

# Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

---

Volume 9  
Issue 2 *Syracuse Scholar Fall 1988*

Article 2

---

9-1-1988

## The "new poetic": post-surrealism in American poetry

Sally B. Segall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/susolar>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Segall, Sally B. (1988) "The "new poetic": post-surrealism in American poetry," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/susolar/vol9/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991) by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

# THE "NEW POETIC": POST-SURREALISM IN AMERICAN POETRY

SALLY BENNETT SEGALL

*The aim of every new poetics is to evolve its own concept of meaning,  
its own idea of what is authentic. In our case, it is the principle of uncertainty.*

—CHARLES SIMIC, "NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND ITS CHILDREN"



Sally Bennett Segall is currently coordinator of the Graduate Program in Creative Writing in the English Department, Syracuse University, where she teaches part-time. She has an M.A. in English from Syracuse University and an M.F.A. from Vermont College. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Seneca Review*, *The Montana Review*, and other magazines and in the 1986-87 *Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry*.

1. S. Dobyns, *Cemetery Nights* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987). All of Dobyns's poems quoted in this essay are from this collection.

2. Stanley Cavell, "The Fantastic of Philosophy," *American Poetry Review* 15 (May-June 1986): 45-47.

3. C. Simic, "Negative Capability and Its Children," in *Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry* (a special issue of *Tendril*), comp. P. Mariani and G. Murphy (Green Harbor, MA: Tendril, 1984), 56-57.

WHEN I HEARD Stephen Dobyns read his new poems from *Cemetery Nights*,<sup>1</sup> I thought surrealism had surfaced again in a somewhat different form. I found the poems exciting because of their often grotesque imagery, their humor, and their colloquial diction. Here were poems, accessible and free of sentimentality, yet highly imaginative and emotionally satisfying. The main difference between these poems and many of their contemporaries was choice of imagery. Often fantastic and grotesque, it nevertheless evoked a universal world of experience rather than inner landscapes the reader could only glimpse and whose meaning remained hidden. People turn into tomatoes, a man is haunted by the ghosts of chickens, a turkey terrorizes a graveyard full of dead folk. These images go straight to the psyche where they set the bells of association ringing. If this imagery can be called *surreal*, it is certainly not flashy and superficial like the heat lightning images many people associate with the surrealists.

As a result of this encounter, I began to try to place Dobyns's poetry in contemporary and historical context to see if it was indeed different from other contemporary poetry, how it related to surrealism, and if these similarities and differences, if they existed, were interesting or instructive. What I found convinced me that these poems are part of a new poetic that shows the influence of the English romantic poets, is peculiarly American in its preoccupation with the fantastic,<sup>2</sup> and owes a great deal to the surrealist movement that followed World War I. Not all poetry written today falls into this category, of course. This new poetic shows the following characteristics, many of which are not particularly reminiscent of our recent poetic past but all of which have come down to us through the surrealist movement: (1) strangeness of imagery, either grotesque or fantastic or neutral (animals, vegetables, character types, historical figures, the dead); (2) primacy of the image over metaphor; (3) shifting narrative voice; (4) humorous or ironic tone; and (5) multilevel diction tending toward vernacular.

Charles Simic, in a recent essay, "Negative Capability and Its Children," believes the new poetic, like English romantic poetry, has to do with "the nature of perception, with being, with psyche, with time and consciousness" in "an attempt to recreate experience which preceded thought and to uncover its phenomenological ground." The key to this endeavor is the image: "this confrontation with the sensuous for the sake of recreating its intensities."<sup>3</sup>

The English romantic revolution, of which Keats's theory of negative capability was so important a part, had, like the surrealist movement, its own revolutionary manifesto in Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* of 1802. In this document, Wordsworth criticizes the neoclassic hierarchical attitude toward form and language and advocates a return to the practices of the past, to a democratic approach more representative of the "real feelings of men."<sup>4</sup>

Michael Benedikt, in his introduction to *The Poetry of Surrealism*, reminds us that Wordsworth and Coleridge broke with the rationalist norms of the time, using the ideas of the pioneering English psychologist David Hartley about "association" and "involuntary memory." Coleridge's famous poem "Kubla Khan" suggests "surrealist experiments with dream-dictated and trance-related compositions," and his philosophical approach sprang from his intuition that people, who should be unified, were instead divided within themselves.<sup>5</sup> These ideas, as we shall see later, are directly related to the new poetic, as is Keats's concept of negative capability.

