Volume 05

Cross-Roads.
Polish Studies in Culture, Literary Theory, and History

Edited by Ryszard Nycz
and Teresa Walas

Anna Nasilowska (ed.)

Wisława Szymborska's poetry

Choice of essays

PL ACADEMIC RESEARCH

This is a reader's book about Wisława Szymborska's poetry. She holds the Nobel Prize in Literature of 1996. The Contents of the book are the Nobel Lecture held in Stockholm at the official ceremony by the poet in December 1996, a choice of Polish essays about Szmyborska's poetry and translations of her works into German, English, Spanish and French by Polish critics (translated into English). All essays were published at first in Polish in separated books or in literary revues. Since many years Wisława Szymborska's poetry is translated into many different languages and loved by readers as intellectual and ironic comment to contemporary world. The book of critics written in Poland and by Western specialists on Polish literature shows how her poetry was read and seen on background of artistic tradition and experience of her generation and from the point of view of different currents in humanities.

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Introduction

The Poet and the World: Nobel Lecture

Wisława Szymborska

Published in: Wisława Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected 1957-1997,* trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Claire Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt, 1998).

They say the first sentence in any speech is always the hardest. Well, that one's behind me, anyway. But I have a feeling that the sentences to come — the third, the sixth, the tenth, and so on, up to the final line — will be just as hard, since I'm supposed to talk about poetry. I've said very little on the subject, next to nothing, in fact. And whenever I have said anything, I've always had the sneaking suspicion that I'm not very good at it. This is why my lecture will be rather short. All imperfection is easier to tolerate if served up in small doses.

Contemporary poets are skeptical and suspicious even, or perhaps especially, about themselves. They publicly confess to being poets only reluctantly, as if they were a little ashamed of it. But in our clamorous times it's much easier to acknowledge your faults, at least if they're attractively packaged, than to recognize your own merits, since these are hidden deeper and you never quite believe in them yourself … When filling in questionnaires or chatting with strangers, that is, when they can't avoid revealing their profession, poets prefer to use the general term "writer" or replace "poet" with the name of whatever job they do in addition to writing. Bureaucrats and bus passengers respond with a touch of incredulity and alarm when they find out that they're dealing with a poet. I suppose philosophers may meet with a similar reaction. Still, they're in a better position, since as often as not they can embellish their calling with some kind of scholarly title. Professor of philosophy — now that sounds much more respectable.

But there are no professors of poetry. This would mean, after all, that poetry is an occupation requiring specialized study, regular examinations, theoretical articles with bibliographies and footnotes attached, and finally, ceremoniously conferred diplomas. And this would mean, in turn, that it's not enough to cover pages with even the most exquisite poems in order to become a poet. The crucial element is some slip of paper bearing an official stamp. Let us recall that the pride of Russian poetry, the future Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky was once sentenced to internal exile precisely on such grounds. They called him "a parasite," because he lacked official certification granting him the right to be a poet …

Several years ago, I had the honor and pleasure of meeting Brodsky in person. And I noticed that, of all the poets I've known, he was the only one who enjoyed calling himself a poet. He pronounced the word without inhibitions.

Just the opposite — he spoke it with defiant freedom. It seems to me that this must have been because he recalled the brutal humiliations he had experienced in his youth.

In more fortunate countries, where human dignity isn't assaulted so readily, poets yearn, of course, to be published, read, and understood, but they do little, if anything, to set themselves above the common herd and the daily grind. And yet it wasn't so long ago, in this century's first decades, that poets strove to shock us with their extravagant dress and eccentric behavior. But all this was merely for the sake of public display. The moment always came when poets had to close the doors behind them, strip off their mantles, fripperies, and other poetic paraphernalia, and confront — silently, patiently awaiting their own selves — the still white sheet of paper. For this is finally what really counts.

It's not accidental that film biographies of great scientists and artists are produced in droves. The more ambitious directors seek to reproduce convincingly the creative process that led to important scientific discoveries or the emergence of a masterpiece. And one can depict certain kinds of scientific labor with some success. Laboratories, sundry instruments, elaborate machinery brought to life: such scenes may hold the audience's interest for a while. And those moments of uncertainty — will the experiment, conducted for the thousandth time with some tiny modification, finally yield the desired result? — can be quite dramatic. Films about painters can be spectacular, as they go about recreating every stage of a famous painting's evolution, from the first penciled line to the final brush-stroke. Music swells in films about composers: the first bars of the melody that rings in the musician's ears finally emerge as a mature work in symphonic form. Of course this is all quite naive and doesn't explain the strange mental state popularly known as inspiration, but at least there's something to look at and listen to.

But poets are the worst. Their work is hopelessly unphotogenic. Someone sits at a table or lies on a sofa while staring motionless at a wall or ceiling. Once in a while this person writes down seven lines only to cross out one of them fifteen minutes later, and then another hour passes, during which nothing happens … Who could stand to watch this kind of thing?

I've mentioned inspiration. Contemporary poets answer evasively when asked what it is, and if it actually exists. It's not that they've never known the blessing of this inner impulse. It's just not easy to explain something to someone else that you don't understand yourself.

When I'm asked about this on occasion, I hedge the question too. But my answer is this: inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists generally.

There is, has been, and will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It's made up of all those who've consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination. It may include doctors, teachers, gardeners — and I could list a hundred more professions. Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it. Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know."

There aren't many such people. Most of the earth's inhabitants work to get by. They work because they have to. They didn't pick this or that kind of job out of passion; the circumstances of their lives did the choosing for them. Loveless work, boring work, work valued only because others haven't got even that much, however loveless and boring — this is one of the harshest human miseries. And there's no sign that coming centuries will produce any changes for the better as far as this goes.

And so, though I may deny poets their monopoly on inspiration, I still place them in a select group of Fortune's darlings.

At this point, though, certain doubts may arise in my audience. All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power by way of a few loudly shouted slogans also enjoy their jobs, and they too perform their duties with inventive fervor. Well, yes, but they "know." They know, and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all. They don't want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish their arguments' force. And any knowledge that doesn't lead to new questions quickly dies out: it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life. In the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society.

This is why I value that little phrase "I don't know" so highly. It's small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended. If Isaac Newton had never said to himself "I don't know," the apples in his little orchard might have dropped to the ground like hailstones and at best he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto. Had my compatriot Marie Skłodowska-Curie never said to herself "I don't know," she probably would have wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families, and would have ended her days performing this otherwise perfectly respectable job. But she kept on saying "I don't know," and these words led her, not just once but twice, to Stockholm, where restless, questing spirits are occasionally rewarded with the Nobel Prize.

Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating "I don't know." Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits

the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift that's absolutely inadequate to boot. So the poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paperclip by literary historians and called their "oeuvre" …

I sometimes dream of situations that can't possibly come true. I audaciously imagine, for example, that I get a chance to chat with the Ecclesiastes, the author of that moving lament on the vanity of all human endeavors. I would bow very deeply before him, because he is, after all, one of the greatest poets, for me at least. That done, I would grab his hand. "'There's nothing new under the sun': that's what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were born new under the sun. And the poem you created is also new under the sun, since no one wrote it down before you. And all your readers are also new under the sun, since those who lived before you couldn't read your poem. And that cypress that you're sitting under hasn't been growing since the dawn of time. It came into being by way of another cypress similar to yours, but not exactly the same. And Ecclesiastes, I'd also like to ask you what new thing under the sun you're planning to work on now? A further supplement to the thoughts you've already expressed? Or maybe you're tempted to contradict some of them now? In your earlier work you mentioned joy — so what if it's fleeting? So maybe your new-under-the-sun poem will be about joy? Have you taken notes yet, do you have drafts? I doubt you'll say, 'I've written everything down, I've got nothing left to add.' There's no poet in the world who can say this, least of all a great poet like yourself."

The world — whatever we might think when terrified by its vastness and our own impotence, or embittered by its indifference to individual suffering, of people, animals, and perhaps even plants, for why are we so sure that plants feel no pain; whatever we might think of its expanses pierced by the rays of stars surrounded by planets we've just begun to discover, planets already dead? still dead? we just don't know; whatever we might think of this measureless theater to which we've got reserved tickets, but tickets whose lifespan is laughably short, bounded as it is by two arbitrary dates; whatever else we might think of this world — it is astonishing.

But "astonishing" is an epithet concealing a logical trap. We're astonished, after all, by things that deviate from some well-known and universally acknowledged norm, from an obviousness we've grown accustomed to. Now the point is, there is no such obvious world. Our astonishment exists per se and isn't based on comparison with something else.

Granted, in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like "the ordinary world," "ordinary life," "the ordinary course of

events" … But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world.

It looks like poets will always have their work cut out for them.

Wisława Szymborska
December 7, 1996
Stockholm

Poetry as Consciousness

Czesław Miłosz

1. The poems about constant and irreversible particulars of human fate, love, aspirations, fear of pain, hope, passing, death assume the poet's identification with others sharing this fate. In this way, the "us" becomes the subject and the "us" is not characterized by belonging to any nation or class. And yet it would not be quite accurate to state that the subject is, then, an eternal person since human consciousness changes, as well as the ways in which we try to cope with the final things. In Szymborska's poetry, "we" signifies everyone living on this planet during the same period of time and connected with the same consciousness — the consciousness *after*: after Copernicus, after Newton, after Darwin, after two world wars, and after the inventions and crimes of the twentieth century. It is a serious and bold undertaking to present a diagnosis or answer the question about who we are, what we believe in, and what we think.

2. Szymborska says "I," but it is an ascetic "I," stripped from any desire to confess and practically from all individual features, tied together with another "I" in one and the same human condition, which becomes the subject of mercy and compassion. One of her poems bears the title "In Praise of My Sister," although this sister appears only as someone who "doesn't write poetry." "The poem "Laughter" talks about a conversation with a little girl that is oneself from the past. But this split of the same person into oneself now and then is not something unique because it can be a meeting of anyone with anyone else. "He" in these poems is also just a man and we do not know anything else about him. The poem "Clothes" is about a visit to the doctor's office and begins with the line: "You take off, we take off, they take off" (PNC, 187) — and these three forms of the verb "to take off" capture the essence of this poetry, which is the identification of "you," "we," "us." And, to use one more example, does not the poem "Report from the Hospital" provide information about what happens to you, others, and us?

3. The consciousness that Szymborska scrutinizes is "ours" since it is sufficiently wide-spread nowadays, obtained through school, literature, illustrated magazines, television, museums. Perhaps someone living in a remote village in Southern India would not be able to recognize himself or herself in these poems because, for instance, the frequent references to our knowledge of the past would be foreign to him or her: Homer, Troy, Rome, Lot's wife, the biblical flood, Maria Stuart,

etc. In general, however, everywhere on our shrinking planet we already tend to consume the same cultural dishes.

4. Our consciousness is shaped very early: adults teach us that the sun does not rotate around Earth, that Earth is a tiny particle among the unimaginable vastness of galaxies, that scientists attempt to find out how life came to be on Earth, that humans are a product of a long process of evolution, and that their closest relatives are monkeys. Biology lessons from school seem to be the foundation of Szymborska's worldview; many of her poems are directly derived from the theory of evolution. However, by no means does she imply reductionism. On the contrary, for her the human is so astonishing precisely because he has such a modest genealogy and is so fragile, and yet, although limited by his own body, opposes Nature and creates his own world of art, values, discoveries, and adventures. It is astonishing that he has a "hand miraculously feathered by a fountain pen" ("Thomas Mann"; PNC, 94) and that he can accomplish the "revenge of a mortal hand" ("The Joy of Writing"; PNC, 67). The worshipping of great accomplishments of human spirit and the masterly works of arts preserved in museums or in writing, belongs, as it seems, to the constant components of the twentieth-century consciousness, and Szymborska is engaged this worshipping, always remembering that everything was saved from the lurking death and, hence, it is so precious. Our century is also marked by the concern with the fragility of our own corporeal existence, and one of Szymborska's most moving poems, "Tortures," talks precisely about this:

> Nothing has changed.
> The body is a reservoir of pain;
> because the soul is
> evasive and a stranger to itself,
> now sure, now uncertain of its own existence,
> whereas the body is and is and is
> and has nowhere to go.
>
> (PNC, 202)

5. And so existential meditation was added to Polish poetry, which requires a break with pure lyric poetry and the courage to enter into a discourse, constantly accused of being prosaic. At the end of the nineteenth century, Asnyk philosophized through poetry, not especially convincing for us today. During the period of Young Poland, Tetmajer wrote the poem-contemplation "The End of the Century." The poets of the Skamander group were not "meaty" enough. A lot had to happen in order to create the tools that permitted a poet such as Szymborska to respond to the challenge, which is to the clearly sensed need for intelligent comments about our miserable dance. Different shades of humor and irony became the new and necessary spices. We like Szymborska because she is so bright, because she takes pleasure in juggling with the props of our common heritage (e.g. when she

writes about Rubens' women and Baroque), and because she has a great sense of humor. And probably she consciously takes the risk doing her magic tricks at the boundary of poetry and essay.

However, she would not have stayed faithful to the colors of her time had she kept a cheerful tone. It is, let us be honest, a very bitter poetry. And since it now belongs to literature internationally, we are allowed to compare it with similar diagnoses in other languages. This suggests a comparison with the hopeless visions of Samuel Beckett and Philip Larkin. Yet, unlike them, Szymborska offers us a world in which you can breathe. I think this happens primarily because the objectification is so far-fetched that the "I," with its own sadness, is completely excluded, so we have a game that gives us a sense of the enormous multitude of forms and, after all, magnificence of human existence.

Essays

The Limits of Lyric: Western Theory and Postwar Polish Practice

Clare Cavanagh

> I have felt that the problem of my time
> should be defined as Poetry and History.
> Czesław Miłosz,
> "A Poet Between East and West" (1977)

1. The Lyric Under Siege

Poetry and history, poetry and society, poetry and politics: according to many recent Anglo-American critics, these phrases pair virtual antonyms. In the ideological criticism that has dominated the American academy in recent years, the lyric has come to serve as a convenient stand-in for "aesthetic isolationism" generally, that is, for art's apparent "refusal of life actually conducted in actual society," which in fact amounts to a "complicity with class-interested strategies of smoothing over historical conflict and contradictions with claims of natural and innate organization." With the advent of Romanticism, Terry Eagleton explains, all art was ostensibly rescued "from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish." And Romanticism's favored form, the lyric, is invariably the worst offender in such socially irresponsible sleight-of-hand.[1]

The sins for which the lyric has been taken to task are many. To critics reared on post-structuralist theory, lyric poetry manifests a suspicious commitment to a slew of discredited values. It stubbornly buttresses the bourgeois myth of individual autonomy, or so the argument runs. It privileges personal voice over postmodern textuality; it seeks to circumvent history through attention to aesthetic form; it turns its back on the public realm in its quest for private truths; and it places transcendental timelessness over active engagement in the here-and-now.

1 Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 94–95; Susan Wolfson, "'Romantic Ideology' and the Values of Aesthetic Form," in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 191–192; Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 21.

The Romantic clichés from which these charges stem have been challenged by disgruntled New Historicists and die-hard formalists alike. Still they persist: they have become staples of recent criticism.[2]

The ideological critics have taken their lead in large part from Mikhail Bakhtin in creating a lyric antipode to the particular vision of art and society that they themselves wish to advance. The lyric, as Bakhtin sees it, is a deplorably anti-social genre. The poet's "utopian" goal is to "speak timelessly" from an "Edenic world" "far removed from the petty rounds of everyday life." "Authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative," Bakhtin's poet struggles to assume "a complete single-personed hegemony over his own language," destroying in the process "all traces" "of other people," "of social heteroglossia and diversity of language."[3]

It is not surprising that this reactionary foe of otherness and diversity should find itself under fire in the American academy. Not surprisingly, recent critics also overlook the distinctive role that poetry has played in modern Eastern European history. And this is unfortunate, since that role runs directly counter to the assumptions informing current discussions of the lyric. Plato famously expelled all trouble-making poets from his ideal kingdom of the mind: Plato's poet, a natural democrat, was "of no use to heads of state," as Mark Edmundson remarks. The Polish poet Aleksander Wat was quick to see the analogy between Plato's republic and the repressive regimes of post-war Eastern Europe. "Plato ordered us cast out/of the City where Wisdom reigns./In a new Ivory Tower made of (human) bones," he writes in his poem "Dark Light."[4] But why should the lyric poets who, according to current doctrine, complacently uphold the bourgeois status quo prove to be so troublesome to left-wing dictators? How do the self-absorbed reactionaries of recent theory become Eastern Europe's subversives?

---

2 For recent accounts of the lyric under siege, see inter alia: Paul Breslin, "Shabine among the Fishmongers: Derek Walcott and the Suspicion of Essences" (unpublished essay); Mark Edmundson, *Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defense of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Eileen Gregory, *H. D. and Hellenism: Classical Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 129–139; Mark Jeffreys, "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics," PMLA, vol. 110, no. 2 (March, 1995), 196–205; Susan J. Wolfson, "'Romantic Ideology' and the Values of Aesthetic Form," in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 188–218; Sarah Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

3 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 322–323; Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Mikhail Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 287, 296–298.

4 Edmundson, *Literature against Philosophy*, 6; Aleksander Wat, *Ciemne swiecidlo* (Paris: Libella, 1968), 11.

"In Central and Eastern Europe," Czesław Miłosz observes, "the word 'poet' has a somewhat different meaning from what it has in the West. There a poet does not merely arrange words in beautiful order. Tradition demands that he be a 'bard,' that his songs linger on many lips, that he speak in his poems of subjects of interest to all the citizens."[5] In Poland and Russia alike, poets have been called upon for nearly two centuries to serve as their nations' "second government," in Solzhenitsyn's phrase. The heavy load of social and civic responsibility that Poland's writers were expected to shoulder was, if anything, still greater than that of their Russian counterparts. The partitions that erased their nation from the map of Europe in the late eighteenth century meant that Poland's great Romantics — Mickiewicz, Norwid, Słowacki — and their literary offspring felt compelled to replace their vanished state itself through their own poetry and prose. And, as Miłosz's remarks suggest, both the poets and their oppressed compatriots took such obligations very seriously.

The political aspirations of England's and America's romantics remained unrealized: hence Shelley's famous "unacknowledged legislators," who stand unfailingly on the side of "great and free developments of the national will," but are spurned by the very nations whose interests they seek to serve. Perhaps for this reason the Anglo-American critical tradition has tended to highlight lyric poetry's impracticable utopianism over its complex engagement with human history and society. It is not just the ideological critics who see the lyric chiefly as the creation of literary isolationists in search of an aesthetic Shangri-La that lies beyond the reach of human history. This tradition has a far longer pedigree. The Anglo-American New Critics famously placed a frame around the lyric's iconic text with their well-wrought urns and verbal icons, as they sought to move it beyond the reach of erring adherents to various biographical heresies and intentional fallacies. And indeed each lyric poem appears to come complete with its own built-in margin of safety in the shape of the white page that seemingly serves to preserve it against unwanted incursions from the outside world. Of all literary genres, the lyric poem would seem to come closest to the ideally self-enclosed *objets d'art*, be they Grecian urns or calligrammes, that modern poets from Keats to Yeats, from Baudelaire to Apollinaire, have celebrated in their verse.

This is precisely the vision of lyric poetry espoused in Sharon Cameron's influential *Lyric Time* (1979), to give just one example. In lyric poetry, Cameron explains, experience "is arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history": "[Lyric poems] insist that meaning depends upon the severing of incident from context, as if only isolation could guarantee coherence. The lyric's own presence on a page, surrounded as it is by nothing, is a graphic representation of that

5 Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 71.

belief."[6] According to friends and foes alike, then, the lyric strives to be a text without context; it aspires to absolute freedom from contingency, to unconditional deliverance from the vicissitudes and ambiguities of the time-bound human being.

The way we perceive individual literary works is conditioned by our cultural and personal "horizon of expectations," Hans Robert Jauss cautions.[7] The same holds true for genres. Polish history has placed very different demands on the lyric than the Anglo-American tradition, and has activated different possibilities in the process. Since the early nineteenth century, Poland's acknowledged legislators have met with a reception that Shelley and his contemporaries could scarcely imagine.[8] To give one particularly vivid example — the Warsaw student riots of 1968 were sparked by the closing of a production of Mickiewicz's romantic verse drama "Forefathers' Eve, Part II," which contained, so the authorities feared, inflammatory anti-Russian sentiments. Shelley could only dream of such a reaction to his "Prometheus Unbound" or "Cenci." And as my example suggests, modern history only widened the rift that divided East from West for much of the century just past: perhaps it takes the fate of the lyric and its makers in an explicitly utopian state to underscore the powerful *antiutopian* strains at work in modern poetry.

In any case, the Anglo-American critic requires a radically shifted angle of vision in order to do justice to the place of poetry in modern Polish history. The lyric might just as easily be conceived — or so the poets of modern Poland imply — not as a utopian genre, but as a genre based on a recognition of boundaries and limits, the limits that its own form so graphically displays. It is arguably the genre best equipped to explore the parameters that both define and restrict human existence. The lyric may give voice to dreams of another, better world. But it must also address, not least through its very form, the realities that resist such flights of fancy: the lyric traveler to distant lands must keep checking, in Adam Zagajewski's phrase, "to make sure he still [has] his return ticket/to the ordinary places where we live." The lyric, by its nature, is forced to take up the question of what it means to have a individual point of view, to be rooted in a particular time and place, even

6 Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 175.

7 Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 44.

8 I don't wish to idealize the lot of acknowledged legislators. Szymborska, Herbert, Zagajewski, Barańczak: all have followed Miłosz's lead in their attempts to revise or even reject outright the politically engaged stance that Polish tradition demands from its national bards, a stance that often operates at cross-purposes, so these poets have argued, with the very lyricism that animates their verse.

a particular species: "Why after all this one and not the rest?/Why this specific self, not in a nest,/but a house? … Why on earth now, on Tuesday of all days, / and why on earth … ?" Wisława Szymborska asks in her lyric "Astonishment." Viewed from this perspective, the lyric is a self-consciously historical and social genre to its core.[9]

2. Reframing the Verbal Icon

"The Soul selects her own Society-/Then shuts the Door": in their study of Mikhail Bakhtin, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson take Dickinson's defense of lyric privacy to speak for the innately solipsistic nature of the genre generally. But the picture looks rather different in Eastern Europe. The subversive potentials of lyric poetry are perhaps clearest in a society committed to the eradication of the individual both in theory and, not infrequently, in practice. What Mandelstam calls the "accidental, personal" voice of lyric poetry acquires singular power under such circumstances.[10]

Indeed, one of Dickinson's greatest Polish admirers, Stanisław Barańczak, hints at the threat that the lyric poses in a totalitarian state in his poem "Fill Out Legibly," which suggests how Eastern Europe's purveyors of Orwellian Newspeak might have perceived Dickinson's "letter to the World/That never wrote to Me." "Does he write letters to himself? (yes, no)," the unnamed framers of an ominous questionnaire demand — and it's all too clear what the right answer should be. "Poetry is not heard, but overheard," John Stuart Mills remarks in one well-known definition of the lyric's audience. But lyric eavesdropping takes on new meaning in cultures where the walls have not just ears, but microphones: in "Moscow's evil living space" "the walls are damn thin," Mandelstam complains, just in case state-monitored poets should take a notion to deviate from their assigned task of "teaching the hangmen to warble." In the lyric, T. S. Eliot insists, the poet speaks "to himself — or to nobody." But just such soliloquys come under scrutiny in Wisława Szymborska's "Writing a Resume": "Write as if you'd never talked to yourself/and always kept yourself at arm's length," the solicitous speaker advises.[11]

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9 Adam Zagajewski, *Mysticism for Beginners*, trans. Clare Cavanagh (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 38; Wisława Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected 1957–1997*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 128.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic*, 320.

11 Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 55, 103. Morson, Emerson, Bakhtin, *Creation of a Prosaics,* 320; Stanisław Barańczak, *Wybór wierszy i przekładów* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1997), 69; Mills is quoted in Christopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 53; Mandelstam, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v. 1, 196–197.

Even the seemingly harmless confession that William Carlos Williams tapes to his refrigerator in "This is Just to Say" — "I have eaten/the plums/that were in the icebox//and which /you were probably saving for breakfast …" — could be given a sinister spin by a suspicious state, or so Baranczak's "2/8/80: And Nobody Warned Me" suggests:

And no one warned me that liberty
might also lie in this: I'm
sitting in the station house with drafts of my own poems
hidden (how ingenious!) in my long johns,
while five detectives with higher educations
and even higher salaries waste time
analyzing trash they've taken from my pockets:
tram tickets, a dry cleaning receipt, a dirty
handkerchief and a baffling (I'll die laughing) list:
            celery carrots
            can of peas
            tom. paste
            potatoes;

            and no one warned me that   captivity
might also lie in this: I'm
sitting in the station house with drafts of my own poems
hidden (how grotesque!) in my long johns,
while five detectives with higher educations
and even lower foreheads have the right
to grope the entrails wrested from my life:
tram tickets, a dry cleaning receipt, a dirty
handkerchief and most of all that (I can't bear it) list:
            celery carrots
            can of peas
            tom. paste
            potatoes;

and no one warned me that my entire globe
lies in the gap that parts opposing poles
which can't be kept apart.[12]

The accidental and personal take on unexpected weight in a state designed to eliminate any accident or personality that might impede history's unencumbered progress towards a radiant collective future. It is not surprising that Mandelstam should add a final, foreboding adjective to his thumbnail definition of the lyric.

T. S; Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1961), 96; Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 205.

12 William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 55; Barańczak, *Wybór wierszy*, 212–213.

Poetry in the modern age is not just "accidental and personal," he warns; it is also "catastrophic."

Certainly Polish poets have met with more than their share of catastrophes in the century just past. War, invasion, disease, privation, censorship, persecution, Nazi atrocities, and totalitarian terror: this litany of horrors took its toll upon writer after writer (to say nothing of the legions of more prosaic victims for whom these poets struggled to speak). Notions of the poem as well-wrought urn, as impermeable verbal icon, could hardly withstand the battering to which modern history submitted art and artists in this part of the world. Not surprisingly, then, the poets of post-war Poland, writing from a decimated nation caught at the crossroads between two brutal regimes, focus in their own poems not only on the lyric's potential power to defy time, but just as importantly, on the vulnerability it manifests in the face of what Wat calls "Enormous History" — a vulnerability it shares, incidentally, with history's more corporeal victims.

In "Anecdote of a Jar," Wallace Stevens conquers nature by way of a jar strategically placed "upon a hill … in Tennessee":

> The wilderness rose up to it,
> And sprawled around, no longer wild.
> The jar was round upon the ground
> And tall and of a port in air.

The jar, an emblem of artistic form, "[takes] dominion everywhere," Stevens writes. But similar objects suffer a very different fate in Miłosz's exquisite "Song on Porcelain" (1947), as translated by the author and Robert Pinsky:

> Rose-colored cup and saucer,
> Flowery demitasses:
> You lie beside the river
> Where an armored column passes.
> Winds from across the meadow
> Sprinkle the banks with down;
> A torn apple tree's show
> Falls on the muddy path;
> The ground everywhere is strewn
> With bits of brittle froth—
> Of all things broken and lost
> Porcelain troubles me most.
>
> Before the first red tones
> Begin to warm the sky
> The earth wakes up, and moans.
> It is the small sad cry
> Of cups and saucers cracking,
> The masters' precious dream

Of roses, of mowers raking,
And shepherds on the lawn.
The black underground stream
Swallows the frozen swan.
This morning, as I walked past,
The porcelain troubled me most.

The blackened plain spreads out
To where the horizon blurs
In a litter of handle and spout,
A lively pulp that stires
And crunches under my feet.
Pretty, useless foam:
Your stained colors are sweet
Spattered in dirty waves
Flecking the fresh black loam
In the mounds of these new graves.
In sorrow and pain and cost,
Sir, porcelain troubles me most.

Stevens' jar subdues the surrounding wilderness only after it is exempted from more mundane, utilitarian purposes. By setting the jar on his mythical Tennessee hilltop, Stevens strategically removes it from the less exotic contexts in which we typically encounter such objects, on kitchen counters or grocery store shelves. But Miłosz's shattered crockery operates differently. It is moving precisely because it mediates between daily existence and the realm of art, as it demonstrates how easily both worlds fall prey to the forces of history: "You lie beside the river/Where an armored column passes." The broken cups exemplify both the fragile forms of a vanished quotidian and the no less fragile human beings that once inhabited it: "Spattered in dirty waves/Flecking the fresh black loam/ In the mounds of these new graves." But they also embody the "precious dreams of master craftsmen (sny majstrow drogocenne)," as the frozen swan from Mallarmé's famous sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" abandons the realm of pure art in order to adorn the rims of now-shattered saucers. (In the Polish text, the craftsmen's dreams take the shape of the "feathers of frozen swans," "piora zamarlych labedzi," that presumably adorn the porcelain). The English translation makes the original's hints of a vanished pastoral more explicit by adding "roses, … mowers raking,/ And shepherds on the lawn" to the poem's litany of lost objects. It might almost be a rebuke to Keats' "unravished bride of quietness," whose pastoral scenes are preserved in perpetuity from the ravages of mere mortality.[13]

13 Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 76; Czesław Miłosz, "Piosenka o porcelanie," in *Poezje wybrane: Selected Poems* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo

"Like Rembrandt, martyr of chiaroscuro,/ I've entered into numbing time …" So runs the opening of one of Mandelstam's cryptic late lyrics, which date from his years in internal exile in Voronezh, not long before his final arrest and death in a Stalinist camp. In Mandelstam's elliptical apostrophe to the Dutch painter, his "noble brother and master, father of the black-green dark" becomes an unexpected fellow sufferer, subject, like the Russian poet himself, to the onslaughts of "numbing" history. Mandelstam anticipates ways in which the poets of post-war Poland conceive of visual artwork — and by extension, the "verbal icons" of their own verses — in their writing. Neither paintings nor poems, they imply, are immune to the forces of history. Far from seeking solace in some airtight aesthetic refuge from reality, the poet looks rather to negotiate the shifting, permeable boundaries that divide the work of art from the larger world that both informs and, all too often, imperils it: "Not many works escape the sands and fires of history," Zbigniew Herbert reminds us.[14]

The Polish poets, in other words, invariably call attention to the world that lies outside the picture's frame. Thus Adam Zagajewski concludes his tribute to "Dutch Painters" by imagining the kind of society that fosters the untroubled domesticity their paintings celebrate:

They [the Dutch] liked dwelling. They dwelt everywhere,
in a wooden chair back,
in a milky streamlet narrow as the Bering Straits.
Doors were wide open, the wind was friendly.
Brooms rested after work well done.
Homes bared all. The painting of a land
without secret police …

Only a "traveler from Eastern, so-called Central Europe," where concealment was until recently an unavoidable way of life, would be so quick to register the implications of this wide-open Dutch domestic space, where in art, as in reality, "apartments are put on display, illuminated in such a way that every passerby can check what's going on inside." And perhaps only such an observer, privy to the darkest spots in Europe's recent past, would be so attentive to all that this luminous art omits. "Tell us, Dutch painters," Zagajewski asks

what will happen
when the apple is peeled, when the silk dims,

Literackie, 1996), 100–103: Stephane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfeld (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

14 "Kak svetoteni muchenik Rembrandt," *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 249; Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, trans. Michael March and Jarosław Anders (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 101.

when all the colors grow cold.
Tell us what darkness is.[15]

This speaker knows the powers that oppose the ordering of art and life too well to exempt even the seemingly imperturbable Dutch tableaux he loves from the onslaughts of history.

