ANTE KADIĆ (Bloomington, Ind., U.S.A.)

Thematic Novelty in the
Poetry of Antun Branko Šimić

"The world was not created once, but as many times as an original artist appears."
Marcel Proust

Jure Kaštelan has remarked of Antun Branko Šimić that "he appeared and disappeared like a meteor; [but] his light has remained."1 Šimić died of tuberculosis in his twenty-seventh year, but today he is rightly ranked among the best Croatian poets of the period between the two world wars. For some time he was neglected, even underestimated, but the postwar generation recognizes him, in addition to Matoš and Ujević, as their forerunner and teacher. Until recently he was known as a poet, but after the publication of his Sabrana djela (Collected Works, 1960), even his critical thought is studied and appreciated.

Antun Branko Šimić was born in 1898 in Drinovci, Hercegovina. After elementary school in his village, he studied for three years with the Franciscans in Siroki Brijeg. In the fourth grade he unexpectedly quit the quiet monastic life, spent a short time in Mostar, two years in Vinkovci, and finally settled in Zagreb in 1915, where he completed the seventh year of high school. In the course of the eighth, he began to publish a literary journal, Vijavica (Blizzard, 1917-19).

Šimić began to write poems very early. At first he published them in Catholic periodicals (especially in Luč and Hrvatska prosvjeta); they usually expressed his religious convictions. Soon, however, Šimić changed, abandoning his previous models and points of view. It seems that his arrival in Zagreb was for this Hercegovinian youth a big surprise and disappointment, which caused a conflict and a gradual break with all his previous beliefs. The roots of this break had been present earlier; but only when he found himself alone in unfamiliar surroundings, with big plans and small resources, yet conscious of his talent which few people recognized and some even mocked, did Šimić withdraw from society. Soon he attacked everyone. Although he was neither personal nor bitter, but usually principled, even his former friends shrugged their shoulders over him. No one described better than Šimić (in "Intima," 1923) that miserable and petty atmosphere of Zagreb:

I was eighteen years old then. Not yet completed in me was that great change which surely had begun much earlier and had certainly been hastened after my arrival in Zagreb. . . . I remember only that I was unpleasant and odious to that small group with whom I sometimes met, usually in a bar, because of my behavior toward them, because of the words which I excitedly spoke to them, because of my mocking, attacks, indifference, silence, and sudden departures.

Realizing little by little that I was wrong, more exactly that I had been cheated in everything that they taught me until my fifteenth year, that they had wanted to cheat me even further—I hated all older people, I ridiculed my colleagues, who allowed themselves to be cheated and deluded, and I mocked them almost to the point of blows.2

After Vijavica, Šimić edited Juriš (Attack, 1919), and finally Književnik (Writer, 1924), sometimes filling issues of these journals alone. Working too much, high-strung, not having the resources and too proud to accept help from anyone, Šimić fell ill with tuberculosis. He sought a cure in Dubrovnik. When his condition deteriorated, he entered a hospital in Zagreb. He hoped that he would recover. Realizing that his final hour was approaching, he wrote, only three days before his death, his last poems, “Smrtno sunce” (Fatal Sun) and “Vraćanje suncu” (Return to the Sun). He died on 2 May 1925.

Stanislav Šimić (1904-60), poet and essayist, who knew better than anyone else the life and work of his older brother, who often wrote about him and finally edited his collective works, nonetheless is not a reliable guide. He saw no one who could have influenced his brother, or who could have been his equal, and he did not accept the fact that even Antun Branko could write poor verses. Stanislav thought that his brother’s writings were above reproach. Where his brother was concerned, Stanislav did not write an objective analysis, but recited litanies of praise.

In Stanislav’s “Epilogue” to the work of A. B. Šimić,3 there are brilliant thoughts about art and excellent observations on domestic and foreign writers; but when he analyzes the poetry of his brother, it seems that his vision becomes blurred, his bile begins to flow, and his language descends to street level, attacking all those who do not understand that “there is only one poet”—his brother.4

4. Marijan Jurković has observed that Stanislav Šimić “excessively insists on the completely autochthonous appearance of A. B. Šimić in Croatian literature and on the originality of his poetry and criticism. He denies or greatly minimizes the influences which he received from both our own and foreign writers”: Ogledi i kritički dnevnik (Beograd: Nolit, 1966), p. 195. Radovan Vučković is even more negative when he says that Stanislav is subjective and that his “image of A. B. Šimić is purely a product of his imagination”: Preobražaji i preobraženja (Sarajevo, 1969), p. 17.