Keats distinguished between "Men of Power," with their strong egos, and "Men of Genius," poets, who were capable of giving up some of their own ego-control in order to identify with the object or the Other and who were capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Charles Simic, in his essay "Negative Capability and Its Children," equates these "uncertainties" with Chance, which was of great interest to the dada and surrealist movements since they, following Nietzsche, maintained that our "alleged instinct for causality is nothing more than the *fear* of the unusual." This clinging to cause and effect leads to habit, which inhibits the imagination from discovering the text that is always within us. The labor of the poet is to reenact the original preconscious complexity. But the nature of language, with all its cultural baggage and rational demands, makes this very difficult.<sup>6</sup>

To give oneself over to the unconscious or to submit to the psyche of another is a dangerous undertaking because it threatens some loss of control. However, as Stanley Cavell reminds us in "The Fantastic of Philosophy," "to take one another's eyes is an image whose terror has to be faced in seizing its beauty. Taking one another's eyes is the chance outside science to learn something new. . . ." I understand "taking one another's eyes" to mean the willingness to relinquish one's own ego temporarily in order to see things from another's perspective. This is what Keats means by negative capability. American romantic poets also understand this, particularly Thoreau: "Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?"

Cavell believes that Americans, unlike Europeans, are centrally preoccupied with the fantastic, which he defines as the "confrontation of otherness (hence of selfhood)" in the desire to both find and escape solitude. It is easy, Cavell continues, to find the fantastic in Hawthorne (*Young Goodman Brown*) and Poe. Thoreau, on the other hand, seems to experience the "otherness" of even ordinary folk as different and bizarre: "the inhabitants [of Concord] have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Bramins sitting exposed to four fires . . . ; or hanging suspended with their heads downward, over flames; . . . even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness."<sup>7</sup>

4. Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. D. Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 320.

5. M. Benedikt, *The Poetry of Surrealism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), xxv.

6. Simic, "Negative Capability," 51-53 (italics added).

7. Cavell, "The Fantastic of Philosophy," 45-46.

If we turn the frightening other into some neutral nonhuman creature—an animal, a ghost or other supernatural being—does it make the barrier between the self and other easier to cross? These substitute images are themselves often fearful but less paralyzing than the original, thus allowing the confrontation to take place. I believe poets today use the fantastic, as Hawthorne and the surrealists did, as a way of confronting the *marvellous*, another aspect of the “uncertainty” previously discussed. André Breton, author of the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, said he was “determined to deal drastically with that *hatred of the marvellous* which is rampant in some people. . . .” By *marvellous*, he meant hallucinatory phenomena, dreams and insanity, which he believed “is beautiful, indeed only the *marvellous* is beautiful.”<sup>8</sup>

8. A. Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924); quoted in Marcel Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting*, trans. S. W. Taylor (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 118.

**G**ROTESQUE IMAGERY is one aspect of the fantastic or *marvellous* found in contemporary poetry, particularly in the poems of Dobyns, which will be discussed later in this paper. *The Oxford English Dictionary* tells us “grotesque” comes from “grotto,” a cave decorated with shellwork, paintings, or sculpture, where forms, half human or angel, half animal or fish, are fantastically interwoven with foliage and flowers. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, believes that the image of the shell connotes our evolutionary beginnings and emergence from the sea, that the combination of enclosure and emergence encourages associations that collapse levels of evolution. It is a perfect image for expressing the dreamlike and hidden: the woman with the tail of a fish, the man with the head of a wolf, etc.<sup>9</sup> Simic believes that this kind of archetype, “those great images that have mythical resonance,” is another feature the contemporary poem aims to uncover.<sup>10</sup> These kinds of images have already been used by the surrealists; for instance, in the shell flowers of Max Ernst.<sup>11</sup>

9. G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas (New York: Orion Press, 1964), 106–12.

10. Simic, “Negative Capability,” 56.

11. Jean, *History of Surrealist Painting*, 128.

The surrealist movement, codified in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), was led by young artists who believed that people leave their creative gifts behind as they mature into a world that imposes its restrictions on their desires. In attempts to tap these overgrown wellsprings of creativity, they experimented with mechanical writing, séances, and other practices designed to excite the unconscious mind to produce dreamlike images that, when juxtaposed by the imagination, would lead to a revelation of truth.

