

A Note on Daniel Simko

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Písané pre K&K

I realize, as I type this on my laptop, that I have kept Daniel Simko's last emails for four years now. It is an electric version of a paper sentimentalism where you cannot throw away old birthday cards, those letters of unimportance, funny postcards and other things people send less from love than because it is bad manners to do so. I begin this way because this is an email, a long one, to Bratislava, where Simko, this American-Slovak poet, rests now. I'm writing today on a porch outside my bedroom. The place is an Ohio city where Simko lived over thirty years ago, where he went to school as a young exile – émigré. The morning is comfortable, the solstice is only days away, the cicadas of Brood XIV provide a constant, cold white noise in the first heat of the day, a sound not unlike that when television stations used to end their transmissions with a test pattern, about the time Simko, when alive, still drew from a cigarette or a glass, while he kept reading and writing.

I think Daniel Simko, during those hours and more than any of us, would be fascinated by the lines of black text and the lines of empty white space between them and he would realize how hard it was to

make both. I know his lines quite well now. I read them a long time ago. I lived through them. I forgot them for a time and committed a kind of sin in Simko's cosmology. I found them again.

I have spent over a year editing his first American-published book of poems. It is a posthumous book, where the poet has, by the accident of his premature death, ceded over, whether involuntarily or, perhaps, intentionally, the business of putting poems in their right order, part architecture, part music, part color theory, and then giving the book a title. I and my collaborators had to stand up, hear, really see all of these fine poems, and the hearing part for me, anyway, was like trying to hear what a dying person is trying to say at the end: Is it a thank you, a confession, or a curse? *White Keys, Dark Keys* is the working title for this writing – binary and pure in a way that linguists love and, I hope, the Slovaks will when they discover Simko here for the first time.

Georg Trakl, whose poems Simko translated from the German and published before his own, has this binary pattern, too, this pure motion from white to black. Here is Simko's manner:

...as if you were walking in snow. The rain standing at attention, gone mad in the past tense.

As if it was about to hide its face in your hands.

That darkness you see, a land of darkness, is darkness itself.

The earth, with its slow grass and tall trees, night, insufficiently night.

Ergo.

Without the darkness perhaps. Or imagine, one with all the lights in the guard towers off ...

I knew Simko from the late 1970s on. We were particularly close for several years, especially when I also lived in New York. We shared living space for a time. We worked for the same large bookstore between the East and West Village. We did not go to school together, but he followed me into Columbia and I wrote one of his recommendations.

I met Simko in spring 1978, about ten years after he and his family had fled Czechoslovakia and ended up in Cincinnati. He was a student at Oberlin College then, at a time when Miroslav Holub was a visiting writer and when Simko befriended Franz Wright, whose influence on Simko's work is there, but both rubbed off on each other like the bloodstain of crime and birth. Oberlin is really an important placename for me in Simko's mythology. It is easier for me to think of him there than as a little boy in Bratislava. I've written something of an anti-elegy¹ for him in this small, northern Ohio town. It came to me a year after I learned of his death in the most absurd setting—at least it would have been for him—while attending Parents' Week at a North Woods summer camp for boys.

This tragic news arrived on a laptop, too, in an email from Franz. And more absurd than this utterly American setting was my urgency of trying to find a direct flight out of "Minocqua, Wisconsin" to attend a funeral—as though I were Jack London in a pontoon plane delivering some truth serum that could bring the dead poet to life. Instead I found a proxy in Nicholas Samaras, a poet and a classmate of Simko's, returning from Europe.

No one knew outside of a few intimates, that Simko was dying and that there would be no more manuscripts, or, a better word, manuscriptions¹ of his poems. During his lifetime he did not publish books – too many books, as in the case of some celebrated poets leads to self-parody. He did not self-publish either, actually the lesser sin of vanity. He may have produced a few copies of his chapbook for his Hollow Wind Press, but these were more like a sculptor's maquette, a model. Even the sumptuous art book of a single poem, which he made with Stefan Arteni of Sol Invictus Press, *Mythologies / From the Fragments*, is still a work-in-progress, a one-off.

There would be no book in his lifetime and no going back to Slovakia after its independence, where he imagined putting, at last, a map under his feet. He did return, but in a way that responded to another desire of his. "All that bleeding was for nothing, repaired quickly," he writes in "Resolution," "The desire for ash was only the kindness of wind [...]" Now, a box of his ashes is troweled into a wall outside of Bratislava. Nevertheless, these kinds of lines give me so much pleasure. They have this feeling that only the most necessary words have not blown away. There is this

genius for the missing article, here it is the “the” before “wind,” which is just one of many other economies of expression taken in Simko’s verses, that you can see even when his long lines want to run off the page.