"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," Walter Benjamin remarks.[16] The poets of post-war Poland did not have to go far afield to test the truth of his observation. They were eyewitness to the devastation wrought on European civilization by cultured Germany and progressive Russia alike, and they saw in both the invaders and their fellow countrymen how easily the trappings of cultivation fall away from even the most seemingly civilized members of our species. Their recent past has taught them to suspect any worldview that rests upon unflagging faith in progress and a commitment to the final perfectibility of human nature. "Progress in our civilization," Herbert comments, "consists mainly in the fact that simple tools for splitting heads" are replaced by equally deadly "hatchet-words," such as "'mind-debaucher,' 'witch' and 'heretic.'" In her poem "Tortures" Szymborska casts doubt upon even this dubious achievement. "Nothing has changed," she insists:

The body still trembles as it trembled
before Rome was founded and after,
in the twentieth century before and after Christ.
Tortures are just what they were, only the earth has shrunk
and whatever goes on sounds as if it's just a room away.

The Polish artist is the "barbarian in the garden" of European civilization, in Herbert's phrase — and not just because of his or her backward Eastern origins. "A historical steam-roller has gone several times through [this] country whose geographical location, between Germany and Russia, is not particularly enviable," Miłosz observes in the introduction to his anthology of Postwar Polish Poetry. The poets of such a country are by necessity acutely aware both of culture's costs and of its terrible fragility.[17]

This is the consciousness Wisława Szymborska brings to bear on her imaginative recreation of early French art in "A Medieval Miniature." She begins

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15 *Mysticism for Beginners*, 12, 7. Adam Zagajewski, *Another Beauty*, trans. Clare Cavanagh (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000), 133.

16 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 256.

17 *Barbarian in the Garden*, 141. Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 202. *Postwar Polish Poetry*, selected and edited by Czesław Miłosz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xi-xii.

by inventing hyperbolic verbal equivalents for the extravagant elegance of paintings like those found in the *Trés Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*:

> Up the verdantest of hills,
> in this most equestrian of pageants,
> wearing the silkiest of cloaks.
>
> Towards a castle with seven towers,
> each of them by far the tallest.
>
> In the foreground, a duke
> most flatteringly unrotund;
> by his side, his duchess
> young and fair beyond compare …

Superlatives abound in the poem's first six stanzas, which recreate the unnamed medieval miniature of the title. But a more sinister reality emerges in the poem's final stanzas, as Szymborska turns her attention to what has been omitted from the aristocratic paradise evoked by this "feudalest of realisms":

> Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary,
> cross-eyed and out at elbows,
> is most manifestly left out of the scene.
>
> Even the least pressing of questions,
> burgherish or peasantish,
> cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.
>
> And not even the eaglest of eyes
> could spy even the tiniest of gallows—
> nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt.[18]

As in Zagajewski's "Dutch Painters," Szymborska begins by sympathetically recreating life as seen from within a given worldview and aesthetic only to undermine its claims to comprehensiveness by stepping outside its seemingly sacrosanct borders. Szymborska lost her faith in the class-free utopia promised by Polish Communism early on. But in "Medieval Miniature" she apparently finds a partial truth in the Marxist vision of a history shaped by governing classes whose task is to suppress all traces of the labor that makes their dominion possible. For Szymborska, the pleasures of medieval art cannot be divorced from the price they exact. It is not only the "least pressing" of "burgerish or peasantish" questions that may not survive "beneath this most azure of skies." The "burgerish" or "peasantish" types who persist in asking such questions may find themselves dangling from the little gallows that the picture keeps carefully out of sight — or so the poem implies.

18 Wisława Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 156–157.

For Szymborska, though, Marxist ideology is hardly the universal master key that its twentieth-century adherents have claimed it to be. It can no more explain the miracles achieved by medieval art than the "feudalist of realisms" can do justice to the peasants and burghers who violate its aristocratic code. "Feudal realism" may be a product of a given historical moment, with all its limitations — but then of course so is its latter-day Soviet variant, socialist realism, or so Szymborska's poem hints. (And of course the Soviet state was at least as assiduous in purging class enemies as any feudal prince might be.) But the heights scaled by medieval "realism" — "each [tower] by far the tallest" — tacitly underscore the aesthetic poverty and formulaic monotony of its distant, less imaginative, descendant. Not all realisms are created equal, the poem implies.

For Szymborska and Zagajewski, the truths of art are partial in a double sense: they are both incomplete and partisan. And this is precisely what makes art human — partial truths are the only kind to which we humans are privy, these poets suggest — and what engages it in history. For only those who claim to have access to the full picture, the final point of view, can imagine themselves to be free of any merely human limits and thus exempt themselves from history. But the lyric poet, first-person singular by definition, cannot pretend to comprehensiveness in the way that a novelist, philosopher or epic poet might. Through its commitment to the individual vision in all its particularity and partiality the lyric works to undermine precisely those versions of human history that negate the weight of individual experience by subordinating it to one Hegelian grand scheme or another. This is what I take Zagajewski to mean when he remarks that "once one divides the world into history and poetry, then one obliterates the difference between a history … which is habitable and human, and the kind which produces concentration camps."[19]

What earthly use is any icon, be it verbal or visual, that has been "arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history," in Cameron's phrase? This is the question that activates Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Mona Lisa." "Inquisitors and troubadors" are equally at home in Herbert's essays on Western culture, in which art, society, ethics, and politics form "an entangled knot of many threads": it could hardly be otherwise, it would seem, for a veteran of modern history in its unusually brutal Polish incarnation. But "Mona Lisa" tells a different story. The speaker is also a survivor of Poland's devastation in the war and its aftermath, as the grim landscape of the poem's opening lines reveals:

Through seven mountain frontiers
barbed wire of rivers

19 Zagajewski, *Two Cities: On Exile, History and the Imagination*, trans. Lillian Vallee (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 260.

> and executed forests
> and hanged bridges
> I kept coming-
> through waterfalls of stairways
> whirlings of sea wings
> and baroque heaven
> all bubbly with angels
> —to you
> Jerusalem in a frame … [20]

This pilgrim makes his way through this Eastern European waste land to the sanctus sanctorum of Western culture, to the Louvre and Leonardo's famous painting. And, as the last line suggests, the speaker's attitude towards the painting he approaches is radically different from what we find in "Dutch Painters" or "A Medieval Miniature." He does not strive to enter into an artwork of another era on its own terms; nor does he wish to engage it from his distinctive, present point of view. Instead he looks for "Jerusalem in a frame," for spiritual redemption through a pure art set apart from a recent past too terrible to contemplate. He seeks, in other works, precisely that kind of transcendent release from history that so many critics have seen as the final aim of lyric poems generally. But the painting he views from "the dense nettlepatch/ of a cook's tour/on a shore of crimson rope/and eyes" fails to meet his expectations. The lady he finds is not enigmatic, but mechanical, even monstrous. The landscape he passes through, with its barbed wire rivers and executed trees, has been dehumanized through an excess of history. But Mona Lisa, the goal of his quest, is finally no less inhuman — though she has fallen prey not to history, but to what appears to be an excess of artifice:

> laboriously smiling on
> resin-colored mute convex
>
> as if constructed out of lenses
> concave landscape for a background …
>
> only her regulated smile
> her head a pendulum at rest
>
> her eyes dream into infinity
> but in her glances snails are asleep …

History and art as worlds kept apart are equally uninhabitable and inhuman, the poem suggests. History as brute machine is countered here by what looks to be an

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20 Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 101; Herbert, *Still Life with a Bridle*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter (New York: Ecco, 1991), 79. Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. Czesław Miłosz, Peter Dale Scott (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), 85–87.

equally mechanical artistry, and the speaker cannot bridge the gap that divides his "living heels" from "the empty volumes" of the Mona Lisa's flesh, that separates his specific historical experience from the static artifact before him:

> between the blackness of her back
> and the first tree of my life
>
> lies a sword
> a melted precipice

These are the poem's closing lines. But are the speaker's final thoughts also the poet's? The pilgrim's description of his unsatisfactory icon suggests otherwise. Mona Lisa, he complains earlier,

> has been hewed off from the meat of life
> abducted from home and history
>
> with horrifying ears of wax
> smothered with a scarf of glaze …

"Hewed off," "abducted," "horrifying," "smothered": the language evokes not so much a history-less vacuum as the brutalized post-war Poland of the poem's opening lines. Indeed the phrases the speaker uses to describe the painting could just as easily be applied both to the war's individual victims and to the fate of entire peoples and nations.

It is not just the museum setting, with its frothy angel, Cook's tours and crimson ropes, that divides the speaker from Leonardo's portrait. Nor is it chiefly the image itself that offends him, for all his complaints. His own desire to escape a history too harsh to be borne leads him to seek out not simply a painting, but salvation itself, "Jerusalem in a frame." What he finds in its place looks suspiciously like the unbearable past he struggles to outrun. And one suspects finally that this horrific past, more than the painting's purported flaws, now fills the black void that blocks him from the vanished world he mourns: how does one recover "the first tree of my life" from a wilderness of "executed forests"?

"Don't even think about it," the speaker warns. But Herbert's poem reveals that there can be no thinking, no seeing, outside of history. "Mona Lisa's" haunted speaker finds the past he flees everywhere. It haunts the tainted landscape of the opening lines, as human villains and victims are displaced onto bridges and trees; and it infects the failed sanctuary of Leonardo's portrait, with its "fat signora" brutally hewed "from the meat of life." "What is poetry which does not save/ Nations or peoples?" Miłosz asks in his famous poem "Dedication."[21] For Herbert, Szymborska, and Zagajewski poetry is not subservient to history, as it was for their more orthodox colleagues. But neither does it exist in isolation. In "Dutch

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21 Czesław Miłosz, "Przedmowa," *Poezje wybrane: Selected Poems*, 96–97.

Painters," "Mona Lisa," and "Medieval Miniatures," we find not celebrations of art's iconic autonomy from time, but stories of the complex interaction between art and human time, art and human history as embodied in an individual perceiver who stands before a work from a distant era. And these stories, in turn, speak to each poet's conception of the lyric, as in each case, a speaker rooted in a specific time and place supplements and complicates the story told by the images he or she works to recreate.

The speakers in Zagajewski's and Szymborska's lyrics do this consciously. They seek first to enter the artwork and the world it represents, and then to address it from what is recognizably a modern Eastern European perspective. Zagajewski and Szymborska thus offer us a model for approaching individual lyrics, a model in which we both seek to enter the poem's world and bring our own individual context, our own rootedness in history to bear upon the work before us. Poetry that seeks to keep itself at arm's length from merely human time is doomed to failure — or so the fate of Mallarmé's frozen swan in the "Song on Porcelain" suggests. But the viewer — or reader — who looks to remove himself and art from history, however understandably, impoverishes both himself and art in the process; he refuses even the partial knowledge, the imperfect redemption that is all art can offer at best. One might at any rate read Herbert's "Mona Lisa" this way; it is a cautionary tale against the mistaking of icons, be they visual or verbal, as a safe haven from history.

"Historicize, historicize," the cultural critics cry. Yet they themselves overlook large chunks of culture and history that might complicate or challenge the limits of their own brand of historicism. Both their neglect of Eastern Europe — whose troublesome history of Marxism in practice might undermine the Marxist theory that underpins so much recent scholarship — and their distortion of lyric poetry are telling in this respect. The call to historicize carries with it an implicit condemnation of some earlier, spurious form of "pseudohistoricism" or "ahistoricism," the crime with which the lyric in particular has been charged. But if the lyric struggles to be context-free, as such critics argue, it is because human beings likewise try, time and again, to rise above the contexts that confine them: Keat's Grecian urn yields its secrets, if indeed it does, only in response to the insistent questioning of the poem's mortal speaker to whom its glimpses of transcendence remain forever out of reach. All efforts to step outside time, the lyric reminds us, are doomed to fail in advance, which is why the lyric poet must struggle time and again to achieve the "revenge of a mortal hand," the temporary reprieve from mortality that is all we can hope for at best.[22]

22 Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 68.

Herbert's speaker in "Mona Lisa" goes in quest of a timeless icon that will release him, if only temporarily, from history's shackles; what he finds is inevitably distorted by the history he tries to leave behind. Attempts to read the lyric as the antithesis to legitimate, historically engaged writing — whatever that might be — likewise tell us at least as much about the genre's interrogators as they do about the mode of writing such critics claim to illuminate. The lyric is, as I've been arguing, a genre of limits — but as its Polish practitioners reveal, its limitations are self-conscious and self-critical. This heightened self-consciousness, moreover, is itself a response to a specific historical situation, in which Poland's foreign-backed rulers claimed to have uncovered a historical master key, a Metahistory or Megahistory that rendered all earlier versions obsolete. The "new" in "New Historicism" inevitably calls to mind the language of advertising, where the adjective "new" is invariably paired with its Madison Avenue twin, "improved." The very idea of a "New Historicism" rests on the notions of intellectual progress and superior vision, if not outright omniscience, that its adherents claim to reject. They would do well to learn from the spurned lyric, which, particularly in its postwar Polish incarnation, teaches us to test the limits not just of the thing perceived, but of its all-too-human perceiver.

The World in a State of Revision: The Poetry of Wisława Szymborska

Wojciech Lizęga

Wisława Szymborska's poetic world remains in motion. It cannot reach its final shape. It reveals empty spaces or those occupied excessively. The accumulation of different objects constantly asks to be organized. This process cannot be concluded. There always remains an unexploited point of view, a "suspended" possibility.

When mentioned, common beliefs or opinions are always supplied with a question mark, a trace of doubt, or negation. The poet regards her statements as a fulfillment of only some possibilities. It is impossible to create a poetic grammar that would encompass a full set of presented phenomena, as well as the complexity of individual objects:

> There are not enough mouths to utter
> all your fleeting names, O water.
>
> I would have to name you in every tongue,
> pronouncing all the vowels at once
>
> ("Water"; PNC, 58)

What is at stake here are not only the attributes of the "researched" phenomena, or the limitations on the perception of the speaker. The paradigms of speech resist to be named.

In Wisława Szymborska's poetry, the revision of language does not rely on the attempts at creating her own system of norms but on adding new combinations of words (e.g. transformations of idiomatic phrases) and crossing out those that are too worn out. These changes are supposed to take place without notice.

The style of the statements reveals a conflict with traditional thinking and with some of our contemporary claims and superstitions. The range of the models proves to be significant, spanning across such areas as scientific ideas, the meaning of art, questionable opinions from newspapers, and the practices of society. From the thickening, overlapping voices, it is possible to dissect a set of approved axiological notions.

Our own opinions do not even have to be stated directly. Sometimes, when located "outside of utterance," they await being brought out from the sphere of silence. More often what we read are lyrical monologues, tales, and treaties.

We must, however, note the seeming univocal character of these forms. The questioning of the reader's assumptions turns out to be the starting point:

> No books, no pictures, no records, you guess?
> Wrong. A comforting trumpet poised in black hands.
> Saskia and her cordial little flower.
> Joy the spark of gods.
> Odysseus stretched on the shelf in life-giving sleep
>
> ("The Suicide's Room"; PNC, 167)

The "thinking tasks" come from the outside. Their range varies from metaphysical questions to contemplations on fundamental everyday experiences. These phenomena influence the style of reflection, but also, reworked by the subject, they start to signify anew. Therefore, the revision of a given worldview works in two directions. There are also two legislative instances: consciousness and the world. In Szymborska's poetry every truth, if it is to be accepted, must first pass the tests of laughter, irony, and doubt.

The world is in a state of revision. It is a metaphor but not exclusively. In order to offer a more narrow understanding, we must turn to the principles of the traditional rhetoric. *Correctio,* the semantic figure of speech, relies on correcting our own previously voiced judgement. Here is an example from Szymborska's early poem:

> Serca, nie bijcie na trwogę.
> Bijcie na gniew sprawiedliwy!
>
> ("Pieśń o zbrodniarzu wojennym," [Song about a War Criminal])[1]

The correspondence between the "I" and the plural "you" is sustained. The direction of a common activity is set up. In this case the topic itself dictates the attitude chosen. The style of expression is the only appropriate one. In her later poems (beginning with "Calling Out to Yeti") the emotional reactions corrected in the developing utterance will be conditioned by individual decisions: "This is not a dirge — no, it's only indignation. / An angel made of earthbound protein … falls down and lies beside a stone" ("Returning Birds," "Could Have").

Szymborska's poetic statements feature a new correcting "but." The figure described has many incarnations and becomes a more generalized principle of poetic language. The revision is, thus, not only a device on the level of style of the text. The extending or crossing out of judgments is a permanent disposition. Sometimes the rhythm of conflicting explanations marks the syntax of the whole poem ("Lot's Wife"). Cognitive doubt is ever-present in Szymborska's poetic

1 "Hearts, don't sound alarm / but righteous anger!"

language. Even the most obvious knowledge about reality is rejected. Let us consider the simplest example:

> A miracle that's lost on us:
> the hand actually has fewer than six fingers
> but still it's got more than four.
>
> ("Miracle Fair"; PNC, 217)

Here a tendency for precision is combined with a playful attitude. The importance of the category of astonishment also reveals itself in Szymborska's poetry: what seems obvious becomes extraordinary, and to the contrary, phantasmagorias become nothing odd. In the poem "Thomas Mann" the mermaids, fauns, and angels seem to be like rejected links in the evolution: "your arms alongside, not instead of, wings, … you must admit that it would be a nasty joke, /excessive, everlasting, and no end of bother, /one that mother nature wouldn't like and won't allow." (PNC, 97)

In Szymborska's poetry, human existence is described as a series of accidents, an interlude in the nonbeing. Every attempt at anthropogenesis ends with an enumeration of potentialities that do not clarify anything, and rather signal the rationalistic superstitions of a mind insensitive to the presence of mystery (Szymborska's own position on this matter is naturally the opposite one). What is left is only a verbal gesture:

> You were saved because you were the first.
> You were saved because you were the last.
>
> …
>
> As a result, because, although, despite.
> What would have happened if a hand, a foot,
> within an inch, a hairsbreadth from
> an unfortunate coincidence.
>
> ("Could Have"; PNC, 111)

This gesture signifies the suspension of determinism. We can think about Szymborska's poetic language as words and sequences of words that have a limited ability of expression. In order to have access to at least a part of the universe of signification, we need to combine them into the arrangements of alternative, we need to multiply explanations and add new meanings. This is both true and false. A word characterizes superficial experiences, but it will never encompass all the possible perspectives on objects. And yet a reality untouched by thought can seem terribly trivial or even foreign to human comprehension (e.g. "View with a Grain of Sand").

What is important in the described mechanism of revision is the relationship of complementarity between sentences (additions and opposition). We also need to highlight the crucial role of conjunctival expressions: "I know that silence will welcome me, but still. / No uproar, no fanfares, no applause, but still. / Neither panicked bells ringing, nor the panic itself. ("Pogoń", ["Chase"]). A conjunction in itself includes a whole hypothetical argument (about the need to fill up the lunar emptiness with our thoughts) and functions as an independent unit of meaning (this is found in all the instances of "but, however, although, if …"). There is no doubt that this is the case with the example of "A Large Number." I call this semantic game a "figure of disclaimer":

There's nothing on the walls
…
Nothing, but nothing remaining
from a bison drawn in ocher.
…
Silence — but in darkness
exalted by eyelids.

("Cave"; PNC, 103-104)

"Nothing" is different from "humdrum nothingness." In the poet's view, emptiness is filled up once again. The thought about the beginning of our existence on Earth and the testimonies of this first presence fill up the space that belongs to no one. The wheel of time is brought to a close. The words such as "silence, dark, cold" are included into the paradigm of opposing meanings. The figure of disclaimer functions as a reconstruction of what potentially could have come into existence but did not have to in the space described. Nonexistence is paradoxically a proof of existence. The sphere of what is perceivable is not enough for the subject. Imagination must overcome the nonbeing.

The suspension of authoritarian considerations is neither a game played by an agnostic nor an attempt at evading "primary questions." There are too many unknowns to state anything with certainty, too many cognitive perspectives that can be thought (including a denial of anthropocentrism) to enclose the world in the right final formulas. Humans do not understand the language of the universe, nature, or history. We are forced to search for passages between the personal "I" and these other axes of the world. The attempts to break down this duality lead only to illusory victories. Because of the existing explanations, we can only add more explanations that are similarly uncertain.

The poetic revision is supposed to reconcile the orders of reality and thought, but in fact it exposes their discrepancy. In addition to the totality envisioned in the poem, there is always an inerasable surplus. It is a feeling of the disproportion of the lack of complementarity. "Metaphysical pluralism" described by Jerzy

Kwiatkowski — qualitative distinctiveness and separate positioning of objects in the world — can be grasped as a system of anti-thesis. The microcosm is not an image of the macrocosm. Exceptions oppose the rule. Essence flees from existence.

Szymborska's poems sometimes return to the "primal" indistinctiveness: the barriers between the classes of objects can be brought down ("In Heraclius's River") or the linearity of time can be reduced to a single point in time ("Water"). More often the poetic reflection goes in the opposite direction; the point is to present "different dimensions of being." For instance, this causes the thought of challenging the laws of the matter or the desiderate of transgressing one's own subjectivity to return (if only for a moment). Poetic inventions are not greeted with admiration, as the created worlds are almost always inscribed with a sense of irony.

Only when the actual reality freezes in the shape of artistic expression does it become possible to organize it clearly. For Szymborska, the text is an "upgraded" version of the world ("I'm Working on the World"). Artificiality is a value. The rules of fiction are exposed. The seizing of clear principles that govern the world is possible only through writing, in words or a palette of colors.

The poet willingly uses the testimonies of life that are fixed, enclosed in already available images, reworked in a specific style. It suffices to mention the well-known poem "Ruben's Women" in which the lyric diction corresponds to the "feast of plenty" in the language of painting:

> Daughters of the Baroque. Dough
> thickens in troughs, baths steam, wines blush,
> cloudy piglets careen across the sky,
> triumphant trumpets neigh the carnal alarm.
>
> O pumpkin plump! O pumped-up corpulence
> inflated double by disrobing
> and tripled by your tumultuous poses!
> O fatty dishes of love!
>
> ("Rubens' Women"; PNC, 47)

The paratactic syntax, for example, is an equivalent of an "open" composition. The expansion of verbs seems to create an illusion of movement, and the rhythm of the enumeration and invocation could evoke an ornate painting. A verbal joke signals the distance from the model, but a joke in poetry could be also seen as the basis of a literary affinity with the baroque painting style. The repertoire of the means of expression is not stable.

Stylistic identification is only the first step in "reworking" Rubens' paintings. Another poetic move, the inclusion of a "critical discourse" on art, seems even more important. And through this we move onto a higher plane: a report of perceived impressions becomes an interpretation.

It is said: “Daughters of the Baroque” — “pumpkin plump,” “pumped-up” — as opposed to “their skinny sisters” from gothic art and twentieth-century cinema and television. These are illegally living on the side of the canvas that was left unpainted. Szymborska’s poem knows only oppositions: she considers only extremes like “pudgy” and “unvoluptuous.” Winckelmann presented a different option: “The noble outline unites and describes all of the parts of beautiful nature and ideal beauty in the Greek figures, or rather it is a concept of perfection in both fields … The great Rubens remained distant from the Greek outline of a body … The boundary between the plumpness of a body and its excess is difficult to grasp and even the greatest masters of new times departed from it in one way or another. If one wished to avoid an emaciated outline, he fell into excess plentitude, and if one wished to avoid it, he excessively emphasized leanness.”

Naturally, Szymborska does not discuss the “deviations” of non-classical art. This is similar to how she is not interested in the loss of esthetic models (a problem with an already long history). The poet thinks about fragmentary truths, the relativity of conventions, and the one-dimensional image of reality captured through works of art. Whatever fits within the boundaries of style, becomes interesting. The poetic imagination evokes images not captured by the painter. From the point of view of the esthetic canon, these corrections are a heresy. According to this interpretation, it is possible to imagine a poem about women by Hugon van der Goes or Dirk Bouts (on the unpainted side of the canvas we would place Ruben’s “exiled by style”).

The “life itself” — with its unorganized, diverse paths — becomes the criterion for making corrections in the painterly reality. We need to sacrifice beauty in order to get closer to the fuller truth.

“A Medieval Miniature” belongs to the same series of poems. It is a playful transposition of pictorial categories into the poetic language. Brothers Limburg’s “The Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry” could be the prototype (a context proposed by Jerzy Kwiatkowski), as the themes from the “Calendar” cycle, the months of May and August, would be closest to Szymborska’s poem. Most likely — since not all of the details are correct — it is a “synthetic” miniature. It is an image of a style:

> Up the verdantest of hills,
> in this most equestrian of pageants,
> wearing the silkiest of cloaks.
>
> Toward a castle with seven towers,
> each of them by far the tallest.
>
> In the foreground, a duke,
> most flatteringly unrotund;
> by his side, his duchess

young and fair beyond compare.

…

Thus they proceed most pleasantly
through this feudalest of realisms.

("A Medieval Miniature"; PNC, 156-157)

The description of the reality in the painting is linked with the reconstruction of the kind of perception designed by "the French-Burgundian culture of the autumn of the Middle Ages." Such ceremonial cavalcades (both in art and in life) were supposed to amaze the observers. In those times, art — in the words of Johan Huizinga — had the "tendency to leave nothing without form, without figure, without ornament. The flamboyant style of architecture is like the postlude of an organist who cannot conclude. It decomposes all the formal elements endlessly; it interlaces all the details; there is not a line which has not its counter-line."[2]

In "A Medieval Miniature" the use of a superlative form of epithets reflects this idealizing order. The ceremonially inversed syntax must be noted here, too. The utterances consisting of enumerations, as if imitating the complementarity of details, are tied together by a full sentence ("Thus they proceed most pleasantly"), which brings the composition to a "close."

The second presented perspective consists of a "critique" of the style. The view of a naïve observer overlaps with the comments of an expert. The objective knowledge of the historical period challenges the artistic vision. Again, the missing links are offered. ("Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary, / cross-eyed and out at elbows, / is most manifestly left out of the scene. / Even the least pressing of questions, / burgherish or peasantish, / cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.")

It is necessary to add that in the background of luminous cavalcades (painted by the brothers Limbourg) we can see peasants, solemnly working in the fields, as if it was a holiday fete. And, equally important, the esthetics of ugliness is not foreign to the medieval period, but it disappears from view that particular time. The revision concerns, thus, the "feudalest of realisms." This is a time of decadence in the culture of the Middle Ages. It is not the only realism that, contrary to the facts, portrays the world as a holiday and the human as a being who can only be happy.

In the art of diversified "becoming," stopping is a type of forgery. What seems to be "most missing" for Szymborska in the style of this painting is, indeed, an essential object of description. The "negative tales" of "Rubens' Women" and "A Medieval Miniature" are the realizations of the possible choices that were

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2 Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages,* trans. F. Hopman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), 237-238.

rejected. The conventionality of the diagnoses given to the world is revealed in a simple way: by juxtaposing it with the "ivy-like," but perhaps more differentiated empirical reality.

The questions posed to cultural texts expose the illusory character of truths presented in them, and question the cognitive content. In Szymborska's poetry, the worlds look into each other. The fiction presents the deficiencies of life, and in turn the ordinary sensual experience erases the upgraded versions of reality.

The translations of the speech from the everyday reality to the language of a work of art are imperfect. On the other hand, a world "not reworked" is filled with accidental configurations of objects, fragments of images stored in memory or sudden, automatic perceptions. In case of a world-text we are, however, dealing with an overt ordering.

The boundaries of artificial worlds are opening. In Szymborska's poems the metamorphoses become possible:

> Just see how far behind I've left you,
> see the white bonnet and the yellow skirt I wear,
> see how I grip my basket so as not to slip out of the painting,
> how I strut within another's fate
> and rest awhile from living mysteries.
>
> ("Landscape"; PNC, 70)

Naïve identification with the painted figure is a way of freeing the existence from the laws of time, and of creating a convenient asylum for the experiencing subject. The disguise is, of course, only temporary.

What is, however, important is the moment of recording; this opposes the disintegration of the events chronicled by consciousness. In order for the image stored in memory to achieve a satisfactory shape, it is necessary to transform these imperfect incarnations into a work of art. This happens in the poem "Memory Finally." The work of art is not already available, as in the examples mentioned earlier, but is the process of becoming. In this very personal poem a following triad appears: "memory — dream — art."

Dream is a testimony to the madness of the mind, the heaviest of deformations. In the poem "Memory Finally" the portraits of the parents that are dreamed about, like a work of art, become the opposite of the oniric chaos ("In a dream, but somehow freed from dreams / … possibilities grew dim). Here the painting can be regarded as a mnemonic aid. Indeed, it is not about the process of literally filling up of the canvas, since it is the situation of the experiencing subject that (creation in memory) is highlighted as analogous to that of the artist (creation of a painting):

> Memory's finally found what it was after.
> My mother has turned up, my father has been spotted.
> I dreamed up a table and two chairs. They sat.

They were mine again, alive again for me.
The two lamps of their faces gleamed at dusk
as if for Rembrant.

(“Memory Finally”; PNC, 69)

Light against darkness. The order of culture against the disintegration of time. In the poem discussed, the representation that is modeled on Rembrandt’s paintings (known as van Rijn’s family portraits from the years 1628-1631) signifies a sudden flash of awareness. The reference to the painterly technique defines both the marvelousness of the vision (faces emanating with light), as well as its transient character. The figures arrive straight out of nothingness. Rudolf Arnheim describes the symbolism of light in the paintings of Rembrandt with these words: “the life-giving energy sets the range of a narrow light. Nothing exists outside the boundaries reached by the rays of light … objects emerge from the state of nonbeing, only to return there a moment later.”