Guillaume Apollinaire, who coined the neologism “surrealism,” maintained that everyone is potentially a poet but that the creative gift is rarely used after childhood and later shows up mainly in “unconscious forms of the psychic structure: the dream, for instance.”<sup>12</sup> These new poets and painters tried to recapture this visionary faculty by evoking dreamlike states or hallucinations. Experiments were performed in which the subject reported a series of auditory images appearing automatically in the mind at the approach of sleep. From these observations, Breton coined the word “automatism,” which was “borrowed from psychiatry and designates involuntary, unconscious psychic-poetic happenings; but . . . this word also contained the passion mixed with anguish of human beings in their relationship with machines that seem always to be on the point of liberating themselves from their creators and leading an autonomous existence.”<sup>13</sup>

12. *Ibid.*, 118.

13. *Ibid.*, 117–18.

The *Manifesto of Surrealism* does suggest that “man is condemned to be a poetry-writing machine, and that the poet must inevitably limit himself to

the role of a 'modest recording apparatus' of his inner voices."<sup>14</sup> However, Breton, who had a nineteenth-century romantic's aversion to machines, never believed automatic writing to be the secret of poetry, and many surrealist poets never made use of it. Experiments with "sleeps," séances, and mechanical writing soon became "monotonous and disillusioning," two hazards of automatic activity.<sup>15</sup>

Max Ernst, the painter, used surrealist techniques to stimulate inspiration. He took rubbings of floorboards, the lines of which heightened his visionary powers. From these experiences he created collages, "*the exploitation of the chance meeting on a non-suitable plane of two mutually distant realities* (a paraphrase and generalization of the well-known quotation from Lautréamont '*Beautiful as the chance meeting upon the dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella*')" whereby "each escapes . . . from its simple function and its own identity." When the sewing machine and the umbrella make love, they "will be transformed into a new absolute, at once true and poetic."<sup>16</sup> For Ernst, surrealism "opened up a field of vision limited only by the mind's capacity for nervous excitement" that is "within the reach of all those who are attracted by true revelations and who are therefore prepared to help on inspiration and *make it work to order*."<sup>17</sup>

Ernst is interesting in the context of this discussion because he introduces the importance of tone, the attitude of the artist toward the material, *by making it work to order*. Although morality was not an overt concern of the surrealists (this would have smacked of the very traditions they were committed to overthrowing), "if Surrealism ever comes to adopt a line of moral conduct, it has only to accept the discipline that Picasso has accepted and will continue to accept."<sup>18</sup> The difference between the recorder and the artist is that the latter shapes the material to a particular purpose or vision. The artist has, in other words, a moral voice. It is this voice that informs and instructs and, at its best, delights. This illumination requires the act of love, or engagement; otherwise, the two realities remain separate and distinct, and meaning (the bridge of creativity) is never built. The following two poems by surrealist poet Benjamin Péret show how seemingly random images (mutually distant realities) are connected by the poet's sense of purpose. The first one, "Face to be Smacked," relies almost entirely on the title to ascribe meaning, to build the bridge linking the images.

*O how the bones are thin in rainy weather  
when the nurseries of Greek noses  
resound with the shrill squeal of red eggs  
which sometimes cry beefsteak tears  
perfumed like a beast of burden  
when the apples seek redress  
and when the spectacles poke out the eyes of the ministers  
of the third republic  
where the princes hide like chipped pots  
in the recesses of the cupboards  
with the newborn bastards of the servant girl  
who doesn't want to be turned out*

*O how the bones are fat  
when the Chinese lanterns of felt*

14. *Ibid.*, 118.15. *Ibid.*, 126.16. M. Ernst, "Inspiration to Order" (trans. Myfanwy Evans), in *The Creative Process*, ed. B. Ghiselin (New York: New American Library, 1952), 66.17. *Ibid.*, 67 (italics added).18. Jean, *History of Surrealist Painting*, 122.

