

More Rigged Than Recollected

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I'd been back in Newry four weeks and had renewed an old habit of taking a walk everyday, around nine or ten in the morning, depending when I rose.

One morning, I passed a woman as she picked leaves from a plant growing in a hedgerow and put them into a blue plastic bag. I wanted to stop walking, turn around and ask her what it was she was picking—and for what purpose—but I was also aware of the hour and the pleasant silence.

I said nothing and walked on.

Another morning soon after I passed a group of labourers as they were about to start work. I nodded at one of them as he walked towards a small digger. He was a man in his fifties with an attractive yet melancholic look to his face.

'Are they looking any men on that job you have?', he said, almost smiling, and walked on to his post.

'I doubt it,' I said, softly, almost smiling too, thinking then that whatever it was I was doing walking the back roads of Newry at 9 a.m. on a Tuesday, perhaps it was a fine job, if job at all: walking during the day, and reading and writing at night.

It was only a pity that no one felt moved to pay me for it.

'My stars are events in time, things that happened and could not have happened to one born in the 16th century.'

— P. Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*

I shall try to describe what happened before all that.

In order to describe it I have read and written words.

It will be an inexact description of an event and the effect.

It will be a process of accumulating noise.

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So I'm trying to think about what to write for this essay and I'm thinking about the screenplay I'm working on when—scrolling through my Twitter feed on my phone—I notice a tweet from famous literary journal *The Paris Review*:

'I write because I want every woman in the world to fall in love with me.' Charles Simic

<http://t.co/YjpGKIuFSY>

I read the quote a second time.

'I used to think that's why I wrote,' I say, quietly to myself.

I have no idea who Charles Simic is.

I touch the link and an article appears. I resize it. I sit back in my chair and start to read. It's not an article, it's an interview with Simic. One of those 'The Art of...' pieces *The Paris Review* is particularly famous for.

It's good.

'I like this Simic,' I think, based on how he answers the questions and the snippets of his poetry quoted throughout. I want to know more about him. I look up his Wikipedia page and read a quote of his that I'll subsequently use in this essay—one about words making love like flies in summer heat.

I'm excited to find out that he was born Dušan, not Charles.

The main character in the screenplay I'm working on is a Serbian expatriate called Dušan—there's that—but I've also been thinking a lot recently about the process of changing one's name. No, that's not quite right: what I've in fact been thinking about a lot recently is the process of change *per se* but the only real type of change I can think of when I think of change is the act of changing one's name.

Perhaps this is because a woman I know recently changed her name by deed poll; perhaps it's because after thinking about that I then remember that another friend I know also changed his name in the same way, many years before.

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Simic was born in Serbia but his family moved to the U.S. in the 50s. In the interview I read he is quoted as saying: *'I realize I'm an odd case, difficult to classify, neither an exile nor an immigrant exactly, but this is not something I worry about. It's not like I had a choice about the life I was going to have or the kind of poet I was going to be.'*

Later that day I tell a friend that I'd like to see the film *Robocop*—the new version, the *reboot*, I think they're calling it

in the film industry—because I like the idea of a story about a man who is made almost whole again by technology.

‘I’d like a new hand,’ I say to the friend, ‘if it could be like the ones you see in such movies.’

She finds the idea of me with such a hand ‘creepy’.

Is it easier to change a name, I think later that night, if everything else—if the body—is still the same?

Is it not possible to also change the body?

Is it possible to not change?

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The next day I look online for some poems by Simic. I find a list and I touch the link for one called *Errata*:

Errata

Where it says snow
read teeth-marks of a virgin
Where it says knife read
you passed through my bones
like a police-whistle

Where it says table read horse
Where it says horse read my migrant’s bundle
Apples are to remain apples
Each time a hat appears
think of Isaac Newton
reading the Old Testament
Remove all periods
They are scars made by words

I couldn't bring myself to say
 Put a finger over each sunrise
 it will blind you otherwise
 That damn ant is still stirring
 Will there be time left to list
 all errors to replace
 all hands guns owls plates
 all cigars ponds woods and reach
 that beer-bottle my greatest mistake
 the word I allowed to be written
 when I should have shouted
 her name

Reading this poem has a strange effect on me. I feel intense regret for something but cannot establish in words exactly what.

I manage to think: some things I see I sometimes want to be something else but they cannot, unfortunately, be changed.

As I read the final few lines, I realise I'm holding my phone at an abnormal distance from my body. I'm trying not to read the final words as I read them. I'm somehow aware that reading the final words—connecting them to an unspecified event—will only act to intensify the strangeness I'm feeling.

Words, I think three months after this event.

Awful fucking words.

As I finish the poem I throw the phone on to the bed, excited and disgusted.

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Someone else will read *Errata* and agree with me. Someone else will read it and think it dull. I might even agree with them, two years from now. Or I might then think: this collection of words will act to haunt me forever. I can't say exactly why the poem affected me the way it did. I'm not sure if I want to be capable of doing that.

Something about those words in the poem, though... something about the reading of them.

But I'm also trying to write something myself and I'm not sure what it is I want to say—or even if I have any good words with which to say it.

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'Words make love on the page like flies in the summer heat and the poet is merely the bemused spectator...in the cold light of reason, poetry is impossible to write.'

– C. Simic. 'Introduction', *The Best American Poetry*.

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Part of what I want to say relates to something else I've recently read. It's in a book about Jim Clark, one of the people responsible for Netscape. Netscape was the first truly popular web browser. The book was written by Michael Lewis and it's called *The New New Thing*.

Here is the part that interests me most:

Why do people perpetually create for themselves the condition for their own dissatisfaction? Listening to Clark talk about how much money he needed to make was like watching the racing dog who had the wit to grab hold of the remote device that controls the mechanical rabbit. Rather than slow it down, however, he speeds it up. Clark played these little tricks on himself so that he would have an excuse, however flimsy, to keep running as fast as he could.

Obviously, Clark couldn't stop using technology to change the world, and so he needed an excuse not to stop. The reasons he couldn't stop were ultimately unknowable; but I assumed that the best and most lasting motive for wanting to change the way things are is to be unhappy with the way things are. People who are unhappy with the way things are tend to remain unhappy even after they have changed them. The nature of their unhappiness is such that change does not slake it. The difference with Clark is that he continued to believe in the endless possibilities of change, even after he'd experienced its limitations. He was the least happy optimist there ever was. No matter how well Jim Clark did for himself, it was always two in the morning in his heart and he was lying awake.

This text interests me for a number of reasons, although not, like *Errata*, in spite of the words (or more specifically in spite of their meaning). *Errata* had—has—a strange effect on me primarily because of the words in and of themselves,

irrespective of their meaning. Irrespective of what they are meant to refer to. I couldn't clearly state what *Errata* means, in other, simpler words. The text from *The New New Thing* affects me because of a clearer resonance; the words point more obviously to phenomena experienced by me and to phenomena more easily communicable to others. The words correlate to experience much more clearly, I suppose is another way of putting it, although the strange feeling I get on reading the words in *The New New Thing* is no less strange or disturbing for all their clarity.

The text affects me specifically because: I also think I perpetually create the conditions for my own dissatisfaction; I've also often been unhappy with the way things are, irrespective of where I go or what I do; and because the changes I think I need to make never slake my unhappiness, once I have made them.

Because change never slakes my unhappiness.

But it is the phrase 'least happy optimist' that resonates most deeply.

I believe I am an optimist—one who conceives the state of things to be optimal—irrespective of how they often are. But I recognise on reading those words that I am also, among optimists, least happy. I am a bad example of an optimist. I am an imperfect optimist. *I am an optimist in private only*, I think.

One of the words I often describe myself with in response to the statement '*describe yourself in three words*' is hopeful and when I do, people are surprised. I know I do not appear to be optimistic, but you've got to believe me: I am, I truly am.

One often has to be optimistic.
 I have had to be.
 You have too, I am sure.

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But all of this is not quite true, I then think, considering a recollection. I remember that a person recently asked me to describe myself in three words. It was the first time in a long time I had been asked to do so. I said, 'contrary', 'simple' and I can't remember the third word just now.

But I am quite sure that it was not hopeful.

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I go searching for more information on Simic. I type into Google: *charles simic, words make love*. A number of links appear and I touch one. The link is to another interview with Simic.

Halfway through it I read:

EW: In *Wonderful Words* you quote Wittgenstein as saying 'What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language.' Do you believe language cannot do justice to heightened consciousness? How is the poet at the mercy of language?

Simic: I do. I really think that language cannot say

or produce or convey the complexity, the depth of an experience, of heightened consciousness. When you feel exceptionally lucid, when you feel truly present to yourself and you see the world and you see yourself watching the world, there's a kind of plenitude of consciousness. So you step away from yourself and say 'My God, I exist!' But, saying I exist is an impoverishment. There is so much more there; the experience itself is much larger than whatever words you have uttered. So I always feel that language does not quite equal the intensity of experience—that words are approximations. But this is a very complicated subject. The paradox that occurs is that attempts through words, through language, cannot instantly, simultaneously convey experience. One attempts by manipulating words in some fashion to find a way in a poem to recreate what the experience felt like originally. But it's no longer the same thing. It's coming to it in a very different way.

EW: But, although you say here that language is an impoverishment of the feeling, of the experience, you say elsewhere that metaphors are smarter than the poets who wrote them.

Simic: Yeah, thank God.

JC: This doesn't sound like an impoverishment, but something being heightened. Do you think you could explain that?

Simic: Well, I can try. It's complicated. I think what I am saying is that I cannot convey what happened to me at that moment. And that inability, and the memory of that inability, drives me to play with language in a certain way. It involves the belief that I'll find a way to recover that lost paradise, that original experience—which of course probably is no longer quite that experience, but something new that I have made up.

Gordon Osing: Somewhere between recollected and rigged in tran-quility?

Simic: Yeah, exactly. More rigged than recollected. It starts as a recollection which then quickly gets contrived.

The hyphenated words are not my work: they are a specific feature of the typography of the interview.

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I get quite frustrated when I read of writers such as Philip Roth having said things like 'two decades on the size of the audience for the literary novel will be about the size of the group who read Latin poetry' and talking about how after a lifetime writing novels, he only now realises there is a life beyond that, that there are things of value outside that often private world. I get frustrated when I read about Jonathan Franzen bemoaning the existence of Twitter in the world of words.

In Peterborough a Portuguese woman keeps a diary, in which are written English words, incomplete and inaccurate records of the thoughts of students who have stayed with her, who have visited Peterborough to learn English. It is a valued possession. She asked me regularly to write something in it before I left her house, but I couldn't think of anything to write. I enjoyed my time there in any event. The food, for example, was delicious.

People are reading and writing words every day. I hear words said by people who are not reading novels. I hear words said by people who are not writing poetry.

They're not trying to, is what I mean.

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And perhaps one of the great pleasures one can get from words is not writing them but that of reading or of listening to them, of finding or hearing in various places words grouped together or said in such a way that one can think: someone understands—or has understood—how I am now feeling or thinking or even simply being.

The connection between the words and the thought will not always be explainable.

But pleasure comes from connection of a word with experience.

Without experience the word is only another sight or sound.

The word is only another experience.

It is only an experience.

The word is only something to be experienced.

On the website of the journal that I'm writing this essay for, the editor has posted part of an interview with writer Ben Marcus. He's most famous for writing a book—*The Flame Alphabet*—wherein language is toxic, literally. When I heard about this book for the first time I thought: no kidding.

I click on the link and read:

Rumpus: It seems like you're interested in coming at language, in attacking our basic structures of reality and how we look at them through slightly different uses of language than so-called 'realist' writers.

Marcus: Sometimes I worry, for myself, that I've stopped being amazed at certain things, or I've taken for granted a set of ideas about how the world works, what people are doing with each other or alone, all the fundamental relationships in the world. I worry that I start taking it for granted and stop feeling the intensity of it because of language. Language starts to shut down the strength and power and strangeness of what it means to be a person in the world. Sometimes I think if I try to articulate these things in a language I haven't really used before or thought before, it will open up that feeling of what it is to be alive and fear that I'm going to die and all these really elemental things that really matter to me. I think that they start to get covered up, and they get covered up really easily. Language is the tool to open them up again and burnish them and put them on the page. That's why I try to use a different sort of language. It's not to show

off something or be different for its own sake. I think it's because I see language as a tool to reveal ourselves or to reveal the world. If we use it over and over and over again, I think we stop seeing those kinds of really primal things that matter to me.

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This essay has been produced by a process of stabs and gropes. I had no idea what I wanted to write about in the beginning, having been asked to write something, knowing—or feeling—only that something had to be written about. So I started writing this essay by typing in the quote from *The New New Thing*. I knew I wanted to write about a sense of restlessness, because I felt restless—but what does that even mean? I knew I wanted to write about words, about the strange desire to write them, but where does one start in order to write about words? I wanted to write about words and value but I'm starting to think that theme is fading into the background of the text. Perhaps, I thought, I would be able to understand these things by writing about them, by reflecting on activity and feeling and thought and successfully categorising those things in, or with, words. Then, halfway through typing in the quote from *The New New Thing*—just at the point where Lewis writes ‘people who are unhappy with the way’—I stopped, and had an idea for a beginning. I wrote the bit in the essay that reads ‘perhaps one of the great pleasures one can get from words’. This seemed like a beginning. But it didn't end up as the beginning. That came much, much later, and is in fact based on real events that

occurred before I was even asked to write anything. I don't know why that experience informed the beginning or why I think it works.

After writing the initial beginning, I then wrote this paragraph. Well, I deleted a lot of stuff from it, and added a lot of stuff to it, but how would you know? Whatever else happens in this essay—whatever words are grouped together in the final piece—they did not exist at the point I wrote this sentence. The bits about Simic? They didn't exist until the third draft; neither did this sentence.

So here, then, is a type of value in words. This groping and stabbing. Reading, rereading. Writing, rewriting. This deleting and this re-entering.

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Glancing over the various headlines and images that constitute the front page of *The Guardian* website one day, I notice the name Ben Marcus. I click the link and read through the article. It's about the same Ben Marcus I quote from above, the author of *The Flame Alphabet*. The penultimate paragraph reads:

And for a sort of rhetorical break, he tries to widen his reading to include odd material from other disciplines. There's a line he recalls from Francis Ponge, the French poet, which he read at graduate school and stuck in his mind: 'We can only write what we've already read.' And so, says Marcus, 'you'd better read some stuff no one else has, or that everyone's forgotten about.'

It's not like I go and read some old strange text book and reproduce it. But it's like music—hearing different cadences. Because, I think, left to my own devices, my devices are sort of sad and small and slightly inoperable. And I need to keep reminding myself of greater possibility.'