a visual summation of a ritual, suggestive of harmony, purity, and mystery.

Simic's poem plays with the abstract and mesmerizing geometry of Cornell's box, as well as with its nostalgic character, as he lets the pigeons out of the box and sets them in motion, in the manner of Wallace Stevens's elusive blackbird:

> A white pigeon pecking on the marble steps of the library watched over by two stone lions. It's like a dream. I thought.
> Next, I saw it on the table of the storefront fortuneteller pecking the eyes of the king of hearts.
> Next, it perched on the shoulder of a black man riding the bicycle at daybreak down Sixth Avenue. ("Traveler") (Simic, *Dime-Store* 5)

Clearly, Simic's ekphrastic look remains entangled in the aestheticizing gaze of Cornell's object: the eye of the poet tries to force the pigeon into a similar pattern by foregrounding the marble texture of the library steps, and using the framing gaze of the two lions to trap the bird within a stabilizing image. The bird will not stay put, however, in contrast to Cornell's beautifully stilled abstract representations. In the next line, it flies onto the table of the fortune-teller, only to flee further away, and finally disappear on the shoulder of a black man cycling down the street. The movement, also suggested by the title "Traveler," reflects the experience of dislocation and estrangement, evoking the poet's own beginnings in the US, characterized by poverty, insecurity, and restlessness. Simic's image, unlike Cornell's ordered grid, is infused with a threat of violence and uncertainty: the stone lions are animated by the poet, and are menacingly "watching over" the bird, while its violent pecking at the eyes of the king of hearts is a suggestion of the ultimate unknowability of this traveler's future.

The pigeon, that refuses to be framed, can be read as Simic's remembering look which is never stabilized—the more so, that the persona adopted by the poet is a fusion of a Baudelairean *flaneur* and Walter Benjamin's *Angel of History*, whose itinerary, like the movements of the pigeon, cannot be charted in advance and whose gaze, despite the forward movement and displacements of the body, is pulled back, towards the landscape of ruins left behind. Thus, Simic's *flaneur* can traverse the controlled, abstract spaces and framed windows of Cornell's boxes, but the traversing uncovers the images' "virtual reality"—their imbrication in the poet's own past. This psychological and visual entanglement, however, provides him with the productive possibility of "apprehending his own image-repertoire from an unexpected vantage point" (Silverman 183). Silverman continues:

> [t]he productive looking necessarily requires a constant conscious reworking of the terms under which we unconsciously look at the objects that people our visual landscape. It necessitates the struggle, first, to recognize our involuntary acts of incorporation and repudiation, and our implicit affirmation of the dominant elements of the screen, and, then, to see again, differently. However, productive looking necessarily entails, as well, the opening up of the unconscious to otherness. (184)

The same processes are visible in Simic's poetic consciousness, which opens up to the subconscious under the pressure of Cornell's evocative images. This function of such opening is equally epistemological and affective, as it leads to a better understanding of the poet's positioning vis-à-vis his cultural heritage, and uncovers the hidden structures of feeling shaped by that heritage. In "Totemism," for example, Simic compares the mind to "secret rooms": "They are cluttered and the lights are out. . . . Every once in a while an object on the table becomes visible: a broken compass, a pebble the color of midnight, an enlargement of a school photograph with a face in the back circled, a watch spring—each one of those items is the totem of the self" (*Dime-Store* 64).

If we borrow this spatial metaphor, Cornell's totems of the self, as aptly described by Hauptman, are neatly framed within "the glazed fronts that offer a window to the outside but remain absolutely and hermetically sealed," forming "a six-sided box structure splitting off selected interior from rejected exterior" (66). In contrast, Simic's totems, even when encapsulated by the ekphrastic gaze, often break under the weight of a much darker psychic residual. The excess of horror and the "epidemic of meanings and signification" (Treichler 32) which they generate find a screen onto which they can be projected. The result is the activation of the image-repertoire, which exhibits numerous marks of wounding and trauma with gothic overtones aptly illustrated by the poem "Secret Toy," in which the white pigeons, so neatly distributed in the frame of Cornell's box, turn into spectral, ominous "crows" which fly over the city. The poem nicely exhibits a palimpsestous layering of Cornell's and Simic's dream-content (Simic, *Dime-Store* 48). For Simic, the dream of stillness and pristine beauty evoked by Cornell's hermetically sealed compartments is the dream of death, bringing back the recollections of the war ruin with "the streets of dark, abandoned buildings" (*Dime-Store* 48). In *Untitled* (*White Balls in Cots*, ca. mid-1950), the ekphrasis directly referencing Cornell's *Dovecote* box, the poet compares the

design to a game board: "It's been a long time since the balls were in motion. . . . Besides, some of them appear to be missing" (Simic, *Dime-Store* 43). In his essay, "Stargazing in the Cinema: on Joseph Cornell," Simic uses a similar metaphor, calling Cornell's shadow boxes "forgotten games, the abandoned games of childhood, rich in ambiguities" (209). "The boxes," the poet continues

> actually make me think of poems at their most hermetic. To engage imaginatively with one of them is like contemplating the maze of metaphors on some Symbolist poet's chessboard. The ideal box is like an unsolvable chess problem in which only a few figures remain after a long intricate game whose solution now seems both within the next move or two and forever beyond reach. ("Stargazing" 215)

The chessboard metaphor offers a key to Simic's remembering look. The poet's imaginative engagement with Cornell's box brings the game back to life and sets the artist's puzzling immobilized abstractions in motion. The price for the re-activation of that "terrifying game" ("Untitled") (Simic, *Dime-Store* 43), as he calls Cornell's meticulous *Dovecote* box, is the reopening of the "chessboard of the soul" (Simic, *Dime-Store* 44) which, in his case, is incapable of deflecting change. Instead, it contains sites of wounding and loss, often lined with frightening and violent images.

Silverman argues that this process of "borrowing memories" destabilizes one's own "mnemic matrix":

> If to remember is to provide the disembodied "wound" with a psychic residence, then to remember other people's memories is to be wounded by their wounds. More precisely, it is to let their struggles, their passions, their pasts, resonate within one's own past and present, and destabilize them. Since the new mnemic matrix which weaves itself around the borrowed memory inevitably shifts the meaning of that memory, it is also to enter into a profoundly dialectical relation to the other, whose past one does not relive precisely as she or he lived it, but in a way which is informed by one's "own" recollections. Finally, to remember other people's memories is to inhabit time. (189)

Similarly, Simic's memories weave themselves around Cornell's absolute designs to re-inhabit the past in which the familiar frames of doors and windows open onto disembodied wounds, ruins, emptiness, and overwhelming death. A good example would be Cornell's famous box,

popularly called *Bébé Marie* (Fig. 2.), containing a Victorian doll dressed in silk and taffeta, "in a forest of twigs," as Simic himself puts it ("Bébé Marie") (*Dime-Store* 47). Cornell has "kidnapped" the doll from the attic of his cousin, Ethel, and, before encasing it, used it as "a prop" for his photograph portraits (Blair 110). The "solipsistic doll who forever inhabits a realm of dreams" (Blair 112) recreates the mysterious aura of children's books, but it also captures Cornell's abstract notion of feminine beauty (Blair 110-11).

Fig. 2. Joseph Cornell *Untitled* (*Bébé Marie*), early 1940s; 59.7 x 31.5 x 13.3 cm
Papered and painted wood box, with painted corrugated cardboard bottom, containing doll in cloth dress and straw hat with cloth flowers, dried flowers, and twigs, flecked with paint. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Foundation/VAGA Bequest 682.1980. Museum of Modern Art. (MoMA), NY

In the poet's imagination, pressured by the latent content of his consciousness, the doll becomes "a spoiled little girl wearing a straw hat about to be burnt at the stake. One can already see the flames in her long hair entangled with the twigs. Her eyes are wide open so she can watch us

watching her" ("Bébé Marie") (Simic, *Dime-Store* 47). What was meant by Cornell as an evocation of the ever-receding space of childhood, in Simic's poem is translated into a remembering vision of grotesque horror, carrying an omen of violent catastrophe and traumatic inscriptions of his childhood recollections. Thus, the doll is turned into another totem of Simic's fragmented self, which, as pointed out by Longinovic, is taken over by "the other who has been traumatized and left many years ago in war-ravaged Belgrade" (154). The open and menacing eyes of the doll, which self-reflexively return the poet's remembering look, lock us not so much within the frozen fairy-tale reality of Cornell's box as within the haunting imaginary of Simic's consciousness.

For Simic, Cornell's boxes function as a productive "interface" between the poet's consciousness and unconsciousness, offering an insight into the "secret rooms" of his cultural and private image-repertoire, haunted by the catastrophe of Eastern European history and war trauma. In "White," from an earlier volume, Simic attempts to explain his own anxiety concerning the undecipherable projections interposing themselves between his mind and the world. Significantly, the poet again references the spatial form of Cornell's boxes, using it as an image of entrapment of the self in the "curtain" of images that inform our conscious and unconscious realities:

> You're not what you seem to be,
> I'm not what I seem to be.
>
> It's as if we were the unknowing
> Inmates of someone's shadow box,
>
> And its curtain was our breath
> And so were the images it caught,
>
> Which were like the world we know.
> His gloves as gray as the sky
>
> While he held us up by our feet
> Swaying over the earth to and fro. (*New and Selected Poems* 36)

The puzzling opening image evokes Cornell's box, *Tilly Losch* (1935), which features the cut-out print of a ballerina suspended in the air by thin white threads of an invisible balloon floating above snow-covered mountains. The sublime purity of Cornell's image, intended as a tribute to the grace and

beauty of the then popular young ballet artist, Tilly Losch, is subtly translated by Simic into an image of confusion, stemming from the rift in the speaker's identity and self-knowledge. As if echoing Cornell who, in a conversation with fellow artist Carolee Schneemann, observed that "a box may resolve frustrations but it is not an equation to the experiences which prompt it" (qtd. in Roche 7), Simic probes the limits of his poem-as-box in an attempt to confront the problem of self-perception and comprehension. The perspective in the poem shifts between the controlling vision of the Other—the implied designer of the-shadow box—and the displaced, upside-down view of "the unknowing inmates" of the box, further divided into "I" and "you." This uncertain, shifting positioning of the speaker, which reverses the vertical and upward direction of Cornell's design, reveals the self's inevitable entanglement in the illegible and alienating images underlying the poet's conscious experience—"the world we know." The displaced vision, with its destabilized "swaying" perspective, which contradicts the visual stasis of Cornell's box, also captures Simic's doubt about the transparency and integrity of self-knowledge.

Piotr Florczyk describes Simic's ekphrastic poems as boxes, "into which fractured and scrutinized language, images, and symbols are arranged and rearranged until their deeper meaning is uncovered" (47). Those dynamic arrangements can be read as the sublimated projections of a displaced experience—a "productively remembering look," whose function is to create a screen between the poet's consciousness and traumatic memories. Aesthetic contemplation of Cornell's work is thus bound up with the poet's personal history. The often unpredictable findings of the "third image," filtered through the complex memory-screen of Simic's double (American-European) cultural legacy, break through the limits of conscious understanding. What is more, they help the poet explore and articulate the problematic relation between the present and traumatic reinscriptions of the past. This relation cannot be built through narrative progress, implying teleology of movement and destination, nor can it be translated into verbal equivalents of the Cornellian spatial forms, enshrined as nostalgic heritage and extracted from time into what Cornell himself called "eterniday" (qtd. in Vine 40). Rather, in Simic's *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell*, the link is forged out of images-as-recollections, which have the power of reanimating the broken fragments of the past, as well as implying meanings and affects which escape historical documentation. Cornell's desires, fantasies, and memories, creatively evoked through ekphrasis, are strongly interwoven with Simic's mnemic matrix, along with its imperative to return

and displace. As such, they can be seen as a tool as well as a protective shield for revisiting dark, difficult memories which provide the grounding for the poet's own consciousness. The result is the possibility of an encounter and renegotiation of the links between Simic's fragmented selves.

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Notes

[1] In an attempt to classify Cornell's art, fellow artist Robert Motherwell wrote: "His true parallels are not to be found among the painters and sculptors, but among our best poets" (qtd. in Caws 16).

[2] In a recent essay on Cornell's practice, Sarah Lea observes that "[h]is method of working directly with physical things, recognizable pieces of the world, allowed him to channel his mental matrix of associations through the objects, images, and textures that comprised his archive, for things have a peculiar capacity to hold stories and ideas, real, or imaginary" (34).

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