*yawn like beans  
when the bellybuttons have their beards  
and hair trimmed  
at the neighborhood shearer  
who has never seen such poodles  
trained so well to swallow sugar  
like blind men on the corner of a quay  
bicycles in a cemetery  
or musicians in the gutter*<sup>19</sup>

19. B. Péret, *From the Hidden Storehouse: Selected Poems*, trans. K. Hollaman, Field Translation Series, vol. 6 (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1981), 45.

These images appear, at first, to be chance associates on the dissecting table. However, the poem does have unity and, on reflection, the images seem to move together like marionettes on a stage, controlled by unseen wires. The story concerns nurseries of various kinds in which faces get smacked because they belong to children or other inmates who, by definition (otherwise why would they be there?), are naughty. The title provides the necessary link and the ironic tone.

In "The Beauties of Heaven and Earth," the poet uses a stronger syntax, which helps bind the poem together. In the first stanza:

*A big man with salty hair  
wanted to be a musician  
but he was alone in the valley  
with three accordions*

In the next two stanzas, two accordions are described as weak and useless for his purpose. The poem continues:

*The third accordion  
would have devoured the earth and all the birds  
if it had wanted to  
But is was a sage  
just like a nettle  
and contented itself with simply envying the  
motionless animals*

*But you'll say to me  
the man who wanted to be a musician  
He had had time to die  
and the leisure to smoke  
and it was this smoke which was rising from the  
earth toward the clouds*

20. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

*WATERSPOUT OFF STARBOARD*<sup>20</sup>

This poem has an implied narrative and a moral tone imposed by the title and the didactic "But you'll say to me." It also has the structure of a fable using the magic number three (magic being part of the machinery of fable). The moral seemingly drawn at the end (man's life is his art, or some such cliché) is undercut by the final line that mimics the call of alarm on shipboard. The man who wanted to be an artist was dangerous even though he had had an easy life because he never realized his desire to be a musician.

In both poems, Péret juxtaposes seemingly disparate images to create a collage. The irony, the moral tone, is created by juxtaposing one strong image against the poem as a whole; in the first poem, it is the title, in the second, the final line. This could be called metaphor.

IT SEEMS IMPORTANT to spend a little time discussing metaphor if only because I have already defined the new poetic as a poetry that prefers image over metaphor. This is not to say that the practice of creating metaphors has disappeared, but that the practice has changed and what we have today, at least among the poets discussed here, is not the same old figure in new clothes but a streamlined figure, thinner and more elegant.

Howard Nemerov, in his essay "Image and Metaphor," asks some central questions: "What is an image? When and how does it become a metaphor? Ought it to become a metaphor?" He goes on to say that some poets have tried to do without metaphor, "and other poets have tried to do without explicit or stated meaning."<sup>21</sup> It is no secret that one way of getting meaning into a poem is by metaphor. When the surrealists tried to write poetry using mechanical writing or recording their "sleeps," they sacrificed meaning and found these products became boring and repetitive. Poems must have meaning in order to be interesting—in order, I believe, to qualify as poems, with or without metaphor.

Nemerov makes a further interesting observation: "It is a major tenet of modernism in literature that in one way or another . . . this assertive relation of image and meaning can be avoided and must at all costs be avoided. . . . what modernism in writing is chiefly about is *seeing*. . . ."<sup>22</sup> Both Nemerov and John Berger, in his essay "from Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos," use a photograph as a jumping-off point for their discussion.

Berger captures the contemporary definition of metaphor in one paragraph. It is also very close to what the surrealists had in mind with their image of a sewing machine and umbrella on the dissecting table.

*Poetry's impulse to use metaphor, to discover resemblance, is not to make comparisons (all comparisons as such are hierarchical) or to diminish the particularity of any event; it is to discover those correspondences of which the sum total would be proof of the indivisible totality of existence. To this totality poetry appeals, and its appeal is the opposite of a sentimental one; sentimentality always pleads for an exemption, for something which is divisible.*<sup>23</sup>

Charles Simic, a contemporary poet influenced by surrealism, is an exemplar of the kind of metaphor discussed above. In his poem, "Classic Ballroom Dances," he uses four disparate images:

*Grandmothers who wring the necks  
Of chickens; old nuns  
With names like Theresa, Marianne,  
Who pull schoolboys by the ear;  
  
The intricate steps of pickpockets  
Working the crowd of the curious  
At the scene of an accident; the slow shuffle  
Of the evangelist with a sandwich-board;*<sup>24</sup>

21. H. Nemerov, "Image and Metaphor," in *Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry*, comp. P. Mariani and G. Murphy (Green Harbor, MA: Tendril, 1984), 142.