Other things to look for in Simko’s poetry are things to see, indeed, the feeling that one is really walking through a gallery as much as reading, a gallery with a pianist playing in the central hall. Simko took art classes in college, and when he did not take that path he seemed to be always looking back to it, looking longingly, lingering around its people (Karni Dorell, whom he knew at Oberlin), its smells—which were quite intoxicating at Utrecht Art Supply near Cooper Union where he worked. And perhaps this answers a little of why he studied library science (of all things) at (of all places) Pratt Institute, New York’s great art academy. He liked taking photographs during the 1990s, and I still have these wonderful pieces of mail art, which is the one kind of artist he might have, with clear conscience, professed to be as well as being a poet. For a time, he sent me his series of black comedy postcards titled “Advice to Pictures,” which, like the collages of the poet Weldon Kees, are not easily separable into visual and verbal art.² And though all of this is perfectly clear to me, I don’t know if this will translate so well for Slovak readers – but all I can say is that the Central European knack for the absurd is in Simko’s bloodwork and was still there no matter how tragic the real bloodwork became.

You really cannot miss the painterly in Simko’s work, the eye. How many of his poems have titles that might have served just as well for a picture. They are not

ekphrastic experiences at all but verbal paintings in themselves. I am thinking of poems like “A Field of Red Poppies,” a homage to Miklós Radnóti, in which the painting is minimal or not in the picture at all.

What else can you say about poppies?

How they remind you of your childhood, or of someone who is not there.

Franz Stuck could have painted something disturbing, however, with Simko’s title alone—“Salome’s Cape Thrown after Drinking.” And, as I look on the facing page, here of my arrangement, and this turns out to be accidental (or is unavoidable a better word?) a phrase in a line that could be the title of a Renoir—“You wandered about the Jardin du Luxembourg.”

Now don’t get me started about the music, where I get the title for his collected poems.

I am tired of arriving with the inch of snow each year. I am tired of the finch warbling nonsense, as though he mattered.

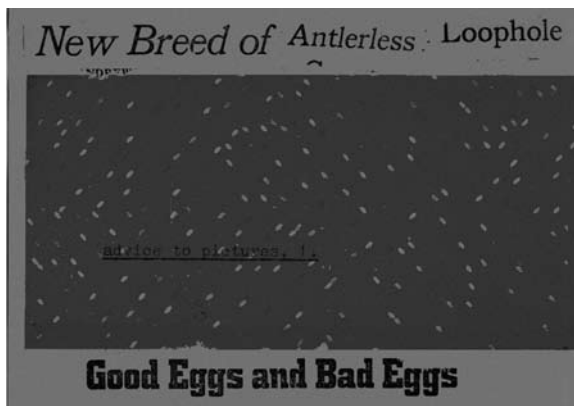
All morning the body has made itself a long vowel, and now, it is white keys, dark keys, instructed to type something into memory.

There is here and there the presence of a piano, of singing (“the empty notebook it is a score for voice”), rehearsing (“for the annual dance”). Simko’s work is a kind of Liedgut as much as a gallery. It is a dialectic of all art.

All the Muses, I think, are represented in these poems, even history’s, Clio, and some of the precious history of Slovakia. And now the cicadas in the trees around me sing more urgently. It is getting warmer. The shade is gone. They remind me it is time for breakfast and of Socrates’

conversation with Phaedrus in which he explains to the younger man the myth of the cicadas. These creatures were once human artists who were transformed by the Muses to an eternal life, of course, with a few strings attached as is the case in Greek myths. These former humans must forever repeat their over-attention to art, forgetting to eat and drink, to take care of themselves, and so perform until they die. They are the agents of those immortal sisters, too, and they watch us and report back when we perform well, speak well, and I hope I have done so for my dead friend.

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Mail art by Daniel Simko (1979)

Poznámky/Notes

- 1 Manuskriptá, virtuálne prekonané slovo, ktoré pri zriedkavom modernom užívaní vystihuje Šimkovu priam manickú pozornosť, ktorú venoval príprave rukopisov intenzívnejšie než ich publikovaniu.
Manuscriptions, a virtually obsolete word that in the rare modern usage describes Simko's near manic attention to the preparation of manuscripts rather than their publication.
- 2 Ďalší dôvod, prečo som nevymazal Šimkove posledné a obsažné maily, že ma zaviazal, aby som ukladal jeho korešpondenciu. Hodnotil svoje listy vyššie než dokonca „predtým bravčové“. Možno som nechápal ntý stupeň ako on, ako niektorá z postáva Thomasa Bernharda. A tak sú maily podobné ako tento.
Another reason for not deleting Simko's last and terse emails is that he conditioned me to saving his correspondence. He gave his letters value that was there even "before swine." I might not understand to the degree what he did, like one of those Thomas Bernhard characters. Thus pieces of mail like this one:

WHEN YOU REENTER THE WORLD IN OBERLIN

The autumn was the season you owned with that garden's St. Franz – right?
 And the rest of us just timeshare – so you can hear me?
 The curtain blowing into my room is led by your hand,
 The deer, alert, cropping acorns, where the yard caves in honeysuckle,
 My talking-board keys-
 It will always be girls' clogs through the fallen leaves,
 To the edge of the lake off S. Professor,
 Lanterns raised on your mouse-gray figure in a swanboat,
 The Imperial and Royal dress tunic you keep and its kepi
 Tipped over water that is flounder-eyed with the orange moon
 Watching your landfall,
 Full enough now to melt the hospital ice
 We click in worry, some pebbles for the top of your stone,
 That we brought for you to suck.
 for d.