The role of artistic languages that shape ordinary life is vital in Szymborska’s poetry. And yet the juxtaposition of a work of art, understood as a domain of freedom and with human life, or the domain of submission, can be true only to a limited extent. It happens in Szymborka’s poetry that the deficiencies of the everyday experience triumph over the precisely devised system.

Pure art is inhuman. It speaks only about its own harmony. It does not leave much space for ordinary life. In the poem “The Classic” the separation of timeless art from the mortal creator takes the paradoxical form of a reduction to perfection:

A few clods of dirt, and his life will be forgotten.
The music will break free from circumstance.
No more coughing of the maestro over minuets.

…

Everything that’s not a quartet
will become a forgettable fifth.
Everything that’s not a quintet
will become a superfluous sixth.
Everything that’s not a choir made of forty angels
will fall silent, reduced to barking dogs, a gendarme’s belch.

(“The Classic”; PNC, 137)

It is important to stress the difference in Szymborska’s poems between the evocation of established systems of ordering the world from the role of testimonies. The “textual” sphere is enhanced by the products of mass culture (e.g. *Bodybuilders’ Contest*) and non-artistic expressions (e.g. “Experiment”). In particular instances, the poems using mythological and historical stories (“Lot’s Wife,” “On the Banks of the Styx,” “Voices,” “Beheading,” “Lesson,” “Job”), or even on poetic

reworking of “biographical texts” (“The Great Man’s House”) and ethnographic reconstruction (“Our Ancestors’ Short Lives”), can be included into the group of the lyric poems that rely on the rules described here. The photographs, letters — different ways of writing down the private and communal life — belong, in turn, to testimonies. Although they are incomplete and false, taken out of their temporal context, they are at the same time impossible to substitute with anything else (“Snapshot of a Crowd,” “The Letters of the Dead,” “Frozen Motion”).

A common trait of the series mentioned above is the oscillating position of the speaker: between penetrating the realities of meaning and demonstrating a “critical” standpoint. What is significant is the sudden reversal of perspective; it is a programmatic incompatibility with the style of reading determined by the work. For example, in the poem “Certainty” the quotation from *The Winter’s Tale* (Antigonus asks whether “our ship hath touch’d upon / the deserts of Bohemia?”) is reshaped in such a way that it makes the question about Shakespeare himself (conclusive evidence about Shakespeare expressed as: “I’m certain, wasn’t someone else”) more important than the fantastic topography in the drama.

In Szymborska’s poetry, the ontologically unstable reality of the borderland of creation and existence is much richer than each of them analyzed separately. Order, perfection, and durability are complemented by movement, changeability, and coincidence. Wisława Szymborska’s worlds look into each other, mutually discovering their shortcomings. The interplay between what is present and what is absent is connected with the correction of the wholes that have been prematurely regarded as complete. Sometimes the thing becomes whole against the obvious laws of the time already passed. The revision reveals a multi-sided dialogue between the lyric “I” and the pre-given figures from human reality. We need to emphasize here another separate theme: the autonomous laws of artistic creation are, if not completely challenged, then at least assigned a question mark.

In this essay, the poetic interference into the existing order of things is defined as revision. In a double meaning this would mean a revision of form and the meaning of the world (this would be the real world that is preserved in a textual form). In Szymborska’s poems, the acts of revision encompass two planes: the sphere of poetic ontology and the sphere of reading. These are parallel domains where the difference between them is that, in the first case, what happens is an arbitrary transformation of the “natural” order, and in the second case, the interpretation of events relies on suggesting other alternative solutions. Then, the new version of the world is constituted in the order of thinking.

The emphasis placed on the action of revising forces us to think how this singular way of understanding the world — based on corrections, voices and commentaries — reveals itself in specific artistic decisions.

In Wisława Szymborska's poetry, the possible roles of the subject are as follows:

1. The creator-maker ("I'm Working on the World"; "The Joy of Writing") situated "beyond" the represented world. His omnipotence transforms itself into a system of restrictions. The distance toward the creative usurpations and the hope connected with creating "a space of freedom" in a poem seems significant.
2. A figure from literature or painting ("Landscape"; "Soliloquy for Cassandra"; "A Byzantine Mosaic") situated "inside" the work of art. The poetic utterance is a citation of a monologue or dialogue of the characters. Sometimes it is rendered in free indirect speech. In this selected group of poems, the models of thinking, canonized by tradition, meet with the modern "ever-searching" knowledge of the world. We encounter conflicts between the convictions of a hero from the past (present in myths, speaking through written letters, taken out from a literary text) and the "director," who brings experiences from contemporary times ("Job"; "Lot's Wife"; "The Letters of the Dead").
3. A reader-interpreter that is situated "outside" of the represented world. The reading of the works commented on does not respect the rules existing within them, to the extent that sometimes we have minor additions or whole apocrypha created. Perhaps, in this case, it is better to speak of somebody compiling glosses than engaging in revision (e.g. "Rubens' Women"; "Theatre Impressions"). The history recorded in the work of art (or an ordinary object) is presented from the point of view of a certain lack, understood in fact in multiply ways ("Brueghel's Two Monkeys";"Lesson"; "Museum"). The task for the reader is to reconstruct the silenced meanings.

While constructing the physiognomy of the subject doing the revisions in Szymborska's poems, one may begin to consider verbalizing the sole act of writing, paining, glossing, crossing out, etc. We need to draw attention to the vocabulary connected with both the technique of recording and the mechanisms of transformation of the world into a text: "The unyielding printing mark / of the shaking of my writing hand I cannot convey" ; "Hear the ballad ‚Murdered Woman … penned / neither to shock nor offend" ("Ballad"; PNC, 44)"; "I don't see the crabbed and blotted draft / that hides behind the Song of Songs"; "In the old master's landscape, / the trees have roots beneath the oil paint" ("Landscape"; PNC, 70).

Another rule that governs the poetic revision in Szymborska's works is the emphasis on the subjective character of the changes introduced: "Everything's mine but just on loan, / nothing for the memory to hold, / though mine as long as I look" ("Travel Elegy"; PNC, 37) Another reality becomes present — the psyche. This subjective limitation relates to two roles indicated in this essay: the creator-

maker and the figures giving monologues. The reader-interpreter usually employs negation and figure of disclaimer.

The act of revising pertains to many domains of poetic utterance: from "ontological" solutions to the seemingly most trivial decisions about the use of words. The poetic revision is an expression of the axiological opposition to the pre-given rules and norms.

In the case of Szymborska's poems, it is not possible to construct a homogeneous poetic system. This is true even though even though each of the claims should, as a matter of fact, be concluded with a correcting commentary. The scenarios that are presented are never complete.

Szymborska's poetic world appears to exist on the borderland of what is "real" and "imaginary;" between the spheres of designates and names; between the object and its image in memory; between the conscious and dream; and between events that have happened and their negative reflection (this anti-world constitutes of an unrealized version of what is an assumed and hypothetical version).

In Szymborska's poetry the boundaries of the world expand beyond the common measure. This world combines existence and nonexistence. The poet mixes, in a seemingly bizarre way, ordinary empiricism with what is potential or belongs to the domains of culture; on the same plane, it situates objects and categories, reveals the dialectics of knowledge and the lack of it. This attempt at creating a separate poetic whole serves to grasp the world in the richness of its forms, which is existence in its multiple shapes.

Wisława Szymborska did not choose to follow the path of her great predecessors: Mallarmé, Rilke, and Leśmian. She does not seek to create a separate poetic universe, but searches for a confirmation for the worlds she creates in the ordinary every-day experience. For her, imagination is not trustworthy, and the intellect is suspect. She creates her poetic language on the basis of the constant revision of traditional artistic solutions. She struggles with literary canons of expression and with every-day speech. She does not reject the material world but also does not wish to form a perfectly beautiful word.

This decision results in bringing to existence fantastic realities and literal phantasmagoria. This is because neither the belief in the saving power of words, nor the acceptance of the pre-given reality is possible.

[1983]

Wisława Szymborska and the Wonders of a Disenchanted World

Arent van Nieukerken

1. A General Characteristic of Szymborska's Poetic World — Scientism and Perspectivism

Many critics have pointed out to the scientist mark in Wisława Szymborska's poetry. The poet constantly refers to the modern biological worldview, often illustrating her poetic arguments with examples taken from nature.[1] Yet it is not didactic poetry in the sense that, through the use of biological terminology, the author seeks to present a coherent theory about humanity's place in the evolving universe. Szymborska uses scientific arguments in a manner that resembles the practices of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets who relied on theological dogmas — for these examples have an extemporary and nonsystematic character.[2]

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1 See, Czesław Miłosz, "Poezja jako świadomość," in *Radość czytania Szymborskiej,* eds. Stanisław Balbus, Dorota Wojda and Jerzy Illg (Kraków: Znak, 1996), 33 ("Biology lessons in school seem to form the foundation of Szymborska's worldview, many of her poems directly derive from the evolution theory") and 35; Artur Sandauer, "Pogodzona z historią," in Artur Sandauer, *Poeci czterech pokoleń* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977), 66 ("A strange adventure of one mammal … In their striving to deepen the chasm between humanity and nature existentialists ignore the intermediate stage: the consciousness of animals"); Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Wisława Szymborska," in *Radość czytania Szymborskiej*, 81 ("In Szymborska's work inspirations of philosophical nature are connected — in a way rarely encountered in contemporary times — with inspirations from biological studies … The central issue that the poet is passionate about is humanity as a biological species"). Furthermore, Stanisław Balbus notes that "if I would attempt to translate the author's poetic thought (in reference to *No End of Fun*) into discursive language, I could say using the simplest formula that it is one of the most subtle anthropological treaties I know." Quotation from: Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata — O Wisławie Szymborskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997), 27.

2 On "conceptism" in Szymborska see, Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata,* 56 and 61 (a reference to the shocking ending, "what an ingenious shocking ending of the extraordinary poem 'Thomas Mann'"). Szymborska's "conceptism" seems to be a *rhetorical* realization of the *metaphysical* principle of "unity in diversity" (Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Wisława Szymborska," 80). On the specific character of the relation between Szymborska's poetry and philosophical system, see: Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Wisława Szymborska," 83 ("All of this does not however mean that Szymborska's poetry is a treaty on the different

The author's private life influences the relativization of those examples. By exemplifying her beliefs and ideals, the poet created a mirror reflecting her life, thereby presenting her personal involvement in the world of creation and passing — recorded by memory. Contrary to the seventeenth century, in contemporary poetry, the horizon of memory is not formed, but is still in the process of forming.[3] The lyric situation, in which memory is articulated, does not obtain its meaning in relation to the system of normative rhetoric (as it was in the preromantic period). Scientific ideology can no longer take over the role that the normative rhetoric once had as a guarantor of individual authenticity.

This does not mean, however, that Szymborska's scientism is only an excuse, a fabric for poetic play. Indeed, the poet regards the results of modern biological research very seriously (even in humorous contexts). It is about something else: the presence of humans reaches deeper and wider into the similarities and differences she perceives though the ceaseless dialogue with the Other — in nature, history, and her "self." It is impossible to capture its meaning with the use of totalizing systems, but the path that must be taken in order to grasp and express the individual's authentic existence passes through landscapes that have to be outlined from multiple perspectives. The knowledge that the world can be seen through many perspectives — common for all ironic moralists — implies that in a way it is possible to gather all the specific perspectives. Some of the poets in mind (Miłosz, Barańczak) consider this possibility to be a derivative of the existence of an absolute perspective, and therefore, a proof of the existence of God.[4] Szymborska seems to hold more restraint in this matter. She seems to believe

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possibilities of existence, written down in poems "); Edward Balcerzan, "Laudatio," in *Radość czytania Szymborskiej,* 42 ("The poet does not trust arrogant systems that assume the right to explain the world's complexity — using an unambiguous system of values"; Marta Wyka, "O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej," in *Radość czytania Szymborskiej,* 217 ("The attitude of rational order is impossible to be saved. All of the poet's efforts aim to save it are in fact not very convincing. It is the bitterness and exactly this conscious doubt that will form a basis for an attitude towards the human species that will provide Szymborska's poetry with a power of *authentic* influence," emphasis added). It may seem then that Szymborska's intellectualist poetry has much in common with the spirit of what Eliot saw as the second and third period of metaphysical poetry, although it is not guided by any conservative utopia, nor is it willing to reject modern rationality and scientism. She is different from Norwid also because of her tendency to relativize rather than attack the modern worldview.

3 See, Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm: nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych "Universitas", 1998), 174-177.

4 In Miłosz's poetry God is, however, much more dynamic than in Barańczak's "two-polars" metaphysical disputes.

that multi-perspectival empiricism, typical for ironic moralism, does not directly translate into accepting a theistic worldview. One can be pleased by the possibility of summing up the experiences in the face of an *open horizon*.[5] In Szymborska's poetry the subject is able to (or at least s/he puts himself or herself to the task of doing so) restrain himself or herself when relating with other subjects, whom s/he perceives as existences similarly fragmented and imperfect as his or her own.[6] The subject is also convinced that others can see the fragmentation of human existence from the fragmented perspective, in the same way as s/he sees their limitations. The only thing missing is a privileged, generalized point of view that could justify that opinion. The "law" of self-restrain is, therefore, not a part of its essence.

We may accept Balbus's intuition that in her poetry Szymborska echoes Leibniz's theory of monadology.[7] This statement, however, requires a broader

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5 In Szymborska's poetry the subject's behavior is characterized by a consistent empiricism against the pressures of the world. She always draws "philosophical" conclusions from a particular, individual, unique experience. This attitude had left a specific mark on her poetry (see Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Wisława Szymborska," 79: "Almost each poem is based on a different principle, in a way creating a separate poetics").

6 Hence Szymborska's tendency to introduce in her poetry the perspective of "other-beings" ("Tarsier," "The Stone") that evaluate the human way of existence (see, Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata,* 154-160).

7 Jerzy Kwiatkowski had previously noted Leibnizian motifs in Szymborska's poetry (Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Wisława Szymborska," 80: "The whole poem ["In Heraclitus's River"] is based on this 'fish mechanism' trick, perfectly introducing the element of surprise and grotesque, which moves through the world. Let us, however, replace the 'fish' with a 'monad' — the philosopher had done something similar in one of his texts — and we will receive a humorous and contradictory, poetical and philosophical lecture"). If one wished to build a consistent philosophical worldview on the basis of qualitatively different, individualized experiences of Szymborska's poetic subject, this philosophy would become a new incarnation of monadology. We have, however, already seen that the subject's attitude in this poetry is rather characterized by skeptic empiricism, which was already noticed by the critic ("This exact principle … of metaphysical pluralism — finds its expression even in the clear distinctiveness of the poems, each of which is in a way a separate individuality"). The tension between the uniqueness of individualized experience and the tendency to integrate the specific perspectives of the subject (subjects) is not easily discharged ("But — most certainly — this principle [of qualitative distinctiveness] is primarily seen on the higher level of hierarchy: in that which connects these poems with each other and differentiates them from the background of contemporary poetry"). Balbus struggles with the identical problem of the "metaphysical polycentrism," juxtaposing Szymborska's poetry with Leibniz's monadology ("Szymborska's poetical universe is different because each of its many particular, possible worlds can turn out to be 'real' from its own position (for its own), while in fact, from the perspective of another 'world,' likewise 'real,' it can be only 'possible.'" (Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata,* 166)). "Recapitulating" the metaphysical basis of Szymborska's poetry, this scholar, however, eliminates the

explanation. In this understanding the human is never self-sufficient, but always directed towards communication — although this communication never comes easy. The surface of its being is not perfectly smooth. There are cracks and scratches that in its *imagination* may turn into gaps, into traces of *tangible absence*. This *lack of presence* can be only defined negatively, in relation to the timeless, inerasable positivity of being. This asymmetrical relation between something that is not present, yet still lingers behind as a *possibility of absence*, and is in fact the *inevitable presence of being*, provokes all the communication breakdowns experienced in our world:

> O mój tutaj spotkany, tutaj pokochany,
> już tylko się *domyślam* z ręką na twoim ramieniu,
> ile po tamtej stronie pustki na nas przypada,
> ile tam ciszy na jednego tu świerszcza,
> ile tam braku łąki na jeden tu listeczek szczawiu,
> a słońce po ciemnościach jak odszkodowanie
> w kropli rosy — za jakie głębokie tam susze.[8] (emphasis added)

It is necessary to note that in Szymborska's poetry this *relation does not have an ontological character*, at least not if we consider it as a variant of *fundamental* ontology. It constantly constructs itself, on and on, through multiple existential experiments, which together form individual fate.[9]

The ecstatic description of a landscape presented in the poem above is a true testimony to the belief that people have a certain understanding of the wholeness of life.[10] This wholeness, however, is the same as divine perfection.

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tension typical for it (this cheerful world is hence not free of tragedy), a tension between the transitory, unique moment of consciousness, and the infinite potentiality of being, although on this "impossible boundary" there is no other way for the discourse of literary criticism.

8 "You, encountered here, shown love here, / I can only guess with my hand on your arm, / how much void awaits us on the other side, / how much silence there for one cricket here, / how much of the lack of meadow for one sorrel leaf here, / and the sun after darkness like a compensation / in a drop of dew — for what severe droughts there."

9 In this regard Szymborska's poetry is opposite to Miłosz's conception of the "Book." Her premise, however, seems to be particularly close to modern sensitivity of Western poetry readers. As far as the reason for the popularity of the author of *Raport z oblężonego miasta* is at least partially connected with the knowledge of his true intentions, it can be said that the admiration for Szymborska's poems is indeed sincere and "authentic."

10 According to Balbus, "a fully-realized love exceeds with its 'absurdity' the most improbable or impossible, also logical, not only physical, natural phenomena." This "natural and logical deviation" turns out to be a miracle. It would be sufficient to add (which Balbus indeed suggests) that the "incomprehensible" miracle of love is only a special instance of the all-embracing miracle of the "being of beings," because of which we are always oriented toward a communication with the Other in all of its complexity. It is not, however,

In Szymborska's poetic world divine transcendence is simply not present. It is not an *impossible presence*, but a natural absence. Divinity is not something that can be imagined based solely on existential experiments, without any reference to its ontological status. From the perspective of Szymborska's poetic world one can speak reasonably about the existence of a personified God only if He manifests himself. Actual "manifestations" of divinity in the world rather prompt to express a negation of its existence. For, if the poet tries to envision a divine sum of individual perspectives, then the impenetrable source of being comes through as a laboratory of an evil demiurge — the progenitor of all technocrats:

Może to wszystko
dzieje się w laboratorium?
Pod jedną lampą w dzień
i milardami w nocy?

Może jesteśmy pokolenie próbne?
Przesypywani z naczynia w naczynie,
potrząsani w retortach,
obserwowani czymś więcej niż okiem,
każdy z osobna
brany na koniec w szczypczyki?[11]
("Może to wszystko")

Szymborska's relation to God is not expressed through the paradoxes of apophatic theology, but through the simple logic of everyday life.

Although in Szymborska's work epistemological antynomies are not the result of God's absence; it seems, however, that the poet's agnostic discourse sometimes uses the same literary devices as religious poetry written "after Auschwitz," in its search for a God who is silenced or even dead.

A one-sided relationship is developing quite well between you and me.
…
Though my curiosity is unrequited,
…
But how does someone answer questions
which have never been posed,
and when, on top of that

a guarantee that contact with "other-beings" will prove fruitful. Such a guarantee would be contrary to a person's individual freedom (see, Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata,* 111).

11 Maybe all of this / happens in a laboratory? / With one lamp during the day / and billions of them at night? // Maybe we are a test generation? / Poured from one bottle into another, / shaken in retorts, / examined with something more than an eye, / each individually / picked up with tweezers? ("Maybe all of this")

> the one who would answer
> is such an utter nobody to you?
> …
> A conversation with you is necessary
> and impossible.
>
> (“The Silence of Plants”; PNC, 269)

If these sentences — evidence of the presence of an irremovable crack in the field of events — had been read by a contemporary George Herbert or Pascal, could he or she have guessed that the “monologue” is addressed to “undergrowth, shrubbery, meadows, and rushes”? Let us note further that the tone with which the subject attempts to establish a dialogue is not characterized by despair, as in constantly interrupted seventeenth-century dialogues with the Deus Absconditus, but rather by calm stoicism.[12] In Szymborska’s poetic world, the metaphysical chasm is never portrayed as a *disintegration* of all forms of temporality. It is precisely the concrete, tangible detail that always establishes the context for comparison, even when we talk about disproportionate factors.[13] In the existential credo quoted earlier, which begins with the significant statement: “Nothingness reversed itself for me, too,” the present world becomes an inversion of nonbeing. Because of this, one cannot escape from the kingdom of forms. The being does not dissolve itself in the nonbeing, yet a similarly false representation of this relation would be to state that the nonbeing constitutes, embraces, or surrounds the being. In the context of Szymborska’s poetry, such traditional metaphors that aim to portray the immanent anchoring of being — e.g. *womb, sea, ocean* etc. — seem ridiculous. The fluidity of forms (e.g. water) is something more primal and basic than the generalized and empty abstraction of the abyss, regardless if we call it nothingness or heaven:[14]

> I should have begun with this: the sky.
> A window minus sill, frame, and panes.
> An aperture, nothing more,
> but wide open.
> …
> Even the highest mountains
> are no closer to the sky
> than the deepest valleys.
> There’s no more of it in one place

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12 See, Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm,* 296.

13 Ibid., 303–305 (see also Jerzy Kwiatkowski, “Wisława Szymborska,” 81: “As usual, also in this regard, Szymborska seeks the most wide generalizations, universal problems, through the use of little concrete and detailed observation”).

14 Wisława Szymborska, “Water”: “Whenever wherever whatever has happened / is written on the waters of Babel” (PNC, 59).

than another.
…
Division into sky and earth —
it's not the proper way
to contemplate this wholeness.
It simply lets me go on living
at a more exact address
where I can be reached promptly
if I'm sought.
My identifying features
are rapture and despair.

("Sky"; PNC, 223—224)

Since the dawn of times, aquatic imaginary (showing up in Szymborska's poems, e.g. "Water," "In Heraclitus's River") was used to express the evident fact of the fluidity of the sphere of phenomena where new forms are constantly born and old ones die. The world viewed as a space of creating and passing, however, can be only *represented* as a space-time enclosing single beings with *tangible shapes*. The element that encompasses particular beings always appears as something already formed. The *source* of the intuition — that forms are not born spontaneously and will not disappear without trace — is the *possibility of thinking* (but not representing) the dimension preceding the being. *Nonbeing* can only become present through an act of negation. Thus, the negation of being (which characterizes the being) is only a semantic trick. The pronoun or prefix "non" was added to a word or phrase relating to the modality of being. In this way "the unthinkable can be thought" ("Miracle Fair"; PNC, 217) (We will observe that this type of wonderment is indeed a vital category for the poet's "feeling of the world"). Szymborska, an authentic poet and consistent nominalist, cannot be satisfied with this type of uncertainty. The negation of anything concrete and treating the "lack of substance" as a negative force inseparable from "the being of beings" will not provide answers to the concerns about why the world is such an unstable place. That is why the poet never gives up on her search for a "more precise address" of her temporary location in this earthly world.

2. The Communal and Casual Character of Communication in Szymborska's Poetic World

Let us move to characterizing the ways of communication used by the protagonist of Szymborska's poetry. It seems — as I have already pointed out — that in her poetic world there is no privileged access to the Other. New planes of communication are established *at hoc* persistently. They are created by the individuality of the

addressee — the partner in the dialogue. "I" can never fully relate to another self-absorbed existence, but at the same time, the otherness of the world is not homogenous. That is because a "hierarchy of otherness" exists. It is much easier to engage in a dialogue with a monkey rather than with a stone.[15] In both cases "[y] ou lack the sense of taking part" (PNC, 63). And yet this hierarchy negates its own nature. It is relative. As between a man and a stone, this impassible chasm could also open up between two "legitimate" beings, that is human beings, e.g. when two lovers, after committing sexual intercourse, start a dialogue that becomes one long chain of misunderstandings ("The Tower of Babel").[16] Szymborska does not break away from the so-called "commonsense way of thinking" (one of the reasons for the popularity of her poetry) and would most certainly be wary of agreeing to the fact that people's indifference towards their kin (just as the stone) has any metaphysical (in contrast to ethical) repercussions. She would oppose reducing human interaction to a dialogue of someone with impaired eye-sight and hearing, only to underline that the plane of communication is neither something primal nor definitive, irrespectively of the fact that the being always remains open to others.

The poet does not seek to locate or formulate any ultimate truths. When comparing different ways of being and highlighting both differences and similarities, she is not searching for a common denominator. When arranging her closest surroundings — history, nature, the universe etc. — Szymborska is perfectly aware of the particular and casual character of any hierarchy. They remain a product of her *thought experiments* and do not share any stable quality, although without doubt they encompass a particular section of reality. The phenomena that make up the world we live in can be organized, separated by boundaries exactly because of "the leaky boundaries of man-made states" ("Psalm"; PNC, 148). The world envisioned as a "chain of beings" and as "Heraclitus' river" are both true and meaningful perspectives. When one wishes to enter into a dialogue with a tarsier and thereby observes himself or herself from the perspective of a being occupying a lower position in the hierarchy, one may be sure of the illusion that the light shed by epistemology reveals. It is very unlikely that one could gain access to the inner world of the animal; but, it is because of this misunderstanding that one can realize the shaky foundation of one's own firm beliefs. Through the act of hypothesizing, we discover the hypothetical quality of a "given" world.

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15 See, Wisława Szymborska, "Brueghel's Two Monkeys": "One monkey stares and listens with mocking disdain, / the other seems to be dreaming away — / but when it's clear I don't know what to say / he prompts me with a gentle / clinking of his chain" (PNC, 15), and "Conversation with a Stone."

16 See, Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata*, 69.

Szymborska's "negative theology" can be defined as determining a hierarchy of misunderstandings. This would be done only in order to prove that the validity of judgments arises from the unstable intersubjective space that no subject can control. And although our judgment can never be absolutely certain, there exists a possibility for applying corrections, deleting false claims that cannot be justified in the twinkling light of the context. This human (perhaps not only human?) ability is not easy to justify. In this context, the possibility of deploying the first-person plural pronoun ("we," "us," "ours," etc.) is significant; in the company of the Other, it gains meaning. When we attempt to speak with the stone "we lack the sense of participation," but thanks to this cognitive disparity between the animate and inanimate, we manage to realize that human communities are endangered by a similar deafness. This also means that we are not *doomed* to be misunderstood in interpersonal, "interspecies" contacts. We can build casual communities in the presence of the Other — the *third* actor:

> Next to clouds
> even a stone seems like a brother,
> someone you can trust,
> while they're just distant, flighty cousins.
> …
> And so their haughty fleet
> cruises smoothly over your whole life
> and mine, still incomplete.
>
> ("Clouds"; PNC, 266).

There can only be one conclusion. The common spaces for communication are not given from above; they do not consist of a noticeable, unyielding sphere of social relations, social groups or biological species; but they emerge, constitute and disappear, die as a result of the process of mutual attraction and repulsion, which remains open forever. Who can assess the effectiveness of communication, as well as the authenticity of the plane on which it takes place?

3. The Structure of Community in Szymborska's Poetry — "Humanity"

It seems that in Szymborska's poetry each subject is a measure for himself or herself in his or her attempts at exploring the world. "In Heraclitus's river / I, the solitary fish, a fish apart / (apart at least from the tree fish and the stone fish), / write, at isolated moments, a tiny fish or two" ("In Heraclitus's River"; PNC, 61). The great value of her poetry lies in the fact that this seemingly solipsistic attitude does not lead to an idle repetition of the same truths and negations. It is connected with yet another

perspective that brings the poet closer to the tradition of ironic moralists (this measure is being constantly verified). The subject does not resemble a fisherman calmly sitting on the shore of Heraclitus's river — s/he is a fish among other fish. S/he is a process among other processes (here metaphysics remains inseparable from ethics). Not only are Szymborska's poems examples of certain continually renewed thought experiments. The author herself, as far as we see her work as a fulfillment of a certain life project, is a certain thought experiment, characterized by profound consequences in various existential spheres. It would seem that in the domain of ethics, Szymborska's perspectivism (characterizing her "feeling of the world") is forcing her to adopt an absolute relativist perspective. Contrary to Herbert, she does not accept any laws written down on "bronze tablets."[17] And then contrary to Miłosz, her life is not a material for any ideal "Book."[18] The author of *The End and the Beginning* avoids an autobiographical approach. She is neither a public poet, nor a spokesman for her nation — a role desired but never fully achieved (*felix culpa*!) by Yeats, but also a fate that at some point threatened (without their actual consent) Heaney, Miłosz, or Herbert.[19] Finally, Szymborska did not choose the option of late Auden, who hid his ethical dignity under the mask of an aging, talkative eccentric with somewhat decadent tendencies.[20] In her poetry, the author is beyond doubt someone who cares deeply about protecting the private sphere. This is what differentiates Szymborska's attitude from Auden's and Miłosz's. They dazzle us with their most personal embarrassing and tragicomic details in order to prove authentic statements carrying a historiosophic or ethical significance. In this context Herbert in his later period seems to resemble an Old Testament prophet, scolding his nation for its disloyalty to the homeland.

The audience of Szymborska's poetry is "humanity," which is a certain ideal community, of which every individual can become a part. This, however, requires a moral effort. People are not born being part of humanity. A community of ideals, which anyone believing in "human rights" can join, is not grounded in any eternal order of the universe; its foundations are being constantly rebuilt. "Humanity," therefore, is not a platonic idea, but a relative term, relating to all of the private worlds that form its entity, members united in it, and at the same time a reality transcending those particular worlds. It is illuminated not only by heavenly light. It is the uncountable candles of its worshipers, focusing in one lens and reflecting onto all individuals that create the illusion that they are governed by some kind of a collective mind. This collective mind does not aspire to be anything more than a simple sum of individual dialogues at a particular moment in time, a particular

17 See, Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm,* note 106.
18 Ibid., 166–174.
19 Ibid., 228–231.
20 Ibid., 164.

place (in particular places) in the space-time *continuum.* The cooperation of those minds is a voluntary act of free will of many individuals that is engaged in thinking through different clearly defined issues or in completing "rational" objectives. It can be said that humanity understood in such a way resembles a secularized community of saints, a secularized body of Christ**,** a communal subject of ethical decisions, which — although not maintained by *sacrum* — remains decisive. It also seems to be a new incarnation of the Enlightenment project of the republic of rational thinkers **—** the difference being that the equality of its members is no longer based on the authority of some mighty, deified mind.[21] We will later see how the addressee conceptualized as an instance founding the idea of community on the concept of individual responsibility will influence the role of the author and her relation with the lyric "I." First we must, however, compare — if only in short — the rhetoric typical for casual planes of communication, created by the author of *People on the Bridge,* with the Enlightenment and Romantic practice. In this context Norwid becomes an essential figure of reference once again.