22. *Ibid.*, 144.

23. J. Berger, "From Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos," *Poetry East* (Spring-Summer 1984): 193.

24. Simic, *Classic Ballroom Dances* (New York: Braziller, 1980).

25. C. Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 122.

Simic asks, in an interview, "How can wringing the neck of a chicken or picking a pocket be seen in the same light? This is what I want the reader to figure out in the poem, for I make the claim that they are one and the same."<sup>25</sup>

**F**OUR CONTEMPORARY POETS who acknowledge their debt to surrealism are Bill Knott, Thomas Lux, Charles Simic, and Stephen Dobyns. I have chosen these four as exemplars of this "new poetic" as they all show a mixture of the influences discussed in this paper. Briefly, these are strangeness of imagery, preference for image over metaphor, ironic (often black) humor, and shifting levels of narration and diction.

26. Mary Karr, "An Interview with Thomas Lux," *Seneca Review* 15, no. 2 (1985): 14.

Knott is cited by Lux as an American surrealist poet of considerable influence on younger poets.<sup>26</sup> Knott's poems seem to me to be more "purely" surreal than any of the other poems under discussion. Also, they show traditional influences in form as the others do not. "February/Freezeframe" has slant end-rhyme, regularly patterned *abab abab abc cba*. The diction shifts between standard and slang; the imagery is violent and concerns prison and bondage. There is little sense of uncertainty or strangeness but rather a kind of petulance at the presence of these unpleasant artifacts (including his tormentor). The tonal element that separates this poem most clearly from others under discussion is its sureness of tone.

*Please press a valentine shape tool to my chest  
And extract from it what was never there  
Then singe your ciggie on this thing that mists  
Over only when shattered is no mirror*

*I lie beside you my caresses deepmeant  
Though they fade as fast as escape plans traced  
Across a prison blanket by an absent  
Fingernail whose blood you piss in my face*

*Is that it is that why I cry for your torture  
That way you look at me pityingly  
Iffen I say things like min ice drops cling*

*Out alone a branch like someone been trying  
On all their bracelets at once to see  
Which is prettiest but of course none are*<sup>27</sup>

27. B. Knott, "February/Freezeframe," *Seneca Review* 15, no. 2 (1985): 62.

28. Karr, "Interview with Thomas Lux," 14.

29. *Ibid.*, 28.

The diction and syntax often seem contrived rather than inventive, but it is also easy to see how this kind of juxtaposition of imagery could at one time have seemed interesting to young poets looking for new models.

Lux feels his early surrealist poems now seem "too arbitrary, too easy."<sup>28</sup> One of his recent poems, "Wife Hits Moose," uses one of his "weird, primordial animals" he referred to in an interview.<sup>29</sup> I quote part of the first stanza.

30. T. Lux, "Wife Hits Moose," *Seneca Review* 15, no. 2 (1985): 9.

*Sometime around dusk moose lifts  
his heavy primordial jaw, dripping, from pondwater  
and, without psychic struggle,  
decides the day, for him, is done: time  
to go somewhere else.*<sup>30</sup>

This poem recounts an episode when his wife and a moose arrived at the same point of the highway at the same moment. This confrontation with strangeness is not so much wife's car with moose as poet with situation. How does one think about such a chance occurrence? The moose in the poem seems to cross some kind of spiritual barrier when he "steps deliberately, ponderously" onto the blacktop and encounters car. This moose is certainly a close relative of Elizabeth Bishop's "Moose," but whereas Bishop allows her moose to rest as a kind of cosmic blessing, Lux pushes the epistemological point and the irony in the last stanza:

*—Does moose believe in a Supreme Intelligence?  
Speaker does not know.  
—Does wife believe in a Supreme Intelligence?  
Speaker assumes as much: spiritual intimacies  
being between the spirit and the human.  
—Does speaker believe in a Supreme Intelligence?  
Yes. Thank you.*

In Simic's "The Ant and the Bird,"<sup>31</sup> there is the strangeness of imagery surrounding the use of neutral nouns. This naming of objects has the effect of "neutralizing" the emotional and cultural vibrations that surround so much of our language and, whether consciously or not, this seems to be one of the aims of the "new poetic," which we will see further illustrated in the poems of Dobyns. Freeing the poem from the associations of the recent past allows it to travel further and faster back to uncover the personal/cultural archetypes that will illuminate the present.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the narrative is submerged, creating a timeless landscape where time has stopped.

*In those far-off days they told time  
By watching ants. Eyes and ears to the ground,  
They'd follow a single specimen  
As it made its mysterious rounds.*

*When it carried its heavy loads,  
When it stopped to rest for a while,  
They remained just as they were:  
Eyes closing, afraid to breathe.*

*Their shirts and dresses unbuttoned  
Because of the heat. Young breasts  
Never to bud further, scruggly beards  
Never to be cut by a razor.*

*The hermit thrush perhaps wanted to sing,  
But it sat mute deep in the woods.  
It sat and sat as the sun forgot to set.  
Then it made one solitary note.*

There is a sense of cosmic threat. The diction is formal and rhythm measured, contributing to the sense of universal loneliness. All nature stops while people try to explain things and are obsessed with order. Because we are part of nature (Coleridge illustrated this in "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner"), we affect the rest of it. Before the Enlightenment, people conveniently overlooked this, believing they were in a category apart and superior. This poem

31. C. Simic, "The Ant and the Bird," *Seneca Review* 15, no. 1 (1985): 13.

32. Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, xi-xii.

is without assertive metaphor and relies on its imagery for its effect—to make readers *see* the danger of our ways, to force them to make the connections.

33. Simic, *Uncertain Certainty*, 19.

"Ancestry" also illustrates the irony that Simic believes has become a world-view, in which tragedy and comedy appear at the same time. The victim of the joke as well as the person who cracks the joke sense themselves defeated. Yet, the yearning for harmony, basic in all comedy, is there too.<sup>33</sup>

In this poem, the humor is very black and supports the strangeness of the imagery. The poem concerns itself with "sainted" great-great-grandmothers who used to take their knitting when they attended a hanging.

*Our sainted great-great  
Grandmothers  
Used to sit and knit  
Under the gallows*

*No one asks what  
It is they were knitting  
And what happened when the ball of yarn  
Rolled away  
And had to be retrieved*

*One imagines the hooded executioner  
And his pasty-faced victim  
Interrupting their grim business  
To come smiling to their aid*

*Confirmed pessimists  
And other party-poopers  
Categorically reject  
Such far-fetched notions  
Of gallows etiquette<sup>34</sup>*

34. C. Simic, "Ancestry," *Weather Forecast for Utopia and Vicinity* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1983), 23.

Confronted as we are by daily accounts of the torture of political prisoners and of an ex-Nazi as the head of the United Nations, the strangeness of imagery and irony of tone seem absolutely right. Uncertainty seems totally appropriate when we reflect that, far from being a current problem, this has always been the way things were; we just chose to pretend otherwise for a long time.

**A**LL OF DOBYNS'S POETRY has an edge of strangeness, which seems to come from the uncertainty of the narrative voice in relation to the object. His most recent poems have taken a quantum leap forward in this regard. The strangeness is no longer at the edge but in the very heart of the poems, where the imagery no longer comes predominantly from the external world but directly from the imagination. This new course has given him greater scope, allowing him to explore a deeper range of emotions. There are two levels of reality in all the poems under discussion and the borders are always open.

In "Tomatoes" a woman who travels to Brazil for plastic surgery gets shot on the street. Her son goes to the morgue to identify her but finds there are ten women, each has been shot, and none is identified as his mother.

*Which ones consoled him? He even tries  
climbing into their laps to see which  
feels most familiar but the coroner stops him.*

This poem is full of the fantastic, in which the hidden is exposed, desire becomes fact. If, as in a more traditional poem, the narrator had expressed a *desire* to climb onto a corpse's lap, we would have read this desire as a metaphor for his wish to reenter the womb or be reunited with his mother, etc. In this poem, the *image* of climbing into their laps changes the attitude of the speaker to his subject and changes our reading of the poem. We may still see this act as an impulse toward reunion, but we also see its impossibility. When we see that, it ceases to be a sentimental cliché (everyone wants to rejoin mom) and becomes an occasion for humor; the humor coming from the disparity between the desire and the possibility of its fulfillment.

When the coroner asks the son/narrator which is his mother, "They all are, says the young man, let me / take them as a package. . . ." This shift to colloquial slang jolts us out of our usual expectations regarding loss of mother. Our surprise turns to outrage as the young man takes the ashes of the women home in a silver garbage can, which he uses to grow tomatoes.

*He takes the first  
ten into the kitchen. In their roundness,  
he sees his mother's breasts. In their smoothness,  
he finds the consoling touch of her hands.  
Mother, mother, he cries, and he flings himself  
on the tomatoes. Forget about the knife, the fork,  
the pinch of salt. Try to imagine the filial  
starvation, think of his ravenous kisses.*

We must laugh, partly out of discomfort, but also out of genuine relief at finding the old emotions represented in concrete form, one we can laugh at. Yes, we say, filial love is all those things. Because of the distancing with the use of the fantastic (neutralizing the emotion) we can "see" deeper than we could if it were offered up straight. This use of the fantastic with humor disarms us in the same way it gave freedom to the poet. Ultimately, the vision is no less tragic than it would have been in more conventional forms, but the resolution appeals to our common humanity with comedy, which says we are all in this together. This is different from the old resolution to tragedy, which was reunification through expiation.

"Spiritual Chickens" works in much the same way as "Tomatoes." The imagery has the same distancing effect. Chickens, like tomatoes, are culturally neutral and are not going to impede the associative process with a lot of cliché-ridden baggage. The ghosts of the chickens that a man has eaten every day for lunch fill the dining room until one of them is crowded "back across the spiritual plain to the earthly." Because this does not fit the man's perceptual expectations, he assumes he is crazy and goes off to bang his head against the wall. The poem, an allegory or fable, ends with the message clearly drawn:

*Better to have a broken head—why surrender  
his corner on truth?—better just to go crazy.*

The tone is comedy that comes from the disjunction between our perceptual expectations and what happens in the poem. The concrete details raise the epistemological problem:

*How is he to know  
this is a chicken he ate seven years ago  
on a hot and steamy Wednesday in July  
with a little tarragon, a little sour cream?*

The narrative point of view switches at one point to the chicken when she is left to herself:

*If she  
had a brain, she would think she had caused it.  
She would grow vain, egotistical, she would  
look for someone to fight, but being a chicken  
she can just enjoy it and make little squawks,*

Any ready-made sentimental responses we might have regarding guilt and our habit of casting around for others to pin it on are undercut by this use of the fabulous.

In "Cemetery Nights IV," Dobyns uses a turkey as a central image. This poem is one of three set in a cemetery with the dead as characters. The dead are very real but powerless. Bored, they spend their time betting on trivial things like how many crows fly in which direction. A live turkey falls off a truck and is immediately attracted to the maggots, which

*the dead wear as a socialite wears her jewels.  
For the turkey, maggots mean feasting and pleasure*

The second stanza begins with a shift in narrative voice:

*Luckily, a young man was hurrying by and he  
saw the turkey, grabbed it and wrung its neck.  
How simple are these problems for the living.*

The word "luckily" is reflexive. It forces the reader back into the previous stanza by announcing the tone. We understand that the dead are powerless and passive (bored), that the living are lucky (even turkeys) because they are active, and that they have the ability not only to act but also to love. The man takes the turkey to his father for Thanksgiving:

*As the son hurried toward this certain pleasure,  
he thought of how his father used to carry him  
up to bed, the rough feel of his father's bristles  
against his cheek and the smell of hair oil*

The sensual details of memory carry this connotation of love just as the sensual details in the first stanza carried the connotation of "living" for a turkey. However, the poem ends on a note of despair:

*What train  
was carrying him such a distance from that time  
and what dark fields would be his destination?*

This poem, it seems to me, demythologizes the dead; they are not only dead but powerless. In this contemporary *carpe diem* poem the irony shows us not only what is good about being alive (action is possible—sometimes even love). Being alive is sometimes mundane; but no matter, anything is better than being dead.

“Cemetery Nights III” and “Cemetery Nights V” have the same setting: the graveyard with its usual inhabitants. The former is funnier and more highly ironic. An angel is sent to earth to straighten things out. He fails, of course, and the dead throw things at him in derision. Later

*In a park, a boy and girl lay naked in the grass.  
They saw the angel limping home through the sky—  
a bright spark against the pallor of the moon—  
and guessed it was a piece of space age technology.*

The narrative voice shifts three times from angel to the dead to the young couple. The dead and the angel are both oriented toward the same point of view, whereas the young couple’s point of view is very different. They think the angel is a piece of space-age technology (why not?) and make up a religion based on this vision: a kind of hippy Christianity.

*The sun would be bright purple, something weird.  
Right away, the blind stop banging into lamp posts,  
cripples would dance the snake dance like crazy.*

The process of this poem is the message. The boundaries are open: the dead see the angel, the couple see the angel, the couple don’t see the dead (of course). All have their own agenda and none are the same.

In “Cemetery Nights V” the cemetery is a concentration camp:

*For the rats, nothing is more ridiculous  
than the recently dead as they press against  
the railing with their arms stuck between the bars.*

The rats are like the turkey in “Cemetery Nights IV”: they pass judgment on the dead and are superior. The tone here, as in the previous *carpe diem* poem, is ironic but bitter instead of funny. The dead can see the living but cannot reach them. The narrative point of view shifts between the rat, the dead, and the living. In this case, the shift at the end is very skillful: the wife of one of the dead has a new lover and is waiting at the bus stop where she imagines herself in his apartment:

*A sudden  
breeze will invade the room making the dust  
motes dance and sparkle as if each bright  
spot were a single sharp-eyed intelligence,  
as if the vast legion of the dead had come  
with their unbearable jumble of envy and regret  
to watch as the man drops his head,  
presses his mouth to the erect nipple.*

All the images relate to the central metaphor behind the poem: a purpose that “works to order.”<sup>35</sup> This contributes to the sense of unity of theme, even though the imagery, point of view, and diction shift around.

35. Ernst, “Inspiration to Order,” 67.

**A**NOTHER ELEMENT of this new poetic is its concern with annihilation; the machine being its quintessential agent. Contemporary poets confront machines with more familiarity and humor than the surrealists, and their questions have become even more urgent. Given what we know and what we have experienced since World War I, how do artists find the meaning they need in order to create? Partly, they find it through the painful recognition of our increasing isolation from each other and the natural world. Everything is perceived as separate and unconnected from the other, even when connections are as close as mother and son. In a way, this justifies the annihilation: all strangers being potential enemies. These poets reflect this gruesome element in contemporary culture and, as Dobyns does, turn this insight into narrative, creating modern fables.

Dobyns's poem "Tomatoes" confronts the horror of random murder by gunfire by focusing on a neutral object in order to allow deep emotions to surface (a technique discussed earlier in this paper). Lux's moose and tarantulas are fabulous creatures who move across the boundary between spirit and matter. They appear in our path, risking themselves, to demand answers. Simic's executioner stoops to retrieve a ball of yarn before putting his hand to the machine of death. We remember Picasso's *Guernica* and its hideous images of war: part human, part animal, and part machine. All these speak to a great necessity, the necessity for survival in the face of human creation: those machines that have, as the surrealists feared, taken on lives of their own.

In this new poetic we see an attempt to reach back into the unconscious for enlightenment and strength. We also find a felt need, articulated by poets such as Dobyns and Simic, to communicate more fully with readers. Artists have always wanted to connect, but at times in our history, this desire took second or third place to other concerns. Dobyns believes that if that communication does not take place, then the work of art has failed in its function, although that failure may be the fault of the audience and not the work of art.<sup>36</sup> Simic can say "I have an idea for a poem . . . [which] would be ultimately accessible to everyone. I feel a certain responsibility toward other lives."<sup>37</sup> This need to bear witness to a growing horror gives this poetic its own particular urgency, an urgency sensed long ago that found its first contemporary expression after World War I in the experiments of surrealism.

◇

36. S. Dobyns, "Metaphor and the Authenticating Act of Memory," in *Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry*, comp. P. Mariani and G. Murphy (Green Harbor, MA: Tendril, 1984), 194.

37. Simic, *Uncertain Certainty*, 25–26.



---

*William Blake, Conversion of Saul. Courtesy of the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, CA.*