4. Existential Conditioning of the Transparency of Szymborska's Poetic Language

I believe that Szymborska's poetry is not free of didactic qualities. Her existential meditations have been compared to eighteenth-century schools of thinking that examined nature in the light of "the great chain of being."[22] It would therefore

21 Richard Rorty sketched this type of "anti-fundamentalist" ethics project in his influential book. See, Richard Rorty, *Contigency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

22 Many critics have pointed to the pre-romantic character of certain aspects of Szymborska's poetry. Without it Jerzy Kwiatkowski would not be able to connect her "deeply individual" tone of poetry with "the spirit of Leibniz and Giordano Bruno" (Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Wisława Szymborska," 79). On the other hand, Anna Kamieńska, wanting to emphasize the riskiness of contemporary rationalist attitudes, argues that "to truly be a rationalist, one has to be born in the 18th century. After Darwin, and what is worse — after the experiences of the 20th century — pure rationalism is in spite of all — to paraphrase Szymborska's style — a nonetheless stubborn heroism of a certain type of mammals, an adventure, worthy of praise, of the species known as humanity (Anna Kamieńska, "Heroizm racjonalizmu," in *Radość czytania Szymborskiej,* 351). The pathos of these sentences is naturally characteristic for Kamieńska. We must, however, add that the choice to focus her analysis on the poem "Thomas Mann" was indeed excellent. In "the great chains of being" we would find a place for "dear mermaids, beloved fauns and honorable angels," etc. The circumstance that according to Darwin's theory of evolution anything "excessive, everlasting" is "no end of bother," "one that mother nature wouldn't like and won't allow," is a regrettable fact for Szymborska ("Thomas Mann"; PNC, 97).

seem that the authority of Szymborska's poetry among readers is not far behind the authority normally attributed to modern didactic works such as Pope's *An Essay on Man.* In Enlightenment didactic poems, the role of the author is, however, essentially incomparable with the status of the subject in Szymborska's poetry. As I have already mentioned many times, there is a qualitative difference between the preromantic genre system**,** in which the division of genres was derived from normative poetry and the practices of post-Enlightenment poets. The situation is even more complicated because the eighteenth-century prose (Rousseau) had already achieved its modern form. The author of *A Large Number* could have been inspired by Leibniz's monadology or certain pioneering versions of evolutionism. For Szymborska, the classical poetics of her epoch remains distant. This does not mean, however, that a clever critic would not be able to produce an outline of the development of poetry in which eighteenth-century poetry would figure as a predecessor of specific modern currents. Eliot analyzed Donne's school in this precise manner. F. R. Leavis's critical inquiries also confirm such a possibility.[23] Perhaps a comparison of the status of the author with the paradoxical role of the persona in certain poems written by Norwid — a poet and intellectual who condemned the antics of the romantics, and yet did not adhere to classicism — will prove more fruitful than reading Szymborska's *Gedankenlyrik* in the light of Enlightenment didactic poetry.

In those poems the author of *Vade-mecum* sought to express several undoubtedly complex issues that could be, however, presented with equal precision using the discursive language of philosophical or historiosophic dissertations. Romantics, Parnasists, and Symbolists did not have patience for intellectualized poetry. The misunderstanding in the reception of his poetry by contemporary readers compelled Norwid to perceive it as an artistic impulse. This resulted in the birth of Norwid's conceptism that brought hermeneutic elements into his poetry.[24] The complexities of the author of *Vade-mecum* can be nevertheless intellectually unraveled e.g. by paraphrasing them accordingly to common logic. We will see that Szymborska also does not avoid making communication difficulties an inevitable element of all interpersonal relations — a subject of her poetry. She, however, uses a clear and precise language. It happens often in her poetry that the primary victim of such confusions is the author, but nonetheless the figure of the author does not resort to gestures of self-defense (similarly as e.g. Herbert's strategy of "the irony of treason of oneself").[25] She presents the situation just as

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23 In Leavis's critical inquiries the role of an antidote for the romantic antics of Shelley, as well as Victorian eclectics, is given to the "Augustian" tradition (Dryden, Pope) instead of the metaphysical poetry exposed by Eliot.

24 See, Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm,* 61–64.

25 Ibid., 185–188.

it is without trying to bury anything in code. It turns out that for Szymborska the problem of interpersonal communication is not in any way connected with her poetic vocabulary. It does not arise, like in the case of Romantic, Symbolists and Avant-garde poets, from the specialized nature of the poetic language. We cannot "communicate" because our world is internally broken. The inability of human communication is only one small aspect of a much wider problem of our (mine?) helplessness in the face of the silence of the universe. Communication does not only require that we have a command over or decipher a code, but it is founded on a certain existential correspondence between speakers. This problem is troubling for more or less every rational being. If, then, Szymborska (who is in the end the author of poetry, although she is often reluctant to expose her "self") presents the lack of correspondence existing between two lovers after a night spent together in "The Tower of Babel," it would be a huge overinterpretation to state that the poem is a twentieth-century equivalent of *The Last Despotism.*[26] The author of that poem sought to show his loneliness in an unfamiliar setting that strips him of the power to speak because the conventionalized *polite idiom* does not regulate the words with which one can discuss serious matters (and was not Norwid's own tragedy connected with a similar taboo existing in *poetry* in his times, one that greatly limited its range, in particular excluding any intellectual motifs?). Szymborska on the other hand *uses* the linguistic incompatibility of her lovers to exemplify the metaphysical question from which her poetic project came to be in the first place: how is it possible to reach the Other *at all*? It seems that by addressing this issue she does not isolate herself from the potential reader whom she envisions to be a member of a secularized community of individual beings. In any case, Szymborska does not treat the heterogeneity of language or its stylistic diversity as issues belonging only to the realm of semiotics. It is, therefore, not so hard to understand that among ironic moralists there is no other poet but Szymborska who would relinquish the Symbolist and Avant-garde heritage — the currents that represent a radicalization of Romantic themes in the direction of poetic language.

By renouncing the essential embeddedness of our world in transcendence, the author of *The Joy of Writing* has also abandoned the claim that rhetoric is a guarantee of undistorted communication within the *textual world*. Masterpieces and literary texts are no doubt the product of the acts of human will and can be studied in the light of certain semantic codes transgressing individuality, but nonetheless readers in their *interpretational will* do not dispose of the whole cultural code, and therefore, can never fully exhaust all potential meanings. Yet, we cannot say that all that is left "unread" must convey secrets concealing the essence of the poem, making visible the supernatural meaning of our relations with the world. Epiphany

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26 Ibid., 348 (note 177).

is far away from Szymborska's experience.[27] The category of inexpressibility does not function in her poetry. Everything can be articulated, although we must apprehend that our attempts at grasping the weight of the world in poetic language are not characterized by philosophical or common reality. Szymborska's view of the nature of language is characterized by consistent nominalism. The poet, therefore, also rejects the belief in the existence of a substantial link between sounds and meanings of words. There is no privileged access to the world. The magic of sound appears sometimes in Szymborska's poetry, yet here the notion of magic must be approached with a grain of salt.[28] Euphony can serve rhetoric purposes, but never influences the existential significance of the poem, as in Leśmian's poetry. Szymborska's world was not born from the spirit of music and is not supported by the harmony of spheres. Incantations that distinguish Miłosz's poetry and Auden's prewar output are absent from her work. On the other hand, the poet does not feel appointed to argue against the concept of poetry as metaphysical incantation. In her poetry it is impossible to find any cracks or dissonances that would disrupt the traditional understanding of the nature of poetry, as e.g. in the case of Różewicz. For him, a puritanical poet living in a Catholic country, the "zero" rhetoric of a given piece constitutes the existential dilemmas of the subject. The essence of this type of poetry is best described as metaphysics of the *simplest words*. Nothing enhances the shape of a room more strongly than bare walls. For Szymborska the outer form of a poem has its own rules. It is art *bene dicendi, elocutio,* as in the poems of her beloved Jan Kochanowski.[29] The form has, therefore, regained its autonomy, yet in a different sense than in Avant-garde theories. The poem has restored its corporeality. This form is, however, created by a magician**.** It is not a bearer of abstract or metaphysical concepts. It must be analyzed from two perspectives: firstly, from the point of its persuasive efficiency in expressing intellectual or moral contents, and secondly, by *appreciating* its selfless Beauty. This type of relation to formal aspects of poetry bears resemblance to Zbigniew Herbert's stance. Szymborska is, however, much more sensitive to the rhythm and melody of phrases than the author of *Kołatka.* It could be argued that the charm of the rococo style, characterizing some of his poems, comes from the fact that it deprived the music of the poem of its metaphysical weight.

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27 Ibid., 298–300 (naturally, this does not mean that an epiphanic experience cannot become a topic of the poet's poetic solutions).

28 E.g. in the poem "Birthday," resembling Leśmian.

29 See, Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Wisława Szymborska," 77 ("Here a word is — in the old way — a means rather than an aim, a means that is supposed to express in a possibly most perfect way what the poet — perfectly aware of her aims — has to say. And perhaps because of this — it is as rich, diverse and revealing").

5. The Act of Writing as a Renewal of the Primitive Community on the Side of Being

Szymborska's poetry is far from following the Romantic concept of an organic text, and it seems that this has helped the poet to overcome the process of the *dissolution of sensitivity*.[30] Her poems are characterized by a non-problematic relation between form and content, one that is neither artificial nor false. The same can be said of the author's figure in her poetry. Czesław Miłosz rightly pointed at a specific "earliness" of ideas and views present in Szymborska's poetry.[31] Is seems that this is what affords her poems with a natural tone. The fact that the poet founds her reflections on stereotypical situations does not stop her from developing those motives with true cognitive rapacity. The nature of a true essay is revealed in a caution in choosing signs, as well as in a restraint in formulating judgments. The clarity of Szymborska's poetic discourse is, however, built predominantly on an appropriately chosen concept of the role of the poet. S/he appears to be a spokesperson representing members of Western societies, in which faith and knowledge (thanks to the accumulation of information) have become the matters of individual acts — either an acceptance or rejection of a particular idea. In both cases the background for the decision is the confidence that the world remains an inexhaustible source of sensations not codified definitively in any system known.[32]

Szymborska's belief in the validity of many common ideas and views, drawn from various fields of human knowledge, is not, however, naïve as far as not to be lined with a certain skepticism, expressing itself in light irony. The subject of such irony, however, is not only our cognitive or creative capabilities, or the ethical sensitivity of people in general (or someone exhibiting views considered wrong). The edge of irony strikes primarily at the author himself or herself, who — as we shall see later — in Szymborska's poetry should never be identified with the first person singular or any community of will marked by "we," since s/he is situated somewhere *between* these poles of personality. In any case, communal or not, this instance is always personally responsible for the consequences of its actions. It is precisely *I* (*we*) who seek(s) the truth by trying and failing, falling into traps that we have brought upon ourselves. We are able to bounce back from the depths thanks to the good will of our brothers, similarly imperfect as us. The most effective — albeit not transcendentally rooted — stimulus that would prompt me to join the secularized community of saints, here and now, is the possibility of creating

30 On the destuction of sensitivity see, Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm*, chapter III and VIII, 283–291.

31 See, Czesław Miłosz, "Poezja jako świadomość," 32.

32 We must understand the essayistic character of her poetics in this context (see, Czesław Miłosz, "Poezja jako świadomość," 35; Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm*, 349).

common good. It is similarly real or illusionary as is the possibility of falling, succumbing to the temptations of evil. Neither good nor evil transcend mine (our) temporary existence. They prove neither the existence of the unchangeable nature of humanity, nor any eschatological hope. The belief in the meaning of life is not motivated by any light shining beyond the horizon of individual life, of which I know, however (and this knowledge may seem like a paradox) that it is imperfect. The criteria according to which moral acts are evaluated look similar to the attempts of justifying our being by showing that its origins lie in nothingness:

> When I pronounce the word Nothing,
> I make something no nonbeing can hold.
>
> (“The Three Oddest Words”; PNC, 261).

And so doing good brings to existence the same system of values that owes its motivation (at least supports its existence). The sphere of values does not emerge spontaneously, as it is based on the corporeality of human existence. It is based on the fact that I unavoidably experience pleasure or pain, though my body’s testimony remains innocent. Here innocence signifies the experience that precedes all possible axiology.

> Nothing has changed.
> The body is a reservoir of pain;
> it has to eat and breathe the air, and sleep;
> …
> and new offences have sprung up beside the old ones —
> real, make-believe, short-lived, and nonexistent.
> But the cry with which the body answers for them
> was, is, and will be a cry of innocence
> in keeping with the age-old scale and pitch.
>
> (“Tortures”; PNC, 202)

Human corporeality, therefore, cannot be used as an argument in support of the existence of a moral order, but comes to be seen as yet another variation of the silence of the universe in the face of consciousness, even when the body — my own or my victim’s — “writhes, jerks, and tugs, / falls to the ground when shoved, pulls up its knees / bruises, swells, drools, and bleeds.” The corporeality of the world — as something preexisting or encountered, something that responds to the voice of my spirit in the hollow and monotonous languages of muscles and skin — admittedly limits my freedom in creating good or evil, and determines my attempts to justify my own existence, but does not influence my freedom of dreaming about projects of self-creation:

Nothing has changed.
Except the run of rivers,
the shapes of forests, shores, deserts, and glaciers.
The little soul roams among those landscapes,
disappears, returns, draws near, moves away,
evasive and a stranger to itself,
now sure, now uncertain of its own existence,
whereas the body is and is and is
and has nowhere to go.

("Tortures")

I am alienated from myself, and it is precisely through this alienation that I experience my authentic identity. I cannot say, however, that I encounter the nonbeing through my corporeality. The fact that the body is lacking its own language and that its decomposition is followed by the death of my companions is without significance. Something which simply is cannot affirm or negate the transformation of nothingness into being. In the precise moment when I began to acknowledge the miracle of my individual existence in the world, I was already on the side of being:

Nicość przenicowała się także i dla mnie. Naprawdę wywróciła się na drugą stronę.
Gdzież ja się to znalazłam —
od stóp do głowy wśród planet,
nawet nie pamiętając, jak mi było nie być.[33]

("Nicość przenicowała się…")

The passages above comes from a poem quoted here several times, which is central to understanding Szymborska's feeling of the world and has been already insightfully interpreted by Stanisław Balbus.[34] Here the poet comes closer to Leśmian's poetry (e.g. "Elias"), as well as to Słowacki and his depiction of otherworldly scenes in "King-Ghost." On the one hand, both Słowacki and Leśmian used the magnificence of their poetic imagination to present the after-death landscapes in the most imaginative style; on the other hand, Szymborska tries to enchant the visualized landscape with a glimpse of the fleeting moment:

Teraz albo nigdy wiatr porusza chmurą,
bo wiatr to właśnie to, co tam nie wieje.
I wkracza żuk na ścieżkę w ciemnym garniturze świadka

33 "Nothingness reversed itself for me, too. / It really turned inside out. / Where did I find myself — / from head to toe among planets, / even not remembering how it was not not to be."

34 Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata*, 85–88. The scholar considers this poem a "love epiphany," realized in a "purely concept-driven way"; in my interpretation these two notions are mutually exclusive.

na okoliczność długiego na krótkie życie czekania.[35]

("Nicość przenicowała się…")

It would seem that at this moment we witness a revelation of some mystery, a sudden glimmer of epiphany that ascribes the protagonist's fate on the temporal side of being with a kind of meaning never fully realized. Has time been truly not suspended, as in Eliot's rose garden? Being a faithful student of Kant, Szymborska knows that time cannot be suspended:

When I pronounce the word Future,
the first syllable already belongs to the past.

("The Three Oddest Words")

In the spatio-temporal *continuum*, this point in itself does not require any privileged status. It is neither the first *glimmer of being***,** nor an intrusion of divine light into creation. The point becomes unusual and marvelous only thanks to the loving alienation of the two imperfect beings, the two lovers:

A mnie tak się złożyło, że jestem przy tobie.
I doprawdy nie widzę w tym nic
zwyczajnego.[36]

("Nicość przenicowała się…")

At this point we return to the basic intuition that rules Szymborska's poetic world. The subject is never placed in a complete opposition to the world and its inhabitants. If it opposes a stone or clouds, then this opposition must be understood as an element of casual planes of communication, which helps to affirm its community — always imperfect, obviously — with other beings. In the presence of nothingness, which cannot be *represented*, the whole being is connected through a brotherly bond. Happiness that comes from this communion demands a collective and articulated expression (if it were only an incommunicable cognitive act of an individual, then it would become something dead). Alone I am unable to experience the feeling of wholeness. I must share it with the being closest to me at this moment, at this place (even only if in my imagination). A sudden articulation of a brotherly bond always breaks the routine of being. We may suspect that the "you" (from the last lines of the poem) and the author are emotionally connected. It seems that, indeed, this specific relation between two people, in the ecstatic explosion of joy of the persona, becomes both relativized, as well as transformed. In one short moment

35 "Now or never the wind is moving the cloud, / because the wind is what does not blow there. / And a beetle goes on a path in a dark suit of a witness / to the event of the long waiting for a short life."

36 "And so it happened to me that I am next to you. / And really I see this as nothing / ordinary."

in time, through the casual plane of communication, the embodied universality of a new Eve and a new Adam, the starting point of humanity, has been constituted. What is most important is that this experience can be recorded:

> The joy of writing.
> The power of preserving.
> Revenge of a mortal hand.
>
> ("The Joy of Writing"; PNC, 68)

6. Deconstruction and Creation as an Expression of the Incomplete Character of Our Entaglement with the World

It is difficult not to agree with Piotr Michałowski when he writes that "the attempts to logically analyze Szymborska's poetry inevitably lead to conclusions of obvious nature, to revealing truths that surprise only with their triviality."[37] Another one of his observations, however, seems less fortunate: it assigns the greatness of her poetry to "the originality of the poetic language" rather than "philosophical depth."[38] Indeed, it would be hard not to appreciate Szymborska's stylistic cleverness. And yet the critic misses to see the purpose of the poet's "ordinary reflections." It is not about "attempting to explore the world with the assumption that it's unknowable."[39] In the earlier parts of this essay, I have tried to prove that the poet does not care about the inability to transcendentally justify her cognitive and moral acts.[40] Szymborska's poems are an arena of persistent attempts to question (or, as we would say today, to *deconstruct*) rigid conventions, one-sided observations, emotional or intellectual prejudices, and most importantly, all the totalitarian claims that endanger the subject of poetry. Distancing herself from generalizing tendencies of *philosophy of the fundamental principles*, the poet makes an effort to avoid the trap common for both ancient skepticism, as well as the now popular theory of deconstruction. Systematically expressing doubts in the permanence of the sphere of phenomena can be a useful methodological presumption in the attempts to self-define; nevertheless, it should never become an "anti-principle."

This is exactly the place where the author of *A Large Number* meets with the author of *Four Quartets,* who called every poetic act "a new raid on the inarticulate."[41] Of course, Eliot's formula neither relates to the attempts at dispelling irrational myths, nor the desires to challenge Hegel's totality of Mind.

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37 See in this volume, Piotr Michałowski, "The Touching 'Untouched Detail'"

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm*, 368.

41 Ibid., chapter VIII, note 165.

It is a positive action of creating. It is something that should be constantly renewed since the dialogue with the world cannot be maintained only based on the methodological ideals that the positivists took from the research procedures of life studies. The existential act of leaning towards the other, in order to define one's own being, always begins with a *leap*. There can be no gradual summing up of particles of knowledge. As we have already seen, Szymborska — similarly to Norwid in the nineteenth century — does not renounce the results of contemporary science. Indeed, she uses them in order to create her own poetic micro-worlds. It seems, however, that her deconstructive attempts begin, in a sense, at the point zero, marked by an existential leap. One reality stands face to face with another one, as if they were meeting for the first time on an unknown planet. The context of this confrontation has to be set up each and every time:

> Titanettes, female fauna,
> naked as the rumbling of barrels.
>
> ("Rubens' Women"; PNC, 47)

> In the old master's landscape,
> the trees have roots beneath the oil paint,
> the path undoubtedly reaches its goal
>
> ("Landscape"; PNC, 70)

> No one in this family has ever died of love.
> No food for myth and nothing magisterial.
>
> ("Family Album"; PNC, 72)

> A few clods of dirt, and his life will be forgotten.
> The music will break free from circumstance.
>
> ("The Classic"; PNC, 137)

> Few of them made it to thirty.
> Old age was the privilege of rocks and trees.
> Childhood ended as fast as wolf cubs grow.
>
> ("Our Ancestors' Short Lives"; PNC, 194)

Here the speaker presents certain alternative worlds, to which a modern person living in the second half of the twentieth century can gain access only through an "extra miracle," and because "the unthinkable / can be thought" ("Miracle Fair"). Let us note that the persona is almost entirely hidden behind the world s/he has himself/herself conjured up and that has once existed or is perhaps possible

to exist in a foreseeable future (but most certainly not now). Here we can see a very odd variant of a persona poem. Either way, these worlds are not dependent on the author's individual will. They are rather a response to deeply experienced existential deficits. They are imbued with a potential realness, in the sense that thanks to *imagination* one can temporarily overcome his or her seclusion, and experience a reality, in many ways, much more complete or comforting (or even, if that be the case, much worse). Contrary to the way this specifically human power was understood during the periods of Romanticism and Symbolism, however, in Szymborska's case, this knowledge cannot breathe life into the object of its desire. The creative power possessed by the subject is limited to the ability to confront different, real or possible, worlds with each other. Imagination thus cannot abolish the tension arising between reality and probability. In this context "thinking" is not identical with "being able to do." Either way, the imagination of an ironic moralist does not aspire to become a divine attribute. Because of this, Szymborska is immune to *spleen,* the extreme variant of romantic irony. We must add that questioning reality through the process of confronting it with alternative worlds (possessing different degrees of reality) was also a technique typical for Norwid's poetry.[42]

These poems ultimately attempt to locate the spheres where it is possible to find a counterweight to the extreme forms of individualism of the post-Enlightenment civilization, which requires the artist to be original. It also requires a normal person to discover his or her own style of living when, in reality, everyone is subject to the law of large numbers. We want to be authentic though there is no place for the outcasts of style**.** In culture we face the same problem as in nature. The *Other* becomes a remorse, convincing us of our own conflict (between the social reality and the desire for authenticity) and of our inability to be self-sufficient. Two things are connoted as distinctly negative: the fact that the individual is not embedded in the transcendental order, and the variability of its fate. It seems that there is no way of escaping from this state. The philosophy of authenticism, which states that individuals define their being in relation to the self-reliance ideal, helps to showcase the most idiosyncratic contents of the "I" (this can ultimately lead to madness). This sentiment, solicitously cultivated by the followers of Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath, is completely foreign to Szymborska's poetry.

Adherents of all forms of classicism in literature eagerly refer to Goethe's *dictum* that juxtaposes this current, allegedly presenting "healthy" roots, with the morbid exuberance of Romanticism. A point of view that encapsulates both elements of this dichotomy is proof by itself that liberating the experiencing "I" from normative rhetoric codes has become irrevocable. If the author of the poem *Willkommen und Abschied* had not been a Romantic poet in his twenties, then in

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42 Ibid., 86–96.

his later years he could have never written classical forms (*Klassik*), which were connected with his previous accomplishments through by the same label. Another thing is that rhetoric can also seize the idiom of authenticity, reducing it to particular external and sweeping factors. This happened in Słowacki's early poetic novels and in his poem "In Switzerland." The fact is that many Romantic poets, including the author of *King-Ghost,* were alleged to be mentally ill. Nevertheless, his most personal poetry from the mystic period is characterized by an expansive drive. The author wishes to become a subject of the universe. He is not satisfied with the subject status of "a God inside his thoughts," distinctive for Neo- romanticism and contemporary confessional poetry.[43]

Szymborska does not fall into the trap of "absolutized" skepticism typical for postmodernity, an attitude logically resulting from the absolutization of the subject. As we know, this had happened because certain features of the Hegelian absolute mind were fused with the concept of the autonomous Cartesian subject. Contrary to deconstructionists, the poet never gives to the temptation to mistake the order of deconstruction with that of construction. She understood that, being a poet, she would expose herself to a great danger if she accepted the view that negation and destruction of an existing reality are conditions for constructing (rebuilding from scratch) a new world. It would be the authentic work of a totalistic demiurge or — what she, however, considers more likely — a dreamy vision of a drugged beatnik poet.

> Island where all becomes clear.
> Solid ground beneath your feet.
>
> ("Utopia"; PNC, 173)

The worlds created by the demiurge are usually closed spaces where "free spirits" die from suffocation. The objective shape or size of these spaces seems like a secondary concern ("island," "lab," or even "solar system"). It would, however, be a mistake to regard the claustrophobic feeling, which bothers "constrained" individuals, as a consequence of the fundamental strangeness of these worlds. The cosmos consisting of "fourteen lifeless planets, / a few comets, two stars" is not a universe beyond human measure ("Warning"; PNC, 164). We are not facing the Other, as in "Conversation with a Stone" or in the poem about the tarsier. "Island where all becomes clear" and the cosmos where "everything's a perfect fit" are too strongly situated in the intersubjective space of humanity. At one time they incorporated ideas that had been born during the lively and often

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43 This formula ("Ik ben een god in't diepst van mijn gedachten") comes from a sonnet written by the Dutch poet Willem Kloos, a typical representative of the extremely individualist-oriented "movement of the 80s" (of the previous century — "De Tachtigers"). Their neo-romantic poetry is in many ways similar to the poetics of the Young Poland.

turbulent dialogue, yet after some time have lost impact. Certain ideas have been commodified (they were formed by authentic attempts to understand the volatile "I" against the backdrop of the infinite openness of human existence). The existential infinity, then, that was not only the destiny, but the challenge and task for creative individuals as well, has become a formal infinity, maintained by a form of logic — unavoidably narrowed, historically conditioned. "The Essence of Things"from the poem "Utopia," "an excellent view" from the mountain called "Confidence," undergoes a similar transformation. It turns out that after they lose their *relational* character, perfection and infinity are no longer practical notions. They can, then, only radiate meaning, if we treat them as *derivatives* of the disabilities and transience of human existence. The definition of the relation between the frailty of individual being and the perfection of the universe as an *opposition* — according to formal logic — relies on a misunderstanding. According to the feeling of the world of ironic moralists, perfection can be only a *desire* or *hope* of a particular human existence. It captures the dynamics of human existence. Perfection understood in this way becomes only one of the elements that form human freedom taking shape against the open horizon of human existence.

Here, once again, Szymborska does not abandon the ideas dictated by "common sense." The poet questions the notions not entirely corresponding to the forms in which she experiences the pressures of the world through the use of introspection. In addition, as we have already seen, the poet tries to present alternative worlds. Both of the actions of introspection and creation take place in the imagination. They are, however, not the expressions of her autonomy. The poet's imagination is not a point zero. Firstly, it possesses the character of a composition of images and intellectual notions, which are set in motion during the existential leap. Secondly, it is a process of integrating diverse forces and incentives, as well as of *disintegrating* of an impulse or image. Contrary, then, to the view characterizing Romanticism (Romantic irony!) and its Symbolist and Avant-garde successors, imagination *is not* a metaphysically embedded *unifying* force. We can say that its role is somewhat menial. Only a particular situation of *being in the world* is unique. It seems, therefore, that the only rational standpoint is the *synchronicity* of deconstruction and construction. It questions not only the basis of the existing world, but also specific aspects of it. Creation starts with the foundations — frequently renewed; though, the renewal never does start at the beginning. It is, thus, a position relying on continuous improvisation that holds onto the surface of life, rather than searches for depth. The poet draws pragmatic conclusions from her epistemological agnosticism. This point of view can be defined with the French term *sagesse,* meaning "wisdom." This can happen even though this wisdom does not offer any ready-made role models, and is characterized by some kind of clumsiness. It smells of amateurism:

> Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
> I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
> I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
> I trip at every step over my own ignorance.
> I can't conceal my hayseed manners.
> My instincts are for hammy histronics.
>
> ("Life While-You-Wait"; PNC, 169)

The best protection from relying on extremes or weirdness is to connect thinking with proposing certain approaches to life in a context conditioned by the criteria such as "usual," "commonplace," "one of many miracles" ("Miracle Fair") or "without exaggeration" ("On Death, without Exaggeration"; PNC, 188). Obviously they should not be taken for granted. They are almost always accompanied by irony. But the edge of irony does not target primarily the prosaic way of thinking, but rather the haste with which the author approves such a stand. "Life While-You-Wait" (without final arguments supporting our decisions) neither is simple nor free of tensions. It turns out that there is no escape from utopian thinking, and the temptation to base the construction of our life on transcendent foundations (unless we agree to put these (innate?) inclinations into ironic parentheses). The circle is closed. Could it be that even such an attempt of constructing a building without simultaneously deconstructing it was to become yet another illusion, given that even the pre-conscious character of a casual experience (under the pen of a philosophically-inclined poet) has a tendency to slowly solidify in a metaphysical ritual?

7. Szymborska's Oxymoronic Attitude Toward the Experiencing of the World: "Ordinary Miracle"

Szymborska presents that last antinomy in the poems where the presence of the persona is much clearly signified than in the works invoking alternative worlds. It also seems that the dilemmas of the lyric "I" largely match the feeling of loss attributed to the author, which is Szymborska herself. In a way we are dealing with a variation of personal poetry. Let me provide an example resembling Norwid's "Marionetki" ["Puppets"]:

> I know nothing of the role I play.
> I only know it's mine, I can't exchange it.
>
> I have to guess on the spot
> just what this play's all about.
>
> ("Life While-You-Wait")

The poet, however, applies a shocking literary device that saves the situation. She couples the ordinary with the marvelous. The miracle is *usual, commonplace, run-of-the-mill* etc — and *vice versa*. A miracle does not tolerate spontaneity, and the mundane does not surrender to the miracle. In the experience of the subject, these two elements of the oxymoron remain corresponding and inseparable.[44] The consequences of this conceptual move reach the core of the ironic worldview and create the conditions to express it *directly*. First we must highlight that for Szymborska to give the miracle a mark of ordinariness, a habit expected from the middle-class, is only one aspect of a much more complicated issue. Its purpose is — again we witness a Norwidian motif — to break our deeply rooted intellectual practice, which forces us to perceive the whole world as a safe everyday reality — free of any significant changes. Such an image seems to be a result of unconscious magical thinking, no less archaic than taboos of primitive communities.

Szymborska has developed a particularly effective antidote against such a type of imaginings. She has imagined a possible, but not a real world — a trivialized version of the sad everyday reality of post-war Poland. Suddenly, Baczyński appears out of nowhere, but he is nothing like the mythical Tyrtaeus of the Warsaw Uprising:

> He would
> vacation in a mountain boardinghouse, he would
> come down for lunch, from his
> table by the window he would
> scan the four spruces, branch to branch,
> without shaking off the freshly fallen snow.
> …
> Sometimes someone would
> yell from the doorway: "Mr. Baczyński, phone call for you" -
> and there'd be nothing strange about that
> being him, about him standing up, straightening his sweater,
> and slowly moving toward the door.
> At this sight no one would
> stop talking, no one would
> freeze in mid-gesture, mid-breath
> because this commonplace event would

44 In this regard Szymborska's attitude is noticeably different from the practice of Constantine P. Cavafy, who, while contrasting the sphere of miracles with the ordinariness of everyday life, chooses, although not without regret, the commonness. E.g. in the poem "Julian Seeing Contempt": "Observing, then, that there is great contempt for the gods / among us" — he says in his solemn way… They were, after all, Greeks. / Nothing in excess, Augustus." See, Constantine P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems,* trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 124.

be treated — such a pity —
as a commonplace event.

(“In Broad Daylight”; PNC, 192—193; emphasis added)

And so we can imagine that a brave participant of the uprising had survived — against all odds — the wartime turmoil, and thanks to that miracle he was be able to (and maybe he did indeed) lead an ordinary life of a normal citizen in the times of the “little stabilization.” The triteness of his existence would be, therefore, a direct result of the miracle, which earlier generations would have envisioned as God’s personal intervention into history. In this new light the war experiences of the rescued hero could be a subject of reinterpretation as well. His past actions turn out to be much less miraculous than the simple fact of his survival. Contrary to traditional forms of heroism, the bravery that miraculously transformed itself into normality correspond neither to our image of marvel nor of heroism. The poet brings *ad absurdum* common view and states that since (in our modern, disenchanted world) miracles do not happen, there is no place left for heroes (let us note that Szymborska is again following in Norwid’s footsteps).[45] Heroism and miracles belong to the magic realm that has disappeared forever. Its past existence is reinforced only through the great epic masterpieces of humanity, which, however, do not offer us any models we could follow — except when we get rid of their mythical dimension. Without such a “treatment” they would be reduced to fairytales. We witness the opening of a void between the metaphysical embeddness of the world prior to the Enlightenment, and modernity, which searches for a reason for its constant changing. Szymborska is only trying to show that nothing has changed — except for historical realities. Heroes live among us and miracles happen every day.

The poem analyzed above can be also included into the widely understood category of the persona poem. The ironic feeling of the world, which finds its expression in the oxymoronic “usual miracle,” is also a context of a few examples of Szymborska’s personal poetry. It expresses e.g. a paradox identical to Leśmian’s poem quoted earlier about the “reversal of nothingness;” however, in this case, the emphasis is placed — as we have already seen —on the marvelous quality of the otherwise ordinary situation:

A mnie tak się złożyło, że jestem przy tobie.
I doprawdy nie widzę w tym nic
zwyczajnego.[46]

(“Nicość przenicowała się…”)

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45 See, Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm*, 60.

46 “And so it happened to me that I am next to you. / And really I see this as nothing / ordinary.”

The metaphysical basis of the "usual miracle" is the certainty that the being exists. Furthermore, the notion of "basis" is not entirely adequate since we have seen that when dealing with the world, Szymborska tries not to use justifying and routine generalities. Rather, it should be said that the being of beings is a miracle, but the negative side of this Heideggerian formula is, in fact, its lack of precision. The poet always stands on the side of the detailed being and prefers metaphors to empty abstractions. She does not trouble herself with the issue of *ontological difference*. Szymborska repeatedly attempts to make visible the all too obvious miracle of the constant presence of the being in a new context. Some of them have been already mentioned previously. It is because Szymborska's intuitions are less trivial in its consequences that the being upholds multiple worlds — those we have access to, but also others that lie beyond our reach. Another "additional miracle," then, is the fact that intuition cannot be expressed even where it seems to relate to the category of non-correspondence: "An extra miracle, extra and ordinary: / the unthinkable / can be thought" ("Miracle Fair"). In Szymborska's poetry (as I have already pointed out) the category of inexpressibility does not exist — this is an obvious consequence of the nominalist interpretation of the status of poetic language. Undoubtedly, this intuition must be something more than just a theoretical postulate. It is rather the product of the poet's essentially essayistic inclination to organize her life experience without losing its concreteness, insightfulness, unrepeatability, and etc. Her attempts at organizing have not always brought satisfying results, yet such failures provided her with the ingredients for her outstanding poems:

> So much world all at once — how it rustles and bustles!
> Moraines and morays and morasses and mussels,
> the flame, the flamingo, the flounder, the feather —
> how to line them all up, how to put them together?
>
> ("Birthday"; PNC, 129)

We could suppose that this is the perfect example of constructing a world on the principle of the realness of the relation between a word and object, but in reality it is exactly the opposite. At the heart of the poem we have a feeling, characteristic for Szymborska, of being lost among the "excess" of phenomena encircling the volatile "I":

> Isn't sunset a little too much for two eyes
> that, who knows, may not open to see the sun rise?
> I am just passing through, it's a five-minute stop.
> I won't catch what is distant; what's too close, I'll mix up.
> While trying to plumb what the void's inner sense is,
> I'm bound to pass by all these poppies and pansies.
>
> ("Birthday")

It is because the feeling of anxiety is, however, inseparably linked with being happy that an imperfect mortal is nonetheless able to experience the fullness of existence — transcending him or her in an unimaginable way. The poet regards it as a unique privilege (and it is also an important motif in Miłosz's poetry):

> I could look into prices, but don't have the nerve:
> these are products I just can't afford, don't deserve.
>
> ("Birthday")

The wholeness of the world does not give way to the attempts at its ordering. Yet this does not result from the inexpressibility of its principle or essence. The inability to represent the whole richness of the world is explained through an argument; one that is impossible to question in the light of everyday logic. Due to this, it would require an infinite sum of individual sensations — but people live only for a short while. This fate can be the source of sadness, but also a factor mobilizing us to use the maximum potential of that short time. In the poem, Szymborska opted for the second option. She decided to play with the supposed inexhaustibility of being and "on the spot" imagined a rhetorical strategy that allows her to accomplish this immediate goal. Therefore, in this case, puns do not unveil any secret gravitational pull that guarantees the cohesion of the universe, but express only the joyous mood of the subject in the face of infinity. The improvised and disposable character of the intercourse with the world is, then, something positive — unlike the situation depicted in the poem "Life While-You-Wait." It turns out that the relation with the Other is not characterized by explicitness. It can be our freedom as well as a limiting factor, but truly it is both at once: a free responsibility of mortals, thanks to which we can consciously handle our mandatory freedom.

8. The Distinctiveness of Szymborska's Poetic Subject — Existential and Genological Conditioning of Its Impersonality

Now it is necessary to return to the question of Szymborska's didactic poetry. In her volume *Salt* we can find poems that can neither be distinctly classified as personal poetry nor as a persona poem. It seems that in those poems, however, the subject has found a way to extract itself from the flow of time. It raised itself to a higher plane from which it is able to present wider truths about human existence — perceiving it not individually, but as a representative of *humanity*. The best example that these truths can cross cultural barriers is the presence of the Japanese painter Hiroshige Utagawa in the poem "People on the Bridge." Other examples of this more traditional variation of reflexive poetry are e.g., "In Heraclius's River,"

"Water," "Miracle Fair," "The Onion," "A Tale Begun," "Clouds."[47] It is less about grammatical determinants of the lyric situation. In "Miracle Fair" all pronouns are missing. "In Heraclius's River" begins from a generalized perspective of the third person singular that later will be subordinated to the perspective of the "I." Water presents a dialogue between "you" and "I." In "The Onion," "People on the Bridge" and "A Tale Begun" the personal space is marked by the first person plural. In Szymborska's literary output these poems stood out not because of the status of the persona or his/her relation to the virtual author, but through the relation with the world presented. The relation of the subject to the world is not reduced to its direct embeddedness in the *here and now,* but is mediated through a specific more general (mostly presented by a symbol) concept of the situation of human existence (a landscape with a bridge, an image of an onion or a metaphor of a stream), or is based on accumulation of certain individual perspectives that become an excuse for making generalizations (the world as a "miracle fair"). In the first case, the subject uses various connotations of an image, in the second one — it tries to find a common denominator that enables itself to bring together these many individual perspectives into one existential situation.[48]

Some of these poems could be also classified as gnomic poetry — a genre that has remained viable in the twentieth century (contrary to Enlightenment didactism, swept away by the Romantic revolution). The most important poets of Western European modernism (such as Yeats, Auden, and Stefan George) all wrote gnomic poetry. Czesław Miłosz has made references to the genre more recently. It is most commonly — but not always — associated with brevity and aphoristic nature. Those qualities can be found in some of the poems analyzed in this essay. Other examples, on the contrary, are verbose ("A Tale Begun"), which most certainly is a reflection of the experience of *excess*. In any case, the authority of these poems — speaking to a wider audience, to all members of the secularized community of saints — cannot be explained taking into account the decreasing popularity of this respectable genre. The traditional gnomic poem owes the livelihood of the author's authority in only one role: that of a wise man, a master addressing his acolytes *ex cathedra.* This attitude of the subject was characteristic for the gnomic poetry of Yeats and Stefan George, and also not unfamiliar for Goethe. Auden, on the other hand, always hid behind the mask of an eccentric.[49]

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47 With the passing of time, this model of meditative poetry that reduces the determinants of personality to the minimum necessary ousts other, more "lyrical" styles of speaking from this poetry. The direction of Szymborska's poetic development is characterized by a conscious intellectual asceticism.

48 See my remarks on the structure of concept in Norwid's poetry: Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm*, 43.

49 Ibid., 264 (on Yeats) and 164 (on Auden).

What was especially important for the authors mentioned was the fact that the roles of the wise man and master had been reserved exclusively for this genre. The subject of love poetry or existential meditations has nothing to do with the subject of gnomic poetry. On the one hand — in lyric poetry — we encounter a multidimensional person attempting to incorporate the sum of his/her life experience into a self-portrait, which becomes a reflection of his/her random entanglements; moreover, s/he addresses a similarly multidimensional reader precisely from this all-inclusive perspective. On the other hand, the reader is reduced to the role of a humble recipient of absolute truths — introduced by the poetic incarnation of a modern leader. This refers especially to the work of Stefan George, although admittedly there is a great deal of masterpieces found among the *Spruchdichtung* of the author of "The Star of the Covenant." Yeats could not have resisted a similar temptation in the poems introducing his theosophical system. He did not avoid it even in some fragments of "Under Ben Bulben" — his famous poetic testament. There is no contradiction between this statement and the fact that the author of "The Tower" sometimes presents the role of the master and his responsibility for the fate of his nation as a theme of existential meditations. The lyric subject who seeks to leave "faith and pride / To young upstanding men" and Michael Robartes (when the latter sings "the changes of the moon") are divided by an impassable boundary.[50] When we aim to extract the existential message of a given work, the long poem "The Phases of the Moon" is a perfect illustration of the deceptiveness of different typologies. Formally we are dealing with a dialogue in dramatic form. Yeats made an effort to provide the dialogue of a master and student with a distinct setting, though the detailed description of the place where it happens cannot hide the vagueness of its content. In comparison with Robartes (Yeats's *port-parole),* his interlocutor, Owen Aherne, comes across as an empty figure at the best, one restricting only to agreeing with his master ("Why should not you / Who know it all ring at his door, and speak / Just truth enough to show that his whole life / Will scarcely find for him a broken crust / Of all those truths that are your daily bread; / And when you have spoken take the roads again?").[51] In the poem the lack of integration between exterior accessories and the ideological content, and a penchant for perceiving the landscape as backstage, are also examples of the dissolution of sensitivity.

Szymborska's poetry on "wisdom" topics showcases a larger degree of integration of the concrete and thought than George's and Yeats's gnomic poetry. This situation is pertinent to both the represented world, as well as the personality of the author hiding behind it. This statement may seem paradoxical when juxtaposed

50 W. B. Yeats, "The Tower," in his *The Tower* (London: Macmillian, 1928); W. B. Yeats, "The Phases of Moon," in his *The Wild Swans at Coole* (London: Macmillian: 1919).

51 Ibid.

with the philosophical nature of the issues covered in those works and the slightly marked presence of the persona. Due to introspection (a temporary withdrawal from the world), one can locate a firm ground in the depths of the soul, because of which the subject is able to make generalizations; for example, one can have a conviction about the instability of being, where "whenever wherever whatever has happened / is written on the waters of Babel" ("Water"); introspection will also allow for the realization that the unrepeatable forms "in Heraclitus's river," "I, the solitary fish, a fish apart," are perceived by man — wanting or not — from the perspective of a "fish." Both examples are comparable arenas, on which the present human existence takes place — with the bridge above water. The existential drama still remains the theme of the poem, yet the lyric "I" — here identical with the author — was able to distance itself from it. We can say that the subject temporarily suspended its mortality, or rather left it aside. This situation is acceptable only because other poems — discussed above — present the heroine precisely in the double role of a feather in the wind and the creator of her own fate — that is, one of the people on the bridge. Didactic poetry, therefore, is not independent; it is a part of a broader *lyric* project with a specific hierarchy. In this context, we may perceive it as a corollary of the lyric hero's fate in this poetry, as a place, where Szymborska takes off her mask.

The authenticity of the poetic project pursued by the author of *The End and the Beginning* draws its *raison d'être* from the possibility of seeing poetic reflection on the existential situation of the *human in general* as *individual destiny*. This universality differs from the universality of the Renaissance or even the Enlightenment. It is something — it must be stressed once more — problematic, imperfect, and not fully comprehensible. It is a reflection of the existential situation of an individual deprived of a privileged access to transcendence. We may sum up our — necessarily scattered — life experience, but this *summa* is never a self-sufficient, self-explaining, and self-reflecting whole. Norwid's *lack* impacts all of the attempts to recapitulate one's being, not mentioning even the essence. The horizon of human existence is not permanent and the individual decides about his/her own fate by constantly moving this borderline, without knowing if s/he will ever reach the end. We have seen that the notion of the end that functions in Szymborska's poetry is, in its negative quality, very close to the God in apophatic poetry — present in the works of Norwid, Eliot, and Miłosz. Let us provide one more example of how life is presented as a constant obligation to situate oneself in relation to the moving horizon:

> How many of those I knew
> (if I really knew them),
> men, women
> (if the distinction still holds)

> have crossed the threshold
> (if it is a threshold)
> passed over that *bridge*
> (if you can call it a bridge) —
> …
> How many
> (if the question makes sense,
> if one can verify a *final sum*
> without including oneself)
> have sunk into that deepest sleep
> (if there's nothing deeper) —
> …
> They've given themselves up to *endless*
> (if not otherwise) silence.
> They're only concerned with that
> (if only that)
> which their absence demands.
>
> ("Elegiac Calculation"; PNC, 236—237; emphasis added)

The poem presents a synthesis of two of the offered rhetorical strategies characteristic for Wisława Szymborska's didactic poetry. It sums up several images burdened by existential connotations ("threshold," "bridge," "shore"). If the poem cannot be perceived as a masterpiece in terms of its artistic qualities, it is because the argument may seem to be overtly detached from the realities of the everyday life. It, however, proves that in time of individualism poetry is not necessarily doomed to be limited to idle subjectivism. The chapter dedicated to Miłosz (in Nieukerken's book, *Ironiczny konceptyzm*) has presented a certain creative option that makes it possible to transgress the narrowness of the "I" of confessional poetry. Miłosz's author is both the object and subject of *The Book* that takes the form of a *work in progress*. He also attempts to save the existential truth of the encountered particular beings by regarding them as inescapable elements of his own imperfect — because never finished — continuously transforming autobiography.[52] The factor that enhances this existential project, and protects its imperfect infinity from reification, is the possibility — in Szymborska's words — of "the unthinkable / can be thought." The author of *Where the Sun Rises and Where it Sets* assumes the existence of a perfect borderline that can transcendent the moving horizon of being. Miłosz's literary work may seem to be the best illustration of the attempts of an individual to self-define through a dialogue with the unconditioned**.** Szymborska chose a different path. On the one hand, she has eliminated the transcendent sphere, on the other, she left aside her own "I." In her poetry the world is not an element of a poetic autobiography. The recapitulation

52 Arent van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm*, 166-174.

of the significance of many specific existential situations happens in relation to *universality*, constituted by the *earthly community of individuals* and the casual plane of communication established between them. Because of this, the members of this community can come to the agreement on the value of a set of matters and opinions, although these *imperfect universals* do not have a transcendent embededness.

Miłosz and Szymborska draw the same conclusions from these different ways of engaging the world. Life brings us both sadness and joy, requires ecstatic affirmation and peaceful reflection. Its deepest and, at the same time, most shallow mystery is expressed by two tautologies: the *being is* and the *being is not***.** In Miłosz's poetry the affirmation of these tautologies is an individual experience (the content of the self) that opens up to the infinite space of nature and history. Szymborska's poetry, however, regards this intuition as a prerequisite required for establishing extensive contacts with the Other in all of its irreducible diversity. The Other is as a plane that enables us to get rid of at least some of the misunderstandings that characterize our human involvement in the world. Miłosz's project of *The Book* as a work in progress helps to present the multitude of subjective roles as a changeable, but direct expression of one destiny. Szymborska's poetry is limited — as we have seen — only to a few of those roles, which are evaluated from the perspective of the author (who has temporarily suspended her involvement in the sphere of transience). The distance obtained creates a space of freedom where we can situate different poetic projects. The act of comparing the existential content of these projects does not force the author to simply apply or renounce them in his/her own creative autobiography.

One of the great values of Szymborska's poetry is her ability to recall many destinies without disturbing their presence. It turns out that the speaker, hiding behind the objectified factors of the presented world almost to the point of becoming impersonal, is better equipped to grasp the excess of personalities in the world, than a subject who searches there for a reaffirmation of his own depth. In addition, we must admit that the poet pays a high price for her empathy. She is not able to apprehend her own ecstatic affirmation of being as her own unique destiny. When facing the being, she is never alone. The description of reality lacks naivety. In the intersubjective space of her poetry, there is no place for egocentrism. The world that "thinks of" is always "a second edition," though not necessarily "revised." Even in the closing of "Nicość przenicowała także i mnie" (her most direct and ecstatic poem), when wanting to emphasize the uniqueness of this sudden revelation of being, she — a second Eve in the new Eden — refers indirectly to a tribunal of the secularized community of saints:[53]

53 See, Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata,* 85–89.

> A mnie tak się złożyło, że jestem przy tobie.
> I doprawdy nie widzę w tym nic
> *zwyczajnego*.
>
> ("Nicość przenicowała się…"; emphasis added)

There is no way of separating praises from accusations. As I have mentioned before, both Szymborska and Miłosz, in addition to personal poetry, also write persona poems and mask poems. In their literary work, we may find poems that could have been authored by either one of them. The message of those poems, in the context of the *oeuvre*, is however different. We could say a bit anachronistically that — although we are not interested in tracing their influences — in several of his poems, Miłosz emulates Szymborska, while on several occasions the author of *The End and the Beginning* was realizing Miłosz's concept of personality; he regarded it, however, according to the principle of an *existential experiment*. In the context of Miłosz's *The Book* the type of metaphysical or ethical reflection practiced by Szymborska seems to be yet another mask, expressing her desire for a *more capacious form*. The poetry of the Noble Prize winner from Kraków is characterized by an opposite disposition. The factor supporting the versatility of her poetry is an attempt at creating the *most capacious mask* (to the point of impersonality) but always identical with the author. The philosophical content of Szymborska's poetry may seem all too obvious.[54] It does not challenge its "cognitive value." The process of "investigating … into these findings" has built a bridge between the everyday experience and philosophical reflection.[55] Perhaps its foundations do not go as deep into the foundation of being as the poetic equivalents of the iron-like constructions of *The Century of Progress.* But it is exactly because of the flexibility of its supporting elements that this improvised bridge has proven to be particularly resistant to rains and storms, persisting through the tides and flows of life being unmovingly moved.

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54 See in this volume, Piotr Michałowski, "The Touching 'Untouched Detail'."

55 Ibid.

The World Trapped in a Poem. Self-reflection and the Poetical Practice of Wisława Szymborska

Joanna Grądziel

"Writing about poetry is not my passion …" (LN II, 81) — Szymborska confesses boldly in *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* (*Extracurricular readings*).[1] In the introduction to her anthology *Poezje wybrane* (*Selected poems*) she adds: "I would prefer not to give myself the right to write about my own poems. The longer I have been composing them, the lesser I feel the need or wish to formulate a poetic credo — more and more it seems embarrassing … and premature."[2] The author refrains from calling herself a theoretician of poetry, but despite that she does not avoid self-reflective utterances. There are relatively few of these in her poetry — among more than two hundred poems there are not many poems that speculate on their own subject, sometimes only hinting at the topic of creativity: "I'm Working on the World," " Classifieds," "Poetry Reading," "Epitaph," "The Joy of Writing," "Thomas Mann," "Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem," "Stage Fright," "Into the Ark," "Some People Like Poetry." Both *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* and *Poczta literacka,* the author's introductions to her poetry collections, interviews, and public speeches prove that Szymborska has much to say about poetry.

The questions "posed to herself" that return concern to the issues most fundamental for the art of words such as its definition, topics, the ways to artistically shape the material, and the role of the poet and readers.

Opposite/Opposed to the Definition/

The definition of poetry is an important issue that stubbornly returns in the poet's metaliterary disclosures. It emerges from periphrases and metaphors, is

1 The quotations from *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* come from: Wisława Szymborska, *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971), marked as LN I; Wisława Szymborska, *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1981), marked as LN II; WisławaSzymborska, *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1992), marked as LN III.

2 Wisława Szymborska, "Od autorki," in Wisława Szymborska, *Poezje wybrane* (Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1962), 5.

never formulated directly, and is never given in a ready-to-quote form. Asked for explanations at numerous occasions, the editor of *Poczta literacka* answered:

> The definition of poetry, in one sentence — oh my. We know at least five hundred definitions proposed by others, neither of which seems to be sufficiently accurate and capacious at the same time. Each expresses the taste of its epoch. Our innate skepticism restrains us from further attempts to make up new definitions. But we remember Carl Sandburg's pretty aphorism: "Poetry is the journal of the sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air." (PL 1963, no. 34)[3]

That which determines the shape of Szymborska's poetic work is that she looks at the world from a perspective of an outsider, a misfit, a person that is constantly astonished. This point of view enables her to maintain distance and novelty of observation and thoughts and does not allow the routine to influence her perception of reality.

"Creation means pulling out some fragment of reality" — Szymborska explains in an interview from 1973.[4] "The Joy of Writing," published ten years earlier, illustrates this truth. It is an attempt to define poetry:

> The joy of writing.
> The power of preserving.
> Revenge of a mortal hand.
>
> (PNC, 67)

Poetry is, thus, a form of rebellion against the imperfection of human nature; it is a victory over time because it can record everything that passes. This definition, however, is lacking the clarity and directness of full sentences, and it is preceded by the words that express disbelief and doubt and are enclosed in ironic quotation marks and bear a question mark.

The images created are always "borrowed from truth" and are constructed from words that name the elements of the real world. A doe, hunters, forest, and water can be the fragments of a kitschy, folkloristic tapestry, or the heroes in a dramatic story — everything depends on the power of imagination and will of the writer, whose "each drop of ink contains a fair supply" of possibilities to choose. The sheet of paper, however, dictates its own rules — "what's here isn't life" shows that the limits of the poet-demiurge's power coincide with the edges of the piece of paper. The creator does not forget that the world she is creating is only an illusion: the doe is "written," water reflects like a carbon paper, silence "rustles across the page," boughs "have sprouted from the word 'woods.'" The written

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3 Quotationss from *Poczta literacka* are marked as PL with the year of publication and issue of "Życie Literackie" added.

4 Krystyna Nastulanka, "Powrót do źródeł: Rozmowa z Wisławą Szymborską," in *Sami o sobie. Rozmowy z pisarzami i uczonymi* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1975), 305.

reality is bound with "chains of signs" and exists only "at my bidding," and it is, thus, temporary and trapped in a frame that at any given moment is ready to fall apart. Art can overtake antinomies and the real world's hierarchy of values, yet it always remains poorer and secondary as reason always sides with life.

In a poem written thirty years later than "The Joy of Writing," entitled "Some People Like Poetry," the question about the essence of poetry returns once more:

> but what is poetry anyway?
> More than one rickety answer
> has tumbled since that question first was raised.
> But I just keep on not knowing, and I cling to that
> like to a redemptive handrail.
>
> (PNC, 227)

The poet avoids any positive statements because by presenting an unambiguous definition it would mean usurping omniscience, which would result in limiting creative perspectives and negating the existence of alternative ways of expression. Many attempts at theoretical definitions of poetry that have been already "raised" and presented to the world did not work and "tumbled." The ambiguity of the word suggests an identical ambiguity of phenomena and an impossibility of permanently defining the phenomenon of poetry; this failure is seen as each attempted answer "reels" at the moment it is being established.

The lack of confidence is not, however, discrediting ("Question — is not knowing something always a weakness?"[5]) because admitting ignorance does not mean provocation, coquetry, or helplessness. The only legitimate knowledge is the one gained through the Socratic Method and the ability to ask questions. "What do I know?" asked Montaigne in his *Essais,* which was far from presenting a coherent, complete philosophical system. Szymborska wishes to remain "an unspecialized poet,"[6] and in terms of aesthetic and ethical choices of the author, she considers that "it will be much better for his work, if these ideals never form a consistent, impermeable system."[7] The indicative mood is replaced by a "searching," interrogative, and negative one. "I don't know and I don't know" — she repeats while holding tightly to this lack of knowledge like to a "redemptive handrail," which is both material and elusive. Poetry can only be a desire for *sacrum*, never its testimony. The handrail leads to the unknown and transcendent, but also remains in permanent contact with the world that lies beneath: you can always return to reality and to this "here and now," which is the only thing that is certain and given.

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5 Wisława Szymborska, "Cenię wątpliwości. Przemówienie poetki wygłoszone podczas uroczystości wręczenia jej nagrody im. Goethego," *Dekada Literacka* 30 (1991), 1.

6 Wisława Szymborska, "Od autorki," 5.

7 Wisława Szymborska, "Cenię wątpliwości," 1.

Transcending the Obvious

The problem of the source of poetry has a special place among Szymborska's auto-thematic considerations. The author of *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* postulates that the individually-experienced reality, laden with the inventory of phenomena, events, things and people, which shows her ordinary, not beautified face, should become the material for poetic creativity. Since "even the richest, most surprising and crazy imagination is not as rich, crazy and surprising as reality."[8]

It seems that this poetry is governed by the principle of presenting a topic in a form that is in contrast with it: emotions — expressed with reserve ("Could Have"), praise — through negation ("An Opinion on the Question of Pornography," "True Love"), critique — as an ironic apology ("Tarsier," "Prospect"), drama — masked as laughter ("Buffo," "Shadow") or as a dry, official report ("Pietà," "Vietnam"). "In a poem I try to achieve the effect that is known in art as chiaroscuro. I wish a poem would consist of things both sublime and trivial, sad and comic, or even have them grown into one another," the poet commented on her own work in one of the few interviews.[9] In *Lektury nadobowiązkowe*, she praises the calendar for precisely this impurity of tones and for showing the world's polyphony since, in addition to a list of dates and holidays, it also includes various nonhierarchical texts that are not organized according to any principle: "A grand confusion of matter, awful dissonances, the sublimity of history mixes with everyday trivialness, a philosopher's maxim competes with rhymed weather forecasts, biographies of heroes indulgently brush against the practical advices of aunt Clementine." (LN I, 267)

This is what Szymborska, the essayist, wrote and yet these words can provide a sufficient self-commentary for the work of Szymborska, the poet. A contamination of Kant's and Pascal's maxims ("The starry sky above the thinking reed / and moral law within it—") is adjacent to a description of a dinosaur skeleton with a "laughably small head" ("Dinosaur Skeleton"; PNC, 125); Thomas Mann with a "hand miraculously feathered by a fountain pen" resides in the company of "diphyletic skeletons / your ill-timed tails" ("Thomas Mann"; PNC, 97) in the description of "Elizabeth Tudor, Queen of England" before beheading a little detail is emphasized — a dress "finished in a starched ruff" ("Beheading"; PNC, 87). The polyphony of a calendar, a sign of the modern, an atomized reality is confirmed by the newspaper-like plentitude of forms: we may find advertisements, summaries, reviews, epitaphs, interviews, intervention pieces, reports, notes, conversations, an advertising prospect, information taken from the opening pages of magazines, well-known names, the news from the world of science.

8 Ibid.

9 Krystyna Nastulanka, "Powrót do źródeł," 305.

In order for the world created to become reliable and suggestive for the reader, poetry primarily needs "the simplicity and tangibility of authentic experience" (PL 1965, nr 61). During a poetry reading, a sweet old man sitting in the front row dreams about a tart ("Poetry Reading"), Isadora Duncan hides a ticket for a steamship leaving tomorrow at nine o'clock ("Frozen Motion"), at thirteen seventeen a teenager in jeans is getting on a scooter ("The Terrorist, He's Watching"). According to Szymborska, referring to experiences that are known to the reader does not indicate a deficiency of poetic work but of its superiority. The art is to combine the words that are not banal; but, an even greater art is to make those colloquial words start to question themselves. The secret of success lies in the way of seeing and expressing the everyday reality in an extraordinary way. An old scarf could as well become the starting point of a separate poem under the condition that it would be suddenly caught red-handed just on existing. Szymborska's poetry does not save anything or anyone, for it is not a remedy for the imperfection of reality. It is, however, "a transgression of the obvious through thought"[10] that guides through "a miracle fair" in which we have found ourselves and makes "new poetic discoveries."

In poetry, only the description has to happen. Everything becomes significant such as the collection of images and their juxtaposition and shape in which they appear in words. The description of an ordinary room in our eyes must become a discovery of that room, and we should experience the emotion of this discovery (PL 1967, no. 49), wrote the editor of *Poczta literacka.* The difficulty of creating consists not of searching for abstract topics, but of original, surprising presentation of those that are trivial. Szymborska negates such notions as commonness, normality, typicality, which means that a "simple," "ordinary person" has no reason to exist in her poetry — "Here count only exceptions" (PL 1965, no. 28).

For instance, how does one present a fear, well-known to every person, of hearing a medical diagnosis, and the joy of a successful ruling, while not making it boring as well as not repeating clichés? In the poem "Clothes," an account of such a visit is transformed into a description of different clothes that are nervously taken off in the office and then put on in a hurry, with the hands still trembling.

> You take off, we take off, they take off
> coats, jackets, blouses, double-breasted suits,
> …
> you see, and you thought, and we were afraid that,
> and he imagined, and you all believed;
>
> (PNC, 187)

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10 Wisława Szymborska, "Od autorki," 6.

The impression of a common experience for “me,” “you,” and “them,” and the commonness of the situation described, were achieved through conjugating verbs and enumerating of particular parts of clothing. In this way, in a poem that consists of one long sentence, we encounter a retardation of the final pun — we have the “crumpled, dotted, flowered, checkered scarf,” and only then it turns out that its “usefulness has suddenly been prolonged.” Not one word is said about death, which has been evaded this time; focusing attention on a thing, not a person, makes it possible to keep silent, and therefore emphasizes the feeling of uncertainty and relief. According to the theoretical postulate, the description “happens” and ends with the “poetic discovery” of the scarf, and the emotions — never communicated directly, but accompanying this discovery — are experienced by the reader.

The World Trapped in a Poem

According to Szymborska, the poet is “an animist and fetishist who believes in the mysterious powers slumbering in everything, and who is certain that he can move these powers with skillfully chosen words” (LN III, 214). These words evoke the association with the ability of magical thinking, characteristic for childhood, which relies on treating animals, plants, and dead things as creatures that can think, feel, possess will, and sometimes even supernatural features. Although the poem “Interview with a Child” does not address a metaliterary topic, there are analogies between the kind of perception presented here and Szymborska’s poetic method of seeing and capturing the world. The poet’s natural reaction to reality is astonishment and the need to ask questions. Similarly to the poem’s protagonist, she adopts the perspective of a “newcomer,” someone foreign, from the outside, perceiving the world from atypical, peripheral positions and not accepting that:

> … how can it be that whatever exists
> can only exist in one way,
> an awful situation, for there’s no escaping yourself,
> no pause, no transformation? In a humble from-here-to-here?
> A fly caught in a fly? A mouse trapped in a mouse?
>
> (PNC, 130)

Against this world conspiracy, behind humanity’s back, the Master protests with a spontaneous, unjustified cry: “No!” Szymborska, free of childhood naivety, does it in a much more sophisticated way. Her poetry can be considered a “world trapped in a poem.” This trip would be understood, on the one hand, as a conscious limitation that is the imprisonment of the spatio-temporal diversity of the world in static form; and on the other hand — boldly — as a trick played by the poet on

reality or a trap set up for it, which is the reality that is shown from an untypical perspective, precisely "caught on its otherness."

Several times in her poetry, Szymborska provides a metaphoric definition of poetic perception and speaks about "the method of scrutinizing" (*Drobne ogłoszenia*), about an "eagerness to see things from all six sides," (*Into the Ark*), or about "working on the world" ("I'm Working on the World").

The "imagining of" words in language goes hand in hand with an unusual approach towards the subject matter, which is the peripheral perspective of the speaking "I" that has been already mentioned in the context of the poem "Interview with a Child" and that perceives everything "from all corners" and "through the crack." Szymborska directs her attention not to what is seen best in the spotlight, but to what can only be caught with a hidden camera: "The poet experiences the world ex-centrically, acknowledging not only the center, but the peripheries, moving the eye to the edge of the frame."[11]

Therefore, she shows the cruelty and self-interest of the human species with irony, from the perspective of a monkey, perversely praising humans ("Tarsier"). She criticizes dehumanization and modernization for every price from the position of Szymborska-as-deceased ("Epitaph"). She condemns the decision to escape from life into a state of numbness through a self-advertisement of a sedative pill itself ("Advertisement"). She is interested in the sixth act of a tragedy that is played out after the spectacle is over ("Theatre Impressions"). Not only does such a perspective invalidate the question of the ordinariness of the subject matter and make it more attractive, but it also enables her to bring out its new qualities and attract the reader by intriguing him or her. At the same time, not addressing the most important issues directly protects Szymborska from the dangers of moralizing and pathos. The abolition of the distinction between important and trivial things does not mean replacing it with a reverse order — in this poetic world nothing is without significance.

This is clearly visible in Szymborska's esteem for the detail. If an overall view of reality is not available, the only solution is a fragmentary description that expresses the complex structure of the world. Szymborska's poems, varying in their form, frequently return to the same topics, each time in a different way and from yet another perspective, and through focusing on the detail, they communicate a complicated and hierarchical reality stunning with excess of forms.

Fragmentarity is realized through the poetics of detail, which demonstrates Szymborska's pedantry. Her most frequent figure, which captures both the multiplicity, as well as diversity of the world, is enumeration. She does not obey the rule of gradation — the parallel verses are equal to each other and are

11 See in this volume: Grażyna Borkowska, "Szymborska Ex-centric."

supposed to invoke the sense of simultaneity, breaking the linearity of the art of words. They are often isolated graphically, put in an anaphoric bracket, internally bound through assonance and consonance, as present in "Birthday" ("Moraines and morays and morasses and mussels, / the flame, the flamingo, the flounder, the feather—"; PNC, 129) or only partially highlighted, like in the poem "Some People Like Poetry" ("compliments," "the color blue," "old scarf," "your own way"; PNC, 227).

The attempts to generalize and create a synthetic image of reality are the opposite pole to the poetics of detail. It emerges through signaling all of the possibilities of a given phenomenon. A common compositional move here, based on accumulating and lining-up of variants excluding each other, is the trick called "delete unnecessary." The poem resembles a survey enumerating — this time without placing in brackets — versions of an answer from which one can choose only one. In the case of a poetic questionnaire, however, neither possibility is "unnecessary." A grain of sand does not have any specific name: "whether general, particular, / permanent, passing, / incorrect, or apt" ("View with a Grain of Salt"; PNC, 185). In a doctor's office we fasten "shoelaces, buckles, velcro, zippers, snaps, / belts, buttons, cuff links, collars, neckties, clasps" ("Clothes"; PNC, 187). "Could Have" resembles a failed attempt to formulate one sentence about an amazing coincidence that helped the hero of the poem to survive.

In the Beginning Was an Idea

The secret of Szymborska's artistry, which does not allow for an unambiguous classification of her poetic techniques and for finding their common denominator, lies in her characteristic shaping of the material. "There are enough topics in this world. The trouble lies only in highlighting a topic, in presenting it as a problem," argued the poet. He later explained that "a sentence, even its syntax itself, must be an image of a situation."[12] Similar opinions can be found in *Poczta literacka:* "There are no established compositional norms, they must be invented anew for each single poem" (PL 1965, no. 19). What counts is the idea that is a unique, individual take on the subject — "what" dictates "how," "how" illustrates "what." This postulate, proving the degree to which the poet has mastered the matter of language, is realized in Szymborska's poetry.

To this day the existence of Atlantis remains a mystery; there are as many scientific theories confirming its realness as there are those denying it, not to mention the speculations about its disappearance. "Atlantis" presents the island's

12 Krystyna Nastulanka, "Powrót do źródeł," 306.

history through juxtaposing contrary perspectives and interweaving sentences that question each other:

> They were or they weren't.
> On an island or not.
> An ocean or not an ocean
> swallowed them up or it didn't.
>
> (PNC, 17)

The doubts are strengthened by questions that include empty spaces demanding being filled out ("Was there anyone to love anyone?") or demanding a scientific precision of expression, similar to the formulas of scholarly language ("So we think," "We suppose"). The poem contains not only two mutually opposing theories but also an infinite number of possibilities. Choosing one version results only in further questions and forces us to make another decision — "not narrowed down to one of two" ("Into the Ark"; PNC, 212). If the island Atlantis did exist, were there any cities there, and if so, how long did they survive, did a meteor fall on them, or perhaps they were destroyed by an eruption of a volcano? The problematic existence and fate of the continent are, thus, presented as a juxtaposition of appropriate alternatives.

Isadora Duncan's "Frozen Motion" in a photograph, so contrary to the nature of her profession, is reflected in the "freezing" syntax of the poem — almost without any verbs. The form of the verb "to stand," exceptionally appearing here ("Standing this way, in the photographer's atelier"), confirms this rule as it means a negation of motion, replacing dynamics with statics. Just like the figure of the spinning dancer frozen in the frame of a photograph, the motion was similarly stopped with gerunds and participial forms: "swaying," "breezes sighing," "wrestled" (from motion), "raised" (arms), "leaving." Instead of hypotaxis**,** which would suggest a sequence of events and the passing of time, we have a list of nouns that are not connected with conjunctions and the sequence of which is fully arbitrary:

> This isn't Miss Duncan, the noted danseuse?
> Not the drifting cloud, the wafting zephyr, the Bacchante,
> moonlit waters, waves swaying, breezes sighing?
>
> (PNC, 135)

We could keep on quoting examples of such ideas: the metaphysical astonishment about one's existence in this precise moment in time and space had taken the form of a number of questions that are elliptical, abrupt, and asked in a hurry ("Astonishment"), and the frustrations and meetings that were never carried out have been closed in the form of a story about something that never happened ("Railway Station"). In Szymborska's case, we should rather talk about the poetics of her individual poems and not about the poetics of her poetry in general. The

poet's approach to writing poetry is an excellent recipe for originality, but it also requires a masterful control of the poetic tools.

"I Choose While Rejecting … "

In *Lektury nadobowiązkowe, Poczta literacka,* and in her poetry ("Under One Small Star") the poet compares reality to a colorful fabric, from which she picks out single threads. "Empty spaces … are absent from the thick fabric of history. This means that they are — but there is no way to prove that they exist" (LN III, 241), wrote the essayist. That is why she treats both types of reality in the same way: the reality that is available to our senses, which is empirically given, as well as the reality that does not exist, but is a potentiality — and she describes its absence. Szymborska presents her poetic world as a tight weave of events that are not materialized versions, possibilities and probabilities. For the poet, creation is inexplicably connected with selecting and rejecting a thousand of other possibilities:

> My choices are rejections, since there is no other way,
> but what I reject is more numerous,
> denser, more demanding than before.
> A little poem, a sigh, at the cost of indescribable losses.
>
> I whisper my reply to my stentorian calling.
> I can't tell you how much I pass over in silence.
>
> ("A Large Number"; PNC, 145)

"Untold" losses, resulting from the author's every decision, are enormous losses, inexpressible, but also — if we take this figure of speech literally — they are the phenomena, events, things that are not told, not preserved in language. In each poetic utterance, the titular "large number," an excess of forms and states of reality that imposes itself on us is reduced to only one possibility. A poem becomes a confession of its creator's apparent inability to perform it in chorus, being restricted only to "poems for a single voice" ("Into the Ark"). The only and basic condition for expression is selection, that is, reduction. The inversed position of "*jest*" [ang. "is"] in the sentence quoted [orig. "ale to, co odrzucam, liczebniejsze jest," "but what I reject is more numerous"], emphasizes the non-repudiation of a much more numerous, intrusive, and thicker reality. At the same time, silencing seems to be both inevitable and a result of a conscious choice. The inability to express the whole, from which so much is lost through "oversight," "not thinking," "lamentation," was portrayed in the poem through not finishing thoughts and tearing "unfinished" sentences:

> But even a Dante couldn't get it right.
> Let alone someone who is not.
> Even with all the muses behind me.
>
> ("A Large Number"; PNC, 145)

The ability to select "reality data" is a certain talent of the artist that is assisted by his or her imagination. "I have as much imagination — writes Szymborska in *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* — as is needed for clearly arranging facts and establishing causal relations between them. That is still quite a lot" (LN I, 46). Imagination is also necessary to look at the world from an uncommon perspective and to be able to ask interesting questions: what would happen if …?, what happened earlier?, later?, at the same time? When the poet writes about war, she notices what happens after it ends ("The End and the Beginning"); when about Hitler, she portrays him as a "little fellow in his itty-bitty robe" ("Hitler's First Photograph"; PNC, 196); when about Kamil Krzysztof Baczyński, she writes of him as an older man in glasses who survived the uprising ("In Broad Daylight"); when about a meeting, she describes it as an unfulfilled version ("Railway Station"). The gift of imagination helps to *imagine* precisely what was not lost "in oversight," describe an absence, show the world's invisible lining.

"To Be Not a Boxer, but a Poet … "

The lyric "I" willingly adopts the role of a poet, e.g. in "Epitaph," "Joy of Writing," "I'm Working on the World," "Into the Ark," "Under One Small Star," "Some People Like Poetry." The theme of the poet as a profession appears also in *Poczta literacka* to which the readers write letters asking to grant them the status of an artist or grant them membership in the Associations of Writers. Szymborska understands creation as an effort of searching for the right words and therefore she suggests correcting one's own texts, biting on a pencil, and gazing through the window: "We advise to write less, carry a poem in your head for a little bit, so it can keep on taking on a meaning and shape for a longer time" (PL 1965, no. 38). She emphasizes working on one's own style, perfecting one's poetic tools, granting priority to talent; poetry is an unordinary gift that at the same time has turned out to be a mistake in nature's art:

> But the best is that
> she somehow missed the moment when a mammal turned up
> with its hand miraculously feathered by a fountain pen.
>
> ("Thomas Mann"; PNC, 97)

A creative person is an exception and a luxury that nature can rarely afford since it eliminates transitional and useless forms. Next to the miracles such as a flying fish or a platypus, a certain freak comes into being who feeds its offspring with milk, whose feathered limb somehow, in the process of evolution, turned into a hand and replaced a true feather with a fountain pen. The name of Thomas Mann signifies here any artist of the word.

"I prefer the absurdity of writing poems /to the absurdity of not writing poems," declares the poet in the poem "Possibilities" (PNC, 214). She adopts a strategy consisting of downplaying the significance of her profession, minimizing it ostentatiously, subversively, and coquettishly: "In Praise of My Sister," a sister that does not babble in poetry turns into a negation of the safe, comforting, peaceful way of life.

The poet often raises the question of reception and her self-referential poems include a motif of the ineffectiveness of poetry's impact on the insensitive readers that are immune to the poetic word. In *Poczta literacka*, she notices that no one writes for himself or herself only as if every artist needs an auditorium. "Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem" is "a poem inside a poem," or "a poem instead of a poem" (PNC, 162). It contains implicitly expressed elements of evaluation of one's own style: "Her moralistic intentions glimmer throughout the poem. / … combined with her lackadaisical style (a mixture / of lofty rhetoric and ordinary speech)." Szymborska's poetry, making corrections to the world and wanting to shape people's attitudes, is far from being moralizing — the reader does not like being educated and that is why certain difficult truths and critiques have to be smuggled in the form of ironic praises, role poetry, and enabling the author to keep a safe distance.[13] Also in "Evaluation …" the poet has indirectly provided a definition of poetry: the "critic's" resentment turns out to be a complement about the transgression of probability and common beliefs and an apology of heresy against clear evidence and ways of thinking through stereotypes. Poetry is supposed to serve to tackle risky topics, but "Whom might this piece convince? / The answer can only be: No one. *Q. E. D.*"

Stanisław Burkot described the poem "Poetry Reading" as an "epitaph for poetry" whose position has been clearly endangered in the modern world, which is oriented towards consumption and commerce and offers entertainment that is perhaps less intellectual or sophisticated, instead featuring strong emotions that do not require any effort. [14]

13 See in this volume: Wojciech Ligęza, "The World in a State of Revision."

14 Stanisław Burkot, "Wisława Szymborska: 'Wieczór autorski,' 'Radość pisania,' 'Pod jedną gwiazdą,'" in *Spotkania z poezją współczesną* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne 1977), 108.

> To be a boxer, or not to be there
> at all. O Muse, where are *our* teeming crowds?
> Twelve people in the room, eight seats to spare —
> it's time to start this cultural affair.
>
> ("Poetry Reading"; PNC, 51)

The number of listeners is not without significance: the purpose of "poetry for twelve" chosen ones, by [Tadeusz] Peiper, and in the future, for the symbolic twelve million, was the participation in society's evolution as well as the creation of the new man. In Szymborska's poem, however, hope turns out to be futile: "Half came inside because it started raining, / the rest are relatives." Every attribute of poetry is subject to demystification: for today's audience, Dante's name is known only from the metaphoric saying and "Dantesque scenes" take place only at a boxing match, "Inferno" through contact with poetry was replaced with "Paradise," the winged Pegasus was translated into a "bobtailed angel," and the burning "fire of poetry" had to change into a small glimmer as you "don't burn the cake!," about which the old man in the first row is dreaming. The romantic faith in the power of words has been ruined — "to be a poet" means that one is "sentenced to hard shelleying for life." The name of the poet was reduced to a common noun and included, by way of substitution, into the idiom: "Be sentenced to hard *work* for life" — that is to create without any response from the readers, exactly for this kind of poetry reading. The figure of C.K. Norwid [in the original or Percy Bysshe Shelley in the English translation], whose work remained unnoticed, misunderstood and disregarded, becomes a sign of the condition of modern poets, but also helps to express the conviction of the lyric "I" about its own value, which truly does not require any confirmation from the "teeming crowds" and swooning women.

"Stage Fright" opens the collection *The People on the Bridge* and is, then, a form of poetic self-definition as well as a means to prepare the readers for the poems; it is a description of the stage fright that accompanies the poet during public appearances as well as before publishing a new book. It is a "poem with its lining on top," as Julian Kornhauser described it, a humorous polemic with the common, romantic-sentimental understanding of the poet's role, with the stereotypical conviction of the readers that something "has to be" because "one says so" and it is "as advertised."[15] Szymborska intensifies the banality of the situation by emphasizing details ("cut-rate sneakers") and the lyric protagonist's clumsiness that clashes with naïve expectations of the listeners who expect an angel in a flowing dress spontaneously and limitlessly spawning poems and

15 Julian Kornhauser, "Notatki w czasie lektury *Ludzi na moście* Wisławy Szymborskiej," *Odra* 3 (1989), 54.

reciting them in candlelight. The animated objects (necessary props for a poet, according to the organizers) become a threat — the "little table" does not wait, it "lurks," candles do not shine, they "smoke." The romantic repertory is, therefore, compromised.

Among the small number of self-reflexive poems, two poems present the incompatibility of the author's and the readers' expectations, and the little interest in lyric of the latter. This produces the question about the purpose of creating — is there anyone (aside from the critics, of course) who still reads poetry? The narcissistic variant is strongly negated: "No, no, no, no one writes 'for himself,' why the mystification?" (PL 1965, no. 28). Accepting the pessimistic version would undermine the raison d'être of the auto-thematic utterances that make the reading easier. The title of one of the poet's newer poems provides the right answer — "Some People Like Poetry":

> Some people —
> that means not everyone.
> Not even most of them, only a few.
> Not counting school, where you have to,
> and poets themselves,
> you might end up with something like two per thousand.
>
> (PNC, 227)

The clarification of the meaning of the word "some people" results in the statement "only a few" since this time there are not even the twelve accidental listeners. The poet is more inclined toward particularity than large numbers. Reading delineates the sphere of freedom (you are not forced to do anything here like in school) and individual choices, so, then, "some people" means at least two people for whom it is worth to write. What counts are exceptions that are not only in literature.

[1995]

Szymborska Ex-Centric

Grażyna Borkowska

1. In Marian Stala's interesting study of Wisława Szymborska' writing, everything deserves attention (except the attempt to ascribe a religious attitude like ecumenism to her). In Szymborska's poems, the critic uncovers "an ability to transgress the limitations that are the result of a non-ambivalent choice," a specific spiritual attitude that embodies freedom, and a wide range of emotions and moods — from joke to despair and tragedy. The joy that comes from reading Szymborska, says Stala, is the joy of participating in an intellectual game initiated by the author, a joy of tasting the subtle tons of her poetry, intertwined with contradictions, fears, doubts, and defiance: "joy of meeting the free, poetically-philosophical meditation, which does not care for a genre-specific utterance, … nor about organizing thoughts in a system."[1] There is one more quotation from the above-mentioned essay:

Every line, every poem by Szymborska presents us with, gives us an image of someone who is internally free. Imagination, as the poet seems to be saying, is a way of communicating freedom. That is why Adam Zagajewski's statement that "the expansion of freedom … is the core of Szymborska's poetic world" is for me still one of the most poignant interpretations of her work.[2]

I agree with both gentlemen, although with some reservation. In Szymborska's case, it is hard to speak about the expansion of freedom (Zagajewski) or the embodiment of freedom (Stala). For the same reasons, the comparison with Polkowski's poem, which embodies the declarative ideal of revolutionary poetry, seems most unfortunate. In the poem "Russia," the young artist insistently asks Majakowski:

> *Wiatr goni liście,* dlaczego poeta
> dzięki tym słowom zsuwa sobie z karku obrożę
> i stoi w słońcu: wolny?[3]

Szymborska never manifests her need of freedom. On the contrary, she hides her independent attitudes and judgments under the mask of naivety and wonder. What

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1 Marian Stala, "Radość czytania Szymborskiej," *Znak,* no. 6 (1990): 34.

2 Ibid., 31.

3 "*The wind chases leaves*, why does a poet / with these words pull down his collar from his neck / and stands in the sun: free?"

is characteristic for her is the dislike of pathos — one of the poles of partiality that she steers clear of in her dialectic arguments — but most importantly the dislike of simplified auto-definitions, self-characterizations, and declarations. Her attitude is far from expressing the romantic faith in the strength and power of poetry. The poet articulated her ambiguous artistic *credo,* not easy to interpret, in the poem "The Joy of Writing" (from the collection *No End of Fun*).[4] Szymborska, "equal to gods," speaks about the space of her poems with Olympic pride:

Other laws, black on white, obtain.
The twinkling of an eye will take as long as I say,
and will, if I wish, divide into tiny eternities,
full of bullets stopped in mid-flight.
Not a thing will ever happen unless I say so.
Without my blessing, not a leaf will fall,
not a blade of grass will bend beneath that little hoofs full stop.

(PNC, 67)

Nevertheless, not long after that a different Szymborska, a master of ink, will dispel the illusion of a created believable world. Indeed, the act of creation does take place, and it concerns, however, a small, intimate space, equal to a piece of paper. "What's here isn't life," says the poet. The joy of writing is necessarily a joy of playing, a joy of doubt and imperfect imitation, a flawed reconstruction of real worries and true cosmic fears. The game does not end here. If it was so, we could write that Szymborska values life over anything else, that she is fascinated by its power, rapacity, and the irreversible factuality of events.

Well, when these intriguing sentences appear:

The joy of writing.
The power of preserving.
Revenge of a mortal hand.

Let us begin our interpretative work from the end — from the "hand." In Kopaliński's *Dictionary of Myths and Cultural Traditions* under the entry "hand" we read:

[I]n Ancient Egypt it was a symbol of courage, in Ancient Rome — a symbol of loyalty, for Zeno of Elea it symbolizes dialectics, and the open hand — oratory. … In medieval art a hand was a symbol of giving orders and dexterity: God was portrayed

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4 Wisława Szymborska, *Sto pociech* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1967). Other cited Szymborska's volumes include: *Wołanie do Yeti* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1957); *Sól* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1962); *Wszelki wypadek* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1972); *Wielka liczba* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1977); *Ludzie na moście* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986).

> as a hand emerging from clouds, a symbol of command (in Hebrew: "iad" — "hand," "power") or blessing (with two fingers raised and rays of light coming from the fingers), or a threat for humans. The king's hand of justice represented juridical power, shedding on the ruler one the most important divine attributes. The hand of the *homo faber*[5] differentiates him from animals.

It would seem that Szymborska's poem revives and confirms all of these archetypical meanings of the word "hand." Perhaps there would be nothing surprising in the fact that an intelligent author knows a lot about her own history and culture, except that the list of meanings compiled by Kopaliński does not form a coherent unit; sometimes the meanings are conflicted, or remain without any direct link to each. Indeed, what connects the hand as a symbol of dialectics with the hand that allegorically represents dexterity and courage?

Whoever feels lost in the meandering complexities of Kopaliński's entry should turn to Szymborska. "The Joy of Writing" precisely addresses the fact that upon seizing creative work, a person transgresses the boundaries that were set for him or her, and breaks the rule of divine order, loyalty, and obedience, becoming an usurper without a chance, but not without courage.

What about Zeno of Elea, dialectics and all the rest? In the fragment quoted above the poet clearly says:

> The twinkling of an eye will take as long as I say,
> and will, if I wish, divide into tiny eternities,
> full of bullets stopped in mid-flight.

We, thus, have the Eleatic paradox of a movement broken into its constitutive elements, into points inertly suspended in space. Therefore, we also have the paradoxical nature of art, its problematic credibility, referencing both truth and falsity, lie and fabrication. Szymborska will recall the Eleatic tradition many times ("Frozen Motion," "Motion," "Laughter"). The poem analyzed also marks a dialectical space, set between contradictions and powerlessness, creation and its illusion, seriousness and humor, obviousness and paradox, movement and stillness, a genuine activity and the unproductiveness of an empty gesture. It is built upon a semantic opposition of two images, which also disrupts Kopaliński's entry: a hand stretched out towards the absolute, mediating between the human and divine order, and a clenched fist, rebellious, dangerous, and threatening.

Let us put aside "The Joy of Writing" for a moment. I would not like to focus only on analyzing one selected poem, especially since it is well known, often quoted, perhaps even a "textbook" example. It is time for preliminary conclusions. I believe that in Szymborska's case it is not possible to reconcile

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5 Władysław Kopaliński, *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1991), 977-978.

the two themes about which both critics speak in one breath — the problem of freedom, understood as a foundation of existence, and creative freedom, identified with an ease of writing, a variability of moods evolving into joking, playfulness, and relieving the tension.

Let us for a moment focus on the second element of the above-mentioned pair — creative freedom. For me it seems much more dramatic than for Marian Stala, as it were; Szymborska moves freely through a "devirginized" space, marked with an inability, incompleteness, insatiability, a territory enduringly devoid of the extremes — impulsive joy and piercing tragedy. The human world has its own measure, a specific range of emotions; it rarely reaches the upper C, and often shrinks in a defensive gesture in face of a vision of final destruction. The antique prophetess is able to find meaning in the strange behavior of her fellow men:

> I'm sorry that my voice was hard.
> Look down on yourselves from the stars, I cried,
> look down on yourselves from the stars.
> They heard me and lowered their eyes.
>
> They lived within life.
> Pierced by that great wind.
> Condemned.
> Trapped from birth in departing bodies.
> But in them they bore a moist hope,
> a flame fuelled by its own flickering.
> They really knew what a moment means,
> oh any moment, any one at all
> before —
>
> ("Soliloquy for Cassandra"; PNC, 83—84)

People correctly interpret the words of the Apocalypse, yet those marked by death from the day they were born know how to live in-between, in the moment *before,* in face of the gathering storm, the illusion of unawareness, the false oblivion. "An odd planet, and those on it are odd, too. / They're subject to time, but they won't admit it" — tells us Szymborska in the title poem from the collection *The People on the Bridge.* The poet's understanding attitude is — as we will see — far from resembling the anthropocentrism of the Renaissance, and does not translate into a glorification of the human world — "good and strong / are still two different men" ("The Century's Decline"; PNC, 198). Szymborska searches for the right key; she wants to assess human affairs using human measures, and therefore she remains within a specific range of moods, one that per definition excludes extreme perspectives.

As Stala writes, therefore it is not only that the author of *No End of Fun* intelligently shuns from dogmatic and one-sided solutions. To use a metaphor taken from "The Railroad Station," in Szymborska's world they do not have, an

"objective existence." Szymborska's world persists (whether it is good or bad — who can say?) without the stigma of divinity, metaphysical depth, coherence, overriding sense, sometimes even without logic and reason. And yet it persists, arousing astonishment, amusement, disbelief ("Astonishment," "I'm Working on the World," "Miracle Fair," "View with a Grain of Sand" and other poems).

The miracle of the world is a miracle of persistence, a miracle of turning thousands of possibilities into one necessity, the necessity of being. Szymborska writes about this in the poem "Water." All of the rivers and streams meet in the one backwater, then spread across the world — and finally meet again. In this way "the Pacific is the Rudawa's meek tributary, / the same stream that floated in a little cloud over Paris" ("Water"; PNC, 58). In nature's closed circuit, it is not identity that is so important, but rather persisting, being, the sense of participation that is unattainable for humans. In Szymborska's poetry, the difference between the material world and the human world is reduced to the difference between what is necessary and what is possible. In the river of time a person is only one figure of being, a "solitary fish," "a fish apart" ("In Heraclitus' River"), but also a fish that thinks, loves, asks, and doubts. Here Szymborska's voice is similar in tone to European philosophy, which has for centuries pointed to the duality of human nature, its association with different ontological orders, etc. Finishing this theme here, two issues are worth mentioning. In the poem "View with a Grain of Sand" Szymborska provocatively wonders about how the world would look like if not for the organizing work of the human eye. Moreover, in the poems that will be discussed below, Szymborska illustrates some of the consequences that result from adopting certain philosophical premises. Ultimate measures are unknown to humans. So therefore, we create, awkwardly copying the divine creation ("The Joy of Writing"). We pretend to love:

> No one in this family has ever died of love.
> No food for myth and nothing magisterial.
> Consumptive Romeos? Juliets diphtherial?
> A doddering second childhood was enough.
> No death-defying vigils, love-struck poses
> over unrequited letters strewn with tears!
>
> ("Family Album"; PNC, 72)

We live hungrily, pandering to life, while it inevitably carries us towards the end of existence:

> I tug at life by its leaf hem:
> will it stop for me, just once,
> momentarily forgetting
> to what end it runs and runs?
>
> ("Allegro Ma Non Troppo"; PNC, 132)

We fear death, but we subdue this fear with a weak consolation:

> There's no life
> that couldn't be immortal
> if only for a moment.
>
> ("On Death, Without Exaggeration"; PNC, 189)

We hope for nothing good, yet still give birth to our offspring, wishing to each other:

> May delivery be easy,
> may our child grow and be well.
> Let him be happy from time to time
> and leap over abysses.
>
> ("A Tale Begun"; PNC, 211)

Szymborska's poetry introduces several tropes, all of which are abandoned after several poems or verses, and thus never create any solid order. Humans cannot expect to embody the ideal since we have not internalized a satisfactory model — but how even could we? The miracle of the world is a non-speculative miracle of persistence, as a matter of fact, adversary to the self-constituted, separate, and individual human being, who is not satisfied by participation, but seeks full subjectivity. Szymborska's poetry is full of philosophical traps and conflicts between what is general and particular, individual and collective, moral and amoral, permanent and temporary, human and inhuman, mine and someone else's, female and male, sincere and fake, historical and natural.

Szymborska does not challenge, nor correct, nor try to replace these conflicts, embedded in European tradition, with any other system. She knows their weight, as she experiences their actuality herself as a woman, poet, lover, mother, an imperfect and mortal being, a subject and object of aesthetic acts, a tourist, cook, patient, an ex-child, and a soon-to-be old woman.

Is Szymborska's poetry, therefore, a philosophical notebook, a recollection of intelligent battles with the world? The poet sometimes presents a teasing praise of reason ("An Opinion on the Question of Pornography"), but she is much more fascinated by the foundation of being, or as she calls it in one of her poems, the "existence [that] has its own reason for being." ("Possibilities"; PNC, 215).

2. What, at least on first sight, seems to be crucial for the originality of Szymborska's poetry, is the specific location of the lyric subject. The poet's voice often amuses and surprises because it comes from unexpected places — from the corner of the room, from behind the stage, an exhibition, from big city gutters, from within a dream, deep underwater. Szymborska's poetry is a modest *glossa* written on the

margins of the great book of the world, the sixth act of a drama, the reverse of a painting.

The things you see "from the kitchen" or before "the curtain's fall … hits the floor":

> here one hand quickly reaches for a flower,
> there another hand picks up a fallen sword.
> Only then, one last, unseen, hand
> does its duty
> and grabs me by the throat.
>
> ("Theatre Impressions"; 114—115)

Szymborska replies: the essence of being becomes visible in the cracks, at the edge of beings. Is has a momentary, revealing, epiphanic character. It bursts into light just like a match that lights up darkness. A bream of light that falls on the stage before the curtain's fall makes it possible to see the human face of art. Sweat, awkwardness or the truth.

If we follow Virginia Woolf's epiphany-match metaphor, Szymborska's poem can be interpreted in this way: a casual observer can only grasp brief moments of truth. If we refer to Lacan, we could say that a failure or a fiasco (the inattention of the theatre's stage manager) is best in revealing the personal, human character of the created reality. Finally, we can refer to the interpretation favored by the so-called feminist critique. I am thinking about Nancy J. Vickers's excellent essay dedicated to Cellini.[6] The American scholar convincingly argued that human truth can be seen behind even the most rigid artistic convention, and in Cellini's case it is truth strongly tinged with Eros: the Renaissance artist fulfilled the guidelines of sculptural conventions, and at the same time was able to express his intimate life, quarrels with lovers, the cruelty of sex connected with coercion and power, the ambitions of a disappointed male. According to Vickers, this tale of passion and unsatisfied love is encased in bronze reliefs that decorate the palace in Fontainebleau, on the stones that for a casual observer only speak about the mythological figure of Diana.

Szymborska acts similarly, that is according to her temperament and intellect. She does not give into the material literality of Dutch painting. Using her position of an unconventional observer, she reflects on the sources of Baroque art. Plump bodies, full with food and desire, awaken such reflections:

> O pumpkin plump! O pumped-up corpulence
> inflated double by disrobing
> and tripled by your tumultuous poses!
> O fatty dishes of love!

6 See, Nancy J. Vickers, "The Mistress in the Masterpiece," in *The Poetics of Gender,* eds. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

> Their skinny sisters woke up earlier,
> before dawn broke and shone upon the painting.
> And no one saw how they went single file
> along the canvas's unpainted side.
>
> Exiled by style. Only their ribs stood out.
> With birdlike feet and palms, they strove
> to take wing on their jutting shoulder blades.
>
> ("Rubens' Women"; PNC, 47

The unpainted side of the canvas clearly shows what is lacking in Rubens' art, what kind of images the master is wary of, and what the background of his art is. Sensuality hides the fear of death. And although the angelic figures of "other" sisters function outside of the scene depicted in the paintings, we can recognize the first signs of death, the attributes of decay and destruction: pupils that flee into flesh, fermenting blood, the sounds made by those sleeping. Szymborska's poems prove their own reliability: the poet experiences the world ex-centrically, acknowledging not only the center, but the peripheries, moving the eye to the edge of the frame. She uses this strategy of poetic description numerous times, e.g. in the poem "A Medieval Miniature," a remarkable stylization of an archaic idyll, or in the poem significantly titled "The Rest."

When looking at an idealized image from the past, the poet writes to its creator with understanding: "This same, however, has seen to the scene's balance: / it has given them their Hell in the next frame." ("A Medieval Minature"; PNC, 157). In another poem, when looking at Ophelia standing behind the scenes and counting, "she, Polonius's true / daughter — the leaves pulled out of her hair, she adds sarcastically: "*Non omnis moriar* of love" ("The Rest"; PNC, 34).

Where Szymborska appears, everything gains importance. In Paris the poet looks not at the cathedrals, but at an urban clochard ("Clochard"). During a night of poetry reading she thinks about a sport arena during a boxing match, about the crowd cheering with emotions. Meanwhile:

> In the first row, a sweet old man's soft snore:
> he dreams his wife's alive again. What's more,
> she's making him that tart she used to bake.
> Aflame, but carefully — don't burn his cake! —
> we start to read. O Muse.
>
> ("Poetry Reading"; PNC, 51)

Some years later, on her way to another meeting with readers, she looks at her non-angelic posture in "cut-rate sneakers" ("Stage Fright"; PNC, 179). When entering a museum, she asks: "Here's a fan — where is the maiden's blush? / Here are swords — where is the ire?" ("Museum"; PNC, 30). When gazing upon

the map of the world, she thinks about the principle of political divisions: “And how can we talk of order over-all / when the very placement of the stars / leaves us doubting just what shines for whom?” (“Psalm”; PNC, 148).

The poet’s ability to identify with beings and situations is clearly visible in Szymborska’s bestiaries. They are special because of the choice of subjects described and their character of contemplation. Why do we limit the world’s drama only to human experiences, that is, to our own?

> And so the dead beetle on the path
> lies unmourned and shining in the sun.
> One glance at it will do for meditation —
> clearly nothing much has happened to it.
> Important matters are reserved for us,
> for our life and our death, a death
> that always claims the right of way.
>
> (“Seen from Above”; PNC, 151)

From the perspective of a dead beetle, a sleeping turtle (“Sen starego żółwia,” [“The dream of an old turtle”]), or a mocking monkey (“The Monkey,” “Brueghel’s Two Monkeys”), the superiority of the human world becomes questionable, as the world is full of cruelty, empty praises, inexcusable stupidity. Szymborska’s monkey is excellent and meaningful:

> he fills up mirrors with his indiscreet
> self-mockery (a lesson for us, too);
> the poor relation, who knows all about us,
> though we don’t greet each other when we meet.
>
> (“The Monkey”; PNC, 28)

The tarsier is equally excellent and meaningful, when he asks:

> Good morning, lord and master,
> what will you give me
> for not taking anything from me?
>
> (“Tarsier”; PNC, 98)

Szymborska also likes to use the peripheral dimensions of time. She explores in periods that are unpoetically distant from contemporaneity, more archeological than historical. She constructs her diluvial, Paleolithic, distant lineage that proves that evolution also brings loses: “An island or two sank on me, they’re lost at sea. / I’m not even sure exactly where I left my claws, / who’s got my fur coat, who’s living in my shell.” (“A Speech at the Lost-and-Found”; PNC, 127) A similar thought comes from Tomas Mann’s mouth:

Dear mermaids, it was bound to happen.
Beloved fauns and honorable angels,
evolution has emphatically cast you out.

("Thomas Mann"; PNC, 97)

Both poems are written in the tone of a poetic joke since humor and laughter more visibly emphasize the poet's external, peripheral location in relation to the reality of the phenomena described. From a distance or from a margin, Szymborska also knows how to look at herself. Her own existence is a confusing fruition of a happy accident. Szymborska will say: it happened, I am a spark ("Could Have," "Falling from the Sky"). But this way of understanding the essence of being is not without consequences for her understanding of the essence of freedom. According to Szymborska, the freedom that is available for humans does not have an absolute character. It is realized in the sphere of certain choices, small and not always significant:

I prefer movies.
I prefer cats.
I prefer the oaks along the Warta.
I prefer Dickens to Dostoyevsky.

("Possibilities"; PNC, 214)

Szymborska does not fetishize freedom. She enjoys her own existence, remaining conscious of the limitations, obscured parallels, and randomness of individual being. She experiences a "joy of writing," remaining conscious of her own dependence on cultural and civilization patterns, and conscious of the limitations of poetic imagination and experimentation ("In Broad Daylight," "Wrong Number").

Why does Szymborska choose to remain in the peripheries with such stubbornness and persistence, why does she observe the world from behind the stage, avoiding? Szymborska believes that the individual and fragmented truths, embedded in experience, related to the nature of life, are especially revealing. She believes in the need for the constant renewing of meanings, in the movement of thought that follows the changing reality of the world. The poet does not find any premises in the human conditions that would justify abstract thinking. In the poem "Utopia" she appears as a determined opponent of logocentrism. The order of the world is not tailored for humans:

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

> For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
> and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
> turn without exception to the sea.
>
> ("Utopia"; PNC, 173)

General truths that pertain to everyone, in fact, do not apply to anyone. They are a perfidious usurpation. People take them for granted ("Parable"). Szymborska does the same — averse to speculations and abstract systems, invested in the world, the multitude of its forms and shapes ("Birthday"). Sometimes this surplus terrifies and depresses the poet, sometimes she feels lost and alone. Szymborska's poetry offers at least three strategies for surviving the crisis of consciousness and crisis of existence.

3. Following these therapeutic strategies, the poet fully incorporates her biological and social role. She becomes a woman and talks like a woman. The first strategy is the strategy of withdrawal. Szymborska announces her desire to quit the game. She is prepared to give up from the pleasure of *existing* for the possibility of solid *being*. I suggest that we read "Conversation with a Stone" not through Sartre's or Tischner's philosophy, but through e.g. the works of Orzeszkowa and Nałkowska. In times of despair the heroines of their romances react identically to Szymborska's lyric subject — they return to "themselves" and confine themselves to their own microcosms, which is to be both a source of calmness and fulfillment. In Orzeszkowa's case, the altruistic version prevails (do one's job and believe in the seed sown), and in Nałkowska's — the narcissistic one (be yourself for yourself). Szymborska is an evolutionist: she wants to smoothly inscribe her accidental existence within the cosmic order. She wishes to find herself, at least for once, not on the margin, but in the center of the world, where she can experience the nurturing feeling of being "in the right place." These dreams come true in the poem "Landscape":

> In the old master's landscape,
> the trees have roots beneath the oil paint,
> the path undoubtedly reaches its goal,
> the signature is replaced by a stately blade of grass,
> it's a persuasive five in the afternoon,
> May has been gently, yet firmly, detained,
> so I've lingered, too. Why, of course, my dear,
> I am the woman there, under the ash tree.
>
> ("Landscape"; PNC, 70)

Generally, however, all that remains is a nostalgia for being self-identical, homogeneous, consistent with the order of the world ("Our Ancestors' Short

Lives") or an awareness of the inability to carry out the whole plan, which, in a moment of irritation, the poet will call "idiotic / onionoid perfections." ("The Onion"; PNC, 166)

The second source of rescue (we will see whether permanent) is eroticism. For Szymborska (as well as Pawlikowska or Poświatowska, therefore in the genres of women's literature), love allows for the integration of the self: "I let myself be invented / modeled on my own reflection / in his eyes" — says the poet in the poem "Over Wine." The loss of love is ultimate and threatens to become a failure of nonexistence:

> When he isn't looking at me,
> I try to catch my reflection
> on the wall. And see the nail
> where a picture used to be.
>
> ("Over Wine"; PNC, 46)

Szymborska does not know how to construct calmness on such unstable foundations. Her love stories are dramas that frequently refer to their prototypes in literature; therefore, they are modified by the writer's consciousness ("Ballad"), or confessions of inability, or the lack of fulfillment ("I am too close…,""Ballad," "The Tower of Babel").

The poet also attempts to soften the feeling of the internal rupture or anxiety in a third way. This critical strategy is, again, characteristic for women's literature. Szymborska searches for contact with other women, weaves a delicate thread of women's solidarity. She stubbornly tries to prove that she is identical to other women, and sometimes even worse than them:

> My sister's desk drawers don't hold old poems,
> and her handbag doesn't hold new ones.
> When my sister asks me over for lunch,
> I know she doesn't want to read me her poems.
> Her soups are delicious without ulterior motives.
> Her coffee doesn't spill on manuscripts.
>
> ("In Praise of My Sister"; PNC, 159)

Her image of the "other" woman is far from being aristocratic, or overly consistent. About her heroine she would say that she: "curls up with Jaspers or *Ladies' Home Journal*" ("Portrait of a Woman"; PNC, 161). This sentence can refer to Szymborska herself, an author of reviews published in the magazine *Życie Literackie*. The poet reviewed both great works and modest publications for common readers, such as self-help books, atlases, and cookbooks. This mixed collection is an evidence not only of the author's sense of humor — it is a choice taken completely seriously, an act of solidarity with the reading public.

When Szymborska states that sometimes she is worse than a person that we would consider to be an ordinary woman, she wants to communicate that this ordinariness means much more than we think. In the poem "Lot's Wife," the poet engages in an exquisite transvaluation of such mediocrity, solidified in the myth averse to the heroine:

They say I looked back out of curiosity.
But I could have had other reasons.
I looked back mourning my silver bowl.
Carelessly, while tying my sandal strap.
So I wouldn't have to keep staring at the righteous nape
of my husband Lot's neck.
From the sudden conviction that if I dropped dead
he wouldn't so much as hesitate.

("Lot's Wife"; PNC, 149)

Poems that praise women's tenderness ("Going Home"), attachment to life ("Into the Ark"), and femininity as such, have not dominated Szymborska's poetic craft, as she confesses herself:

My apologies to everything that I can't be everywhere at once.
My apologies to everyone that I can't be each woman and each man.

("Under One Small Star"; PNC, 142)

As a result, Szymborska has rejected feminist alternative strategies. She could not settle with "idiotic / onionoid perfections" and being for the sake of being ("The Onion"). In love she remains alert, dividing herself into "flesh and poetry." ("Autonomy") While attempting to achieve solidarity with similar beings, she herself stands in her own way ("Under One Small Star").

4. Szymborska's poetic proposal is stunning. It is a consistent critique of the universalist thinking, which is abstract and imposed by the restrictive, "patriarchal" order. In this sense, she remains close to deconstructivist practices, and feminism. But neither formula — nor deconstruction, nor feminism — does justice to the richness of her poetry.

Almost a hundred and fifty years earlier, Narcyza Żmichowska in her debut poem wrote about the amazing condition of a poet, who — through internalizing different experiences — is not, and cannot be, "either a man, nor a woman."[7]

7 Narcyza Żmichowska, "The Poet's Happiness," in her *Essays*, vol. 1, eds. Piotr Chmielowski (Warszawa: Nakładem Michała Glücksberga, 1885).

Women's Perspective in Szymborska's Poetry — an Attempt at a Postfeminist Perspective

Bożena Karwowska

"Women constitute about half of Earth's population, similarly as men, and this is not in any way reflected in poetry"[1] — Małgorzata Baranowska wrote in her excellent essay in which she also examines the poetry of Wisława Szymborska. "Gender does not determine the shape of a work of art"[2] — Grażyna Borkowska noticed, analyzing the characteristics of women's literature. It seems that in literature the fact that a writer is a woman is becoming less relevant, compared with the question of whether and how the author can express her femininity in the language of literature. Here lies the problem as no one really knows what it exactly means to express femininity in literature, and what this femininity is or should be in literature. According to Borkowska: "We stand … rather helpless, facing the phenomenon of women's literature/poetry, believing that definitions paradoxically do not satisfy the need for clarity embedded in every utterance, and clear utterances are never completely true."[3] The problem is, however, much more complicated, as it generally deals with the notion of "femininity" and the different ways of defining it. For example, femininity, as defined in the masculine world order, signifies a complete (or almost complete) subordination to stereotypes and patterns that have been created for women by men. Feminist critique attempts to deal with the conventional (patriarchal) uses of this category, adjusting its meaning according to its own needs. Furthermore, what we call "femininity" refers to two different concepts: biological sex (*female*) or gender, which is a collection of features/values (*femininity*); and the culturally determined relation of their meanings is one of the subjects of feminist analysis. It is no less significant that in the Polish language the two concepts are not differentiated.

The problem with the notions (or perhaps notions) of "femininity" seems to transgress the frames of terminological troubles. Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out

1 Małgorzata Baranowska, "Szymborska and Świrszczyńska — dwa bieguny codzienności," in *Sporne postaci polskiej literatury współczesnej,* eds. Alina Brodzka and Lidia Burska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 1996), 17.

2 Grażyna Borkowska, "Metafora drożdży. Co to jest literatura/poezja kobieta," *Teksty Drugie,* no. 3/4 (1995): 38.

3 Ibid.

that in literature defining the most important women's problems and the proposed solutions …are shaped in such a way as to meet the needs of fundamentally *men's* problems … women appear in literature … as a comfortable solution for men's dilemma.[4] According to Wolff, a sufficiently "anti-stereotypical" women's literature does not yet exist, which — in her opinion — is connected with the fact that in their literary work women have also followed too closely the models created by men. According to German Ritz,[5] in Polish poetry the female voice, dominated by masculine imagination, had to pave its way in a world of stereotypical images of women and femininity, which were built as a part of the masculine symbolic order. Interestingly, these opinions — although they are strikingly accurate in relation to the general phenomenon of women's writing — have a rather limited reference to Szymborska's poetry, which nonetheless is not especially popular among feminists.[6]

The fact that Szymborska's "femininity" has largely escaped the attention of feminist criticism[7] is perhaps understandable since her poetry does not focus on women's problems, and does not attack the masculine world order; in other words, Szymborska's poetry is not feminist poetry. Many feminist categories[8] — especially those emphasizing the political aspect of literature and literary criticism — simply do not fit, are not effective when confronted with Szymborska's poetry, and are unable even to describe it properly. It is not a coincidence that when attempting to define women's literature/poetry — and assuming that "every time, when the gender of the speaking subject is emphasized, every time, when the relation between the body and the text is revealed — we meet an example of women's literature/poetry" — Borkowska did not use any example from Szymborska's poetry.[9] An attempt to use the feminist categories of "therapeutic strategies" has

4 Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature," in *Woman: An Issue,* eds. Edwards et al. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), 207, 208, 217.

5 German Ritz, "Dyskurs płci w ujęciu porównawczym," *Teksty Drugie,* no. 5 (1999): 117–123.

6 The only attempt of applying feminist categories in analyzing Szymborska's poetry known to me is Grażyna Borkowska's text "Szymborska Ex-centric" [presented in this volume]. It is important to remember that since its publication both feminist critique and Szymborska's work underwent a rich development.

7 Interestingly, Szymborska's name — the only Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner — appears only once, in footnotes, in the recently published study on feminism as methodology and research perspective. See: *Krytyka feministyczna. Siostra teorii i historii literatury,* eds. Grażyna Borkowska and Liliana Sikorska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2000).

8 Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, "Introduction: The Story So Far," in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism,* eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Blackwell, 1997): 1–15.

9 Grażyna Borkowska, "Metafora drożdży," 31–44.

brought the scholar to the conclusion that "[a]s a result, Szymborska has rejected the feminist alternative strategies."[10] But at the same time, it is still poetry written by a woman, a fact that is nonetheless significant.

These are not the only categories used to describe poetry that critics have not yet associated with Szymborska. Borkowska notes that "she is far from expressing the romantic faith in the strength and power of poetry."[11] It is worth clarifying — Szymborska is not a romantic prophet, nor a patriotic poet, she does not know nor understand more than her readers, and so she does not lecture them, and is not someone chosen by the gods etc. The masculine form is not a coincidence; Szymborska is simply not someone who is regarded a poet in Polish poetry — a role almost exclusively reserved for men, and is not a part of the existing patriarchal world order, does not accept the traditional models of a romantic poet. At the same time, her poetic persona has nothing to do with the Platonic (or demonic) mistress; or the Polish Mother who teaches patriotism to others; or with any other role designed for women within this tradition. Borkowska accurately identified that when she wrote:

> Szymborska's poetic proposal is stunning. It is a consistent critique of the universalist thinking, abstract, imposed by the restrictive, "patriarchal" order. In this sense, she remains close to deconstructivist practices — and feminism. But neither formula — nor deconstruction, nor feminism — does justice to the richness of her poetry.[12]

Szymborska's poetic voice, although completely and admittedly feminine, asks for a womanly-feminist description, going beyond categories and formulas designed to fight for the recognition of the value and position of women in literature/culture. Szymborska's poetry is, therefore, a challenge for feminist criticism, although it also meets many of its requirements.

Szymborska's poetry does not fight with the existing, traditional gender discourse, because in many ways it does not notice it. It proceeds over it. It does not reject it, but also does not accept it. This also refers to all kinds of new cultural products, e.g. talk shows, generally dedicated to a predominantly female audience, which builds a culture of verbal therapy dealing with problems once seen as intimate. It is as if the poet did not notice that the roles of women and men are explicitly prescribed on many levels, and their hierarchies are culturally determined. In other words, Szymborska's poetry does not engage in a direct discussion with tradition, nor with modernity, though it is created within the frames of their discourses. Małgorzata Baranowska writes that "[s]ometimes it seems that Szymborska's poetry comes from the past, a time when the battle

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10 See [in this volume]: Grażyna Borkowska, "Szymborska Ex-centric."

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

for women's position, and therefore the position of the human — men and women — is no longer necessary".[13] But perhaps Szymborska's standpoint is similar to that proposed by Kristeva, who rejects the male/female dichotomy as metaphysical?[14] One of the most interesting features of Szymborska's femininity is the creation of models that are not subject to categorization, adopted as part of the dichotomous discourses of the patriarchal society. In Szymborska's poetry, creating hierarchies that ignore the existing order, looking at the world through the lens of what is domestic and private, and what for centuries was linked with women's domain, is not something worse, not a battle, but rather a non-antagonizing deconstruction of stereotypes that glorify the male and masculine tradition on a daily basis.

Szymborska's poetic persona does not refer to itself by contrasting a woman with a man, but first and foremost remains human, free of the sex-gender division. In her poems humanity is, thus, defined thorough obviousness, a distinction from "the other." Otherness helps to realize the difference, but it can also transform itself into a norm, as in the poem "The Onion" from the volume *A Larger Number*:

> The onion, now that's something else.
> Its innards don't exist.
> Nothing but pure onionhood
> fills this devout onionist.
>
> (PNC, 166)

The notion of "people" is dichotomous in itself — this, as well as other, stereotypical product of culture and the normal living human being — as in the poem "Wrong Number," where the great people presented on paintings:

> Above it all, in scarlet robes or nude,
> they view nocturnal fuss as simply rude.
> …
> And if some silly man calling from town
> refuses to give up, put the receiver down,
> though he's got the wrong number? He lives, so he errs.
>
> (PNC, 113)

The differences can be not only biological (natural), but also artificial, constructed by people, often for their own pleasure and peace:

> To preserve our peace of mind, animals die
> more shallowly: they aren't deceased, they're dead.

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13 Małgorzata Baranowska, "Szymborska and Świrszczyńska…," 8.

14 Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism,* ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Blackwell 1997), 201–217.

They leave behind, we'd like to think, less feeling and less world,
departing, we suppose, from a stage less tragic.

("Seen from Above"; PNC, 151)

Looking at someone from a distance, we can see the (biological) homogeneity of species, ignoring the (cultural) gender differences. Szymborska's feminine "I" is equally human as any "other" — that is, the man. In her poetry the man is located not in the center of the world, but in the position of "the other," and the categories he has created multiply and become only one of many possibilities. The center is yet not occupied by — as one would expect, according to the logic of patriarchal dichotomies — a woman, but a single being "declined in human form" ("A Speech at the Lost-and-Found"; PNC, 127). This singularity or individuality is very important. As she points out in the poem "Among the Multitudes":

I didn't get a choice either,
but I can't complain.
I could have been someone
much less separate.
Someone from an anthill, shoal, or buzzing swarm

(PNC, 267)

Because, essentially, she always remains a human being, an individual being, Szymborska's poetic persona is almost never a man, although it may be — and rather often is — a woman.[15] In its "genderless" form, it is a person or being (the use of feminine grammatical forms is very significant here) that knows about its past incarnations, although, as she herself puts it in the poem "A Speech at the Lost-and-Found":

I'm not even sure exactly where I left my claws,
who's got my fur coat, who's living in my shell.

There is no difference between genders — the forms of the past tense point both to feminine and masculine — "only just whittled with his hand né fin," as Szymborska ironically speaks about a human in the poem "No End of Fun." The division is present on another plane. In Szymborska's poem, the understated process of evolution, of the gradual transformation — temporarily — into a human form, is the result of the actions that are (in a common, metaphorical sense) more characteristic for women than men: changing one's skin, losing one's senses, turning a blind eye, waving hands or shrugging shoulders. In other words, we are and have become humans not thanks to what is masculine, grand, and heroic; not

15 Probably the only poem, in which Szymborska employs the masculine form in the first-person singular is "Report from the Hospital," published in the collection *No End of Fun* (1967).

thanks to what is rational (masculine), but what is hysterical (feminine); not planned and scientifically cognizable processes, but coincidence — one of the notions crucial for Szymborska's poetry — forms the best and most complete explanation of the history of humanity. This understated, but clearly implicated, courageously feminist and yet, in some way, obvious description of the world (seen through the women's "common" wisdoms) is, therefore, a perspective characteristic for Szymborska's poetry. Once more we will quote Grażyna Borkowska:

> What, at least on first sight, seems to be crucial for the originality of Szymborska's poetry, is the specific location of the lyric subject. The poet's voice often amuses and surprises because it comes from unexpected places — from the corner of the room, from behind the stage, an exhibition, from big city gutters, from within a dream, deep underwater. Szymborska's poetry is a modest *glossa* written on the margins of the great book of the world, the sixth act of a drama, the reverse of a painting.[16]

In other words, it is a voice coming from places marginalized by the patriarchal tradition and, thus, symbolically assigned to women. And, perhaps paradoxically, it comes to be seen as a perspective even more interesting than the "centre," symbolically assigned to men.

By asking the question "Where is she?," Hélène Cixous presented several oppositions:

> Activity / Passivity
> Sun / Moon
> Culture / Nature
> Day / Night
>
> Father / Mother
> Head / Heart
> Intelligible / Sensitive
> Logos / Pathos[17]

In Szymborska's poetry a woman does not feel her inferiority (one that is the result of adopting the masculine symbolic order) and does not wish to change places with a man since she does not consider him someone better. Therefore, negating neither her own place, nor the combination of metaphors, she negates (or at least challenges) the hierarchy inherent to the pairs quoted above. That is why the feminine persona in Szymborska's poems often refers to men with irony:

> This adult male. This person on earth.
> Ten billion nerve cells. Ten pints of blood

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16 See [in this volume], Grażyna Borkowska, "Szymborska Ex-centric."

17 Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," in *The Feminist Reader. Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism,* eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Blackwell, 1997), 91.

> pumped by ten ounces of heart.
> This object took three billion years to emerge.
>
> ("A Film from the Sixties"; PNC, 94)

In her poetry, irony seems to be so strongly directed at men that every time Szymborska speaks ironically about people in general, she not only uses the [Polish] masculine noun "man" [człowiek], but rather the imagery used to indicate a male individual:

> With that ring in his nose, with that toga, that sweater.
> He's no end of fun, for all you say.
> Poor little beggar.
> A human, if ever we saw one.
>
> ("No End of Fun"; PNC, 107)

In this quote, it is shown how a man is perceived from the perspective of a home:

> Tomorrow he'll give a lecture
> on homeostasis in metagalactic cosmonautics.
> For now, though, he has curled up and gone to sleep.
>
> ("Going Home"; PNC, 123)

Feminine irony (which precisely characterizes Szymborska's poetry) is born at the crossroads of home and the expectations of a man that must face in the outer world. In the poem quoted it includes a status and success in professional life, but it can also go beyond these boundaries, as in the poem "Smiles," in which masculinity is associated not with pity, but amusement that comes from fake behaviors that are staged for show.

> And that's why statesmen have to smile.
> Their pearly whites mean they're still full of cheer.
> The game's complex, the goal's far out of reach,
> the outcome's still unclear — once in a while,
> we need a friendly, gleaming set of teeth.
>
> (PNC, 153)

What is public and high (and thus masculine) can be also simply funny. It is hard not to agree with the not-too-serious (although true) observation that: "Dentistry turned to diplomatic skill / promises us a Golden Age tomorrow." In other worlds, the world of men cannot be taken seriously in its entirety.

It should not be, however, disregarded as it influences humanity as a whole. The model of masculinity nevertheless also includes heroism, for which (as in the poem "Pietá") it is the woman who has to pay later, becoming something of an exhibit in a museum dedicated to a great man. Szymborska does not question the essence of masculinity or heroism, which is a natural consequence of being a man

(especially as a part of the patriotically oriented Polish tradition). She requires her readers to know this tradition and understand its rules, at the same time presenting it from a slightly astonishing perspective of everyday existence. For example, in the poem "In Broad Daylight," the heroic death is used to emphasize the common lack of understanding in regard to the uniqueness of the miracle that is the ordinary life itself.

> Sometimes someone would
> yell from the doorway: "Mr. Baczynski,* phone call for you" —
> and there'd be nothing strange about that
> being him, about him standing up, straightening his sweater,
> and slowly moving toward the door.
>
> At this sight no one would
> stop talking, no one would
> freeze in mid-gesture, mid-breath
> because this commonplace event would
> be treated — such a pity —
> as a commonplace event.
>
> (PNC, 192—193)

For Szymborska everyday experience constitutes life, as in the poem "Museum;" but also, life consists of the presence of emotions and the ability to make mistakes, as in the poem "Wrong Number" and "He lives, so he errs." Everything that the patriarchal tradition places on the side of the irrational, it does so as to represent the woman. Even when, as in the poem "Museum," life becomes synonymous with a battle, it is just a race with a dress:

> The crown has outlasted the head.
> The hand has lost out to the glove.
> The right shoe has defeated the foot.
> As for me, I am still alive, you see.
> The battle with my dress still rages on.
>
> (PNC, 30)

In the poems where the poetic persona clearly identifies with a woman, irony is replaced with "joyous pity." It is not the only difference between the way in which Szymborska refers to a human being and a woman in particular. As a human, he or she is most importantly a biological being. As a woman, she not only remembers the previous stages of her biological development, but also is conscious of the cultural conditioning of her own existence. As the beautiful Helena she visits Troy, she understands Lot's wife, or she is simply Cassandra. She remembers figures that have created her as a cultural stereotype (figures that she "was" as a cultural construct) and which she understands to such a degree as to be able to become one

of the female figures of the past. In the poem "Landscape" (already painted as a "woman under the ash tree") she says:

> I don't know the games of the heart.
> I've never seen my children's father naked.
> I don't see the crabbed and blotted draft
> that hides behind the Song of Songs.
> What I want to say comes in ready-made phrases.
> I never use despair, since it isn't really mine,
> only given to me for safekeeping.
>
> (PNC, 70)

The female persona of Szymborska's poems also remembers figures that she was before, in the past, for example, herself from the childhood. She is able to look at them from a distance, regarding them as "the other," as in the poem "Laughter":

> The little girl I was —
> I know her, of course.
> I have a few snapshots
> from her brief life.
> I feel good-natured pity
> for a couple of little poems.
> I remember a few events.
>
> (PNC, 73)

In the poem "A Memory" from the collection *Moment* a look at herself from the past is at the same time a reflection — conditioned by relationships with men — on the relations between women from different generations.

> I thought: I'll call you,
> tell you, don't come just yet,
> they're predicting rain for days.
>
> Only Agnieszka, a widow,
> met the lovely girl with a smile
>
> (M, 43)

While the description of "her old self" is a somewhat a frequent motif in Szymborska's poems, and rather similar in tone to the sentimentally-ironic relation to other "future women" — e.g. thirteen-year olds ("A Moment in Troy") or little girls ("A Little Girl Tugs at the Tablecloth"), it would seem that perceiving a woman as "the other" happens more rarely. In this context, the poem mentioned earlier, "A Memory," is an exception while it may also be a preview of something new in Szymborska's poetry. Nevertheless, the tone in which women can speak about a potential rival, or simply about any unacceptable "other," has often appeared in her poems, although it was masterfully adopted for the first time in

the poem “Hatred” from the collection *The End and the Beginning.* “See how efficient it still is, / how it keeps itself in shape” (PNC, 230) sounds almost like a line taken from a spiteful conversation. Malice and gossip, ascribed to women according to patriarchal stereotypes, are not a characteristic tone of expressing the feminine persona in Szymborska’s poetry, and they never appear in relation to other women. They are only a voice, a literary trick, one more game that uncovers and ridicules the patriarchal attitude to women.

The characteristic for Szymborska’s tone of treating “others” with friendly irony grows not from the adoption of “outside” or existing stereotypes, but is an extension of the style of speaking about one’s “former self. The poet uses it not only in relation to people, but also many elements of the surrounding world (including both the existing tradition and modernity) in which the tradition is embedded:

> It’d be better if you
> went back where you came from.
> I don’t owe you anything,
> I’m just an ordinary woman
> who only knows
> when to betray
> another’s secret.
>
> (“Laughter”; PNC, 74)

By describing herself in the poem as an “ordinary woman,” she focuses her attention, in a paradoxically obvious manner, on being on the margins of the “high” models of culture. At the same time, it would be rather difficult to define the concept of the “ordinary woman” in Szymborska’s poetry. A woman is indeed variability without any variations, someone who “must be a variety,” as in the poem “Portrait of a Woman”:

> Naive, but gives the best advice.
> Weak, but takes on anything.
> A crew loose and tough as nails.
> Curls up with Jaspers or *Ladies’ Home Journal.*
> Can’t figure out this bolt and builds a bridge.
> Young, young as ever, still looking young.
>
> (PNC, 161)

A woman is also someone whose body is subjected to fashion and existing standards of beauty. In the poem “Rubens’ Women,” noticing the absence of “skinny sisters” on the painting, Szymborska writes:

> The thirteenth century would have given them golden haloes.
> The twentieth, silver screens.
> The seventeenth, alas, holds nothing for the unvoluptuous.

For even the sky bulges here
with pudgy angels and a chubby god —

(PNC, 47)

The woman and her role in the poem function as images of the body, and the female body is subject to the same categories of aesthetic evaluation as the work of art. Of course, noticing this manner of perception of the female body shares many similarities with feminist criticism; yet, in Szymborska's case, it is not solely a negative view as it can also refer to heavenly figures presented in art (those that are particularly valued). This is typical for Szymborska: noticing issues raised by feminism and (not) solving them in (un-)conventional ways.

What is also typical is the focus on what is absent, which does not seem strange, if, according to Lacan, "the woman does not exist."[18] What is therefore extraordinary is the simple fact that in a world where "the woman does not exist" everything that has not happened is as significant as anything that has. An excellent example is the poem "The Railroad Station" dedicated to the "nonarrival in the city of N" (PNC, 75). The beginning of the poem "*** (Nicość przenicowała się…)" ["*** (Nothingness reversed itself)"] is also worth mentioning in this context: "Nothingness reversed itself for me, too." This nonexistence expands further: to the nonexistence of particular realizations of stereotypes. That is why the family described in the poem "Family Album" consists of people who are not subject to those stereotypes, and when many years later the sentimental stereotype indeed does appear in Szymborska's poetry, it is the description of a photograph in "Hitler's First Photograph." A stereotype prohibits from seeing or describing reality, and often goes against the common sense. "True Love" — in Szymborska's words — "… couldn't populate the planet in a million years, / it comes along so rarely" (PNC, 140) Therefore what is important for our existence is reality, and not stereotypes used to describe it. Similarly, in the poem "Love at First Sight," about which after years — contrary to the stereotype — Szymborska's poetic persona could say only that "something [that] was and wasn't there between us,/ something went on and went away." And it is not the stereotype of the eternity of the first love that makes it so important; but contrary, it is the fact that it has passed:

Yet just exactly as it is,
it does what the others still can't manage:
unremembered,
not even seen in dreams,
it introduces me to death.

(M, 47)

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18 See, *The Feminine Sexuality,* eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982).

It is interesting that the play with stereotypes appears mostly in the poems concerning love, in which Szymborska almost completely breaks with the existing patriarchal tradition of women's poetry. In her earlier poems, love is essentially the absence of love, the impossibility to match the ideal:

> I am too close for him to dream of me.
> I don't flutter over him, don't flee him
> beneath the roots of trees. I am too close.
> The caught fish doesn't sing with my voice.
>
> ("I am too close…"; PNC, 55)

In later poems, love is expressed without using grand words, not through its unordinariness, but precisely through the everyday miracle:

> A mnie się tak złożyło, że jestem przy tobie.
> I doprawdy nie widzę w tym nic
> zwyczajnego.
>
> (*** from *Could Have*)[19]

Love is not a privilege of youth, a stereotypical emotional storm, but is simply being with another person: a mature feeling of a mature human being. In her love poems Szymborska uses the lyric "You," which (contrary to "we") enables her to preserve her own "I," to mark its "individuality," and to express the respect for the "I" of the loved one, and at the same time (contrary to "he") does not place it in the position of "the other." The lyric "You" appears relatively late in Szymborska's poetry, and it does not receive its full voice until the poems written after the death of a beloved man:

> I survived you by enough,
> and only by enough,
> to contemplate from afar.
>
> ("Parting with a View"; PNC, 241)

In Szymborska's poetry the woman's voice is nor a battle cry nor a whisper of surrender. It is a voice of a woman who feels not only as an individual, but also (from the point of view of culture) as an equal to a man (if this division remains valid); therefore, the woman does not have to fight or surrender to anyone. The voice of a woman is one who knows that even if history is written by the heroic victors, still "after every war / someone has to tidy up" ("The End and the Beginning"; PNC, 228). The woman's voice is of someone who — perhaps paradoxically — comes from an extremely patriotic Polish culture, and agrees to forget the patriotism of her ancestors rather than agitate for the creation of another veterans' organization.

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19 "And so it happened to me that I am next to you. /And really I see this as nothing /ordinary."

> Those who knew
> what this was all about
> must make way for those
> who know little.
> And less than that.
> And at last nothing less than nothing.
>
> ("The End and the Beginning"; PNC, 228)

And what is perhaps most characteristic for women is the fact that they have the voice of someone who does not have to change one's reality, but can simply (as a non-existing being) decide not to take part in it. This is similar to the women who through the ages did not participate in creating categories that described the world they inhabited; they could only to adapt or disagree silently, calmly. And, of course, these women took care of everyday life in the times when the male heroes were busy serving important social and historical roles. Perhaps that is why it is not easy to grasp and write about the essence of this certain vision of femininity: after all, the writer was awarded with the Nobel Prize.

Calling Out to Yeti as an Expression of Existential Crisis

Anna Zarzycka

On 16 December 1956 three of Wisława Szymborska's poems were published on the front page of "Życie Literackie," which were later included in a cycle forming a part of the collection *Calling Out to Yeti.* Those poems were: "To My Friends," "Still," and "Greeting the Supersonics."

The first and last poems are connected with a rather peculiar motif of jets. In the poem "To My Friends" Szymborska wrote:

> We are amused by jets,
> those crevices of silence
> wedged between flight and sound:
> "World record!" the world cheers.
>
> But we've seen faster takeoffs:
> their long-belated echo
> still wrenches us from sleep
> after so many years.
>
> (PNC, 12)

The text of "Greeting the Supersonics," which the poet did not include in the later selections of her poetry, is as follows:

> Faster than sound today,
> faster than light tomorrow,
> we'll turn sound into the Tortoise
> and light into the Hare.
>
> To venerable creatures
> from ancient parable,
> a noble team, since ages past
> competing fair and square.
>
> You ran so many times
> across this lowly earth;
> now try another course,
> across the lofty blue.
>
> The track's all yours. We won't
> get in your way: by then
> we will have set of chasing
> ourselves rather than you.
>
> (PNC, 7)

At the time jets were one of the newest technological achievement, still a sensation in the 1950s. For the poet, they became an excuse to ask essential questions concerning human existence. We invent new technical wonders — Szymborska seemed to be saying — and yet we are not able to be responsible for our own life. We can register the "crevices of silence" between the flying of the jet and the speed of sound, but we are indifferent to human tragedies that occur around us. The achievements of our civilization do not coincide with our spiritual development. Are we better, more attuned to harm happening to people, are we more skillful in differentiating truth from falsity in the era of jets? Nothing changes in this sphere. The only thing that increases is the distance between the mind and the heart:

> Well-versed in the expanses
> that stretch from earth to stars,
> we get lost in the space
> from earth up to our skull.
> Intergalactic reaches
> divide sorrow from tears.
>
> ("To My Friends"; PNC, 12)

This reflection not only accompanied her recount with Socialist realism, it also influenced the main direction of her thinking in the whole collection. *Calling Out to Yeti* was not only, and not most importantly, a book in which the poet settled with the communist ideology and provided an account of her own entanglements with Socialist realism. It was rather an account of a far more essential examination that a person does when "midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a dark forest / For the straightforward pathway had been lost." In the year *Calling Out to Yeti* was published, Szymborska was 34-year old, and had a perfectly clear sense that she did not pass her first "entrance exam" into the adult life with much success. The third collection of her poetry reflected this state of consciousness, at the same time becoming the record of a crucial existential turn.

"Bildungsroman"

In May 1955, answering to a survey concerning her poetry, conducted by the newspaper "Dziennik Polski," Szymborska wrote:

> Dear Editors!
>
> I am constantly promising myself to comply with your request and write something specifically for "Dziennik," but I fail to do so. And now this survey … If I don't write anything — you will get mad at me, although I don't have anything interesting to write about myself, and recently there has been enough of theorizing about poetry "in general" in the press.

> As you know, I write very rarely. Among my two books, the first was a reprint, the second is out-of-print, and so I'm thinking about a third one, but there is still time for it: I don't have enough poems completed to sign a deal with a publishing house. Although writing bigger texts is not especially fortunate for me, I would like to write something broader, which could be generally regarded as childhood memories. I'm currently working on a couple of poems for a magazine. In addition, I have several Bulgarian themes, collected during last year's visit, but still not used.[1]

The third poetry collection, as envisioned by the poet, was supposed to be a selection of her "childhood memories." This was confirmed by a title headline that Szymborska gave to her new poems published in the first issue of "Życie Literackie" in 1956, *Ze wspomnień* [*From memories*]*,* under which four poems appeared that were all connected by the strong presence of the childhood motif — "Noc" ["Night'], "Hania" ["Hania"], "Spotkanie" ["Meeting"], and "Srebrna kula" ["Silver Ball"].[2] The first three, in an almost identical sequence, later opened the collection *Calling Out to Yeti.* Ultimately, however, the selection turned out to be a book about something more than a return to childhood years, and the childhood motif gained a new, broader dimension.

The content and arrangement of the poems included in the book seem to prove that in Szymborska's intention the idea of coming back to childhood years transformed itself into a project of a poetic book about growing up. The collection opens with several poems in which the narrator is an adolescent girl who is experiencing her first ideological rebellion, and who discovers in herself — partly through reading the works of Anatole France — a sense of critical, independent thinking ("Spotkanie"). Subsequent poems: "Nothing Twice," "Jawność" ["Transparency"], "Buffo," and "Commemoration" do not discuss a child's experiences, but that of a young woman, who, having been aware of the uniqueness of the world, wants to experience it as fully as possible. She learns about the happiness and bitterness of love, while also developing an ability of thoughtful existence in the world:

> I teach silence
> in all languages
> through intensive examination of:
> the starry sky,
> the Sinanthropus' jaws,
> a grasshopper's hop,
> an infant's fingernails,
> plankton,
> a snowflake.
>
> ("Classifieds"; PNC, 5)

1 "Mówią krakowscy pisarze: Wisława Szymborska," *Od A do Z,* no. 17 (1955): 5.

2 The last poem was not included in *Calling Out to Yeti.*

The narrator-heroine of *Calling Out to Yeti* is also faced with the necessity to answer fundamental existential questions ("Minuta ciszy po Ludwice Wawrzyńskiej" ["A minute of silence for Ludwika Wawrzyńska"). The most important and hardest stage of her growing up is, however, the confrontation with previous life choices, primarily with her own ideological entanglement. As a result of this confrontation, she self-consciously discovers a fundamental truth: human existence is burdened with guilt that cannot be avoided, and onto which one falls without even knowing it. This experience is accompanied by a feeling of complete isolation and grotesqueness of our own existence, as well as helplessness against the metaphysical "coercion" of being. ("Still Life with a Ballon," "An Effort," "Four A.M."). This experience also makes her reevaluate her relationship to the world. The joyful, trusting faith of a girl who once said:

> Why do we treat the fleeting day
> with so much needless fear and sorrow?
> It's in its nature not to stay:
> Today is always gone tomorrow.
>
> ("Nothing Twice"; PNC, 20)

is disturbed by sad skepticism and leads the heroine to rethink the world once again —"featuring fun for fools" and "tricks for old dogs"("I'm Working on the World"). It is, therefore, not only the experience of a young woman, but a poet as well, who is led by this difficult process of growing into herself and into her own humanity, in the end ultimately achieving literary maturity.

It would seem, therefore, that describing *Calling Out to Yeti* as a type of "Bildungsroman" — a poetical and autobiographical tale about growing up — would not be an over-interpretation. Moreover, considering her epic inclinations, as well as the tendency of searching for more inclusive forms of poetry, visible the in post-war years, it is possible that Szymborska thought of this collection precisely as a loosely-constructed poem or a cycle of poems connected by an overarching theme. However, it is not the structure of the book, but primarily the character of experiences presented by the poet that provides the basis for such thinking.

The source of the existential turning point, which in its written form became *Calling Out to Yeti,* was the experience of religious doubt. The first three poems were an eloquent testimony to this: "Noc," "Spotkanie," and "Hania," all of which could be found in the first edition grouped under the heading *Ze wspomnień.* The title of the first recalled, in an obvious way, the theological concept of a "night of faith," signifying the spiritual experience of darkness and being abandoned by God. The heroine, a little girl, is unable to agree with the theological interpretation of the story about Isaac's sacrifice. She experiences a crisis of trust in God who requests that Abraham proves his faith by killing his own son. She feels

an emotional bond with the helpless Isaac, as well as a moral objection against treating the boy's life as something that fate can freely decide upon. The poem's form, however — the trochaic meter, the stylization of the lyric monologue as child's speech, and the depiction adapted to a child's imagination — strikingly contrast with the seriousness of experience that the title seems to be pointing to. It rather suggests a frivolous, childish treatment of the subject. In this context, the titular "night" loses its depth and menace, and the child's words, full of rebellion and doubt, sound like a horrific story heard in childhood.

The contrast between the topic and the form naturally produces an ironic effect. It does not, however, diminish the significance of the child's experiences and fears, as evidenced by the gentle and serene ending of the poem[3]:

> Od tej nocy
> ponad miarę złego snu,
> od tej nocy
> ponad miarę samotności,
> zaczął Pan Bóg
> pomalutku
> dzień po dniu
> przeprowadzkę
> z dosłowności
> do przenośni.
>
> ("Noc")[4]

These words give a new quality to the preceding monologue. In their context the perspective, in which the problem of faith was presented in the poem "Night," turns out not to be a child's perspective, but that of an adult woman, who was once that child. The poet, using free indirect speech, lends voice to herself, a little girl.[5] She expresses fundamental questions using child's language, questions raised by philosophers and theologians, about God's kindness and omnipotence, purposely presenting them as a child's dilemma, as well as, in some sense, a childish dilemma. Against other questions troubling Szymborska and against the later experience of "night" induced not by the doubts born during the studying

3 On the contrary, this contrast can be interpreted as a discussion with those who consider a child's religious dilemmas as less true, serious, or deep as the dilemmas of an adult. Meanwhile, they are not only similarly authentic, but they may also influence a person's relationship with religion in adult life. The only difference is the language in which a child can express these dilemmas.

4 "From this night / of a boundlessly bad sleep, / from this night / of boundless loneliness, / Our Lord began / slowly / day after day / to move / from literalness / to metaphor."

5 The motif of returning to herself from past years is present also in the poet's later work (see, "Laughter," "Absence").

of catechism, but a feeling of moral responsibility for her own life decisions, the poet recognized them as distant, foreign, and as a matter of fact, inadequate to her own experiences. Explanations provided by traditional theology did not appease her existential anxiety.

Perhaps that is why in another poem, "Spotkanie," she allowed herself — this time adopting the role of herself as a high school student — in a completely humorous way, to deal with the folk and devotional vision of hell, which throughout centuries had found such rich representations in literature and iconography. Here again the poem's light form served to address serious and fundamental matters. The poem clearly resembles a youthful manifesto — although one announced after some years, according to the rules of a poetic recollection. Sitting down at the knees of Anatole France, the poet chooses certain values that undoubtedly had the greatest significance for her — freedom, independence, and clear, critical thinking.

A consequence, as well as a confirmation of this choice, was the irony with which, in the third poem from the *Ze wspomnień* [*From Memories*] cycle, Szymborska portrayed Hania — "a good maid." This irony was directed towards institutionalized forms of religious faith and devotional Catholicism, which denies Hania — a simple, humble woman, tormented by life — the right to enjoy the delightful richness of the world, and instead feeds her naivety and fear. Hania is the eternal sadness, grief, and mortification. Szymborska speaks about her with sympathy and tenderness:

> Hania jest taka chuda, tak bardzo nic nie ma,
> że zabłądzi w bezmiarze Igielnego Ucha.
> …
> Nie słyszałam jej śmiechu, płaczu nie słyszałam.
> Wyuczona pokory nic od życia nie chce.
> Towarzyszy jej w drodze cień — żałoba ciała,
> A chustka postrzępiona ujada na wietrze.[6]

We can also detect indignation and anger in the poet's words, tempered down by irony:

> Ona widziała diabła kurz ścierając z lustra:
> Był siny, proszę księdza, w takie żółte prążki
> i spojrzał tak szkaradnie i wykrzywił usta
> i co będzie, jeżeli wpisał mnie do książki?

---

6 "Hania is so thin, she does not have anything so much, / that she will get lost in the vastness of the Eye of the Needle./ … / I have heard neither her laughter, nor her crying. / Having learned humility, she does not want anything from life. / A shadow accompanies her on her way — the mourning of the body, / and a frayed scarf barks in the wind."

Więc ona da na bractwo i da na mszę świętą
i zakupi serduszko ze srebrnym płomieniem.
Odkąd nową plebanię budować zaczęto,
od razu wszystkie diabły podskoczyły w cenie.[7]

These stanzas smolder with rebellion against social injustice and religious hypocrisy. An identical spark could have ignited Szymborska's support for the October Revolution and Marxism. The reason for the poet's indignation stems from a much deeper place than her social beliefs do. Its source is the specific bond shared by the poet with the world. This bond has a non-religious and non-metaphysical character; it is deeply rooted in humanism. That is why Szymborska's answer to the life model imposed on Hania by religion is a strong opposition when she writes:

Maju oddaj kolory, bądź jak grudzień bury.
Gałązko ulistniona, ty się wstydź za siebie.
Słońce, żałuj, że świecisz. Biczujecie się chmury.
Wiosno, owiń się śniegiem a zakwitniesz w niebie![8]

For the poet, the sin, or to put it differently, the inexcusable offense against the life-giving force because of which we exist, is not using the world's beauties and possibilities given to us by nature, but on the contrary, it is underestimating its beauty, richness, and uniqueness. Mind you, nothing happens twice:

No day copies yesterday,
no two nights will teach what bliss is
in precisely the same way,
with exactly the same kisses.

("Nothing Twice")

Szymborska remains detached from theology, institutionalized forms of religion, and a theocentric view of the world. The reference point for her existence is the material, empirical, and sensual reality. Her relationship with the world is a kind of close tenderness, as well as a desire of experiencing other beings through one's own being. In the collection *Calling Out to Yeti* this attitude is in a specific way connected with eroticism. In the poem, "Commemoration," we read:

They made love in a hazel grove, beneath the little suns of dew;

7 "She has seen a devil cleaning dust from a mirror: / He was livid, Father, with these yellow stripes / and he glanced so dreadfully and grinned / and what happens if he has put me down in his book? // So she will give to the brotherhood and at the holy mass / and she will buy a heart with a silver flame. / Since the new vicarage started to be built, / all prices of devils rose immediately."

8 "O May, give back the colors, like December be dull. / Twig, full of leaves, be ashamed of yourself. / Sun, be sorry that you shine. Whip yourselves, clouds. / Spring, veil yourself in snow, you will bloom in heaven."

dry leaves and twigs got in their hair
and dry dirt too.

Swallow's heart, have
mercy on them.

They both knelt down on the lakeshore,
they combed the dry leaves from their hair;
small fish, a star's converging rays,
swam up to stare.

Swallow's heart, have
mercy on them.

Reflected in the rippling lake,
trees trembled, nebulous and gray;
o swallow, let them never, never
forget this day.

(PNC, 23)

Love is an experience that brings us closest to the world: it enables people to "get dry dirt in their hair." Although the poet's way of thinking about reality is completely non-religious, Szymborska composes a litany to the swallow "aureole of lovers," asking for a sign to be left after them in the world, commemoration. This experience expresses exactly what she considers to be the call of the sanctity of existence.

The poet's deep bond with reality, or even literally, with the world of things, is also revealed in the poem "Still Life with a Balloon." Here it is presented from a completely different perspective than in "Commemoration," as it is evidenced by the poem's position in the collection. Szymborska situated it there after the cycle of retrospective poems, thus, making in a "moment" especially difficult and crucial for her. In the context of the poems such as "Rehabilitacja" ["Vindication"], "To My Friends," and especially "*** (Historia nierychliwa …)" ["*** (Tardy History …)"] the poem acquires a special meaning. Szymborska says:

Returning memories?
No, at the time of death
I'd like to see lost objects
return instead.

(PNC, 10)

The titular "still life" is in fact the poet herself, her own image, "at the time of death." An image, we must add, that is unique in the sense that it's contrary to the commonness and banality of props that appear in the poem. Although the thought about our own death is inescapable for each one of us, a poem written by a young woman on how she wishes to die is difficult to accept as something obvious. In

some ways, it is a punch line for the previous poems, and at the same time, a conclusion drawn from the lesson that the world had taught the poet until now. I will die, we interpret this conclusion, and I will die together with everything that I have done, possessed, achieved, and lost during my life. It is, however, a quite a heavy baggage; therefore, the poet tries to get used to the thought of death by, at the time of dying, not ordering the return of memories, but the return of "lost objects." Memories are often too painful, too "vivid," to afford a peaceful parting with the world. Things, on the other hand, although we get attached to them, remain "still," they leave us alone, go on existing without us.

This "getting used to" also has another dimension. Szymborska calls for "safety pins, two odd combs, a paper rose" so she can say: "What good's all this," so she can say: "I haven't missed you." Those are the words of agreement, acceptance, but for the time being, they are the only words, spoken just as one more lesson learned by heart. Perhaps the poet already knows how one is supposed to die, but she is not yet ready. The sign of her attachment to life and the world is the balloon (This is the most important element of this still life since it is mentioned in the title; again and again, then, an unserious motif appears in a poem). The balloon provides reference to her childhood:

> And lastly, toy balloon
> once kidnapped by the wind —
> come home, and I will say:
> There are no children here.
> Fly out the open window
> and into the wide world;
> let someone else shout "Look!"
> and I will cry.

Szymborska wants the balloon, carried by the wind, to return to her. However, it is supposed to return only so that she can say: "there are no children here." How can we understand this desire? It seems that the poet's words can be read in two ways. I don't have children, says Szymborska, but also, I'm no longer a child. It is time to grow up, time to mourn one's own immaturity and say goodbye to childhood, time to understand that this is the order of things, and time to permit someone else to call, with delight, "O!" when he/she sees a balloon carried away by the wind.

In *Calling Out to Yeti* childhood and childishness is revealed not only in its "narrative" dimension. It also appears as an ironic stylization, sometimes with a tint of buffo, as a humorous, perhaps even a bit clownish mask. Its function is to build a distance, which on the one hand, allows the poet to protect herself, and on the other, not to overwhelm the others with despair and sadness. However, there is one poem in the collection in which the poet does not hide behind any mask, and her irony, instead of granting the poetic confession some delusive lightness, is

bitter and overwhelming. It is also the only poem whose original title Szymborska modified in a book form. I am referring to the poem “Four A.M.”

> The hour between night and day.
> The hour between toss and turn.
> The hour of thirty-year-olds.
>
> The hour swept clean for roosters’ crowing.
> The hour when the earth takes back its warm embrace.
> The hour of cool drafts from extinguished stars.
> The hour of do-we-vanish-too-without-a-trace.
>
> Empty hour.
> Hollow. Vain.
> Rock bottom of all the other hours.
>
> No one feels fine at four a.m.
> If ants feel fine at four a.m.,
> we’re happy for the ants. And let five a.m. come
> if we’ve got to go on living.
>
> (PNC, 9)

The poem first appeared in the middle of June 1956 on the front page of “Życie Literackie” with other poems: “An Effort” and “Brueghel’s Two Monkeys.”[9] The original title was “Opis czwartej nad ranem” [“A Description of Four A.M.”]. As Jacek Brzozowski noticed, the poem is written as if it were in the voice of a community, not far from the existential tone. It summarizes the feeling of existential emptiness, common for Szymborska’s generation (“hour of thirty-year olds”); the feeling of being “thrown into time” and complete dependence on it (“And let five a.m. come / if we’ve got to go on living”); and the feeling so distant from illusions of the just ended era, and at the same time distant from illusions concerning the present.[10]

Naturally, this “communal voice” discreetly hid the poet’s “I.” However, Wisława Szymborska had made a gesture that does not allow for any doubts about the fact that the “four a.m.” is also *her* hour. This gesture was the change of title. The phrase “*description* of four a.m.” situated the poet as if she were outside the experience to which the title referred to. It expressed distance. “Four A.M.” however, in a much more unambiguous way recalled the author’s personal

9 Jacek Brzozowski described this triptych as “an self-ironic lesson of historical maturity” (“Brueghel’s Two Monkeys”), “a lesson in subjectivity” (“An Effort”), “a lesson in existence (“Four A.M.”); “Życie Literackie,” no. 24:. 12. This brief commentary expresses the essence of the maturing process described in *Calling Out to Yeti*.

10 Jacek Brzozowski, “Poetycki sen o dojrzałości. O ‘Dwóch małpach Bruegla,’” in his *O wierszach Wisławy Szymborskiej* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1996), 12.

experience. It also marked a different temporal perspective in which this "hour between toss and turn" became an experience of the present — a state of suspension in time, tiring, and full of anguish.

There are noticeably many traces of this experience in the collection *Calling Out to Yeti.* Contrary to the indulgence with which in the poem "Night" the poet recalled her childhood experience of the "night of faith," it is precisely the night that describes the character and tone of the whole collection. A real night, a night as a metaphor of spiritual darkness and emptiness, the night as the time when what is repressed during the day comes to us with clearness — during the sleepless hours or during sleep.

Judge Night

> For promises made by me spouse,
> …
> into believing that they still
> might conquer loneliness and fright,
> I cannot be responsible.
> Mr. Day's widow, Mrs. Night.
>
> ("Classifieds"; PNC, 5)

In *Calling Out to Yeti*, at many occasions the poet mentions the experience of insomnia, which is the "silence without breath," when suddenly, with paralyzing strength, we become aware of the truth that has been eluding us. In the poem "Minuta ciszy po Ludwice Wawrzyńskiej": we read "A minute of silence for the dead / sometimes lasts well into the night."

> Their long-belated echo
> still wrenches us from sleep
> after so many years.
>
> Outside, a storm of voices:
> "We're innocent," they cry.
> We rush to open windows,
> lean out to catch their call.
>
> But then the voices break off.
> We watch the falling stars
> just as after a salvo
> plaster drops from the wall.
>
> ("To My Friends"; PNC, 12)

In the poem "Still" Szymborska confesses: "And their silence once more, / … drums on my silent door." In "Breughel's Two Monkeys" she recalls her "dream

about final exams," full of deep melancholy and sadness. It is precisely during the night, in darkness and abandonment, that we examine ourselves and our own history. This recurring motif signals — very discreetly, but visibly — the presence of deep sadness and resignation in *Calling Out to Yeti.*

More than thirty years after publishing this collection, in the poem "Sky," Szymborska wrote: "My identifying features / are rapture and despair." The poem opened the collection *The End and the Beginning* — a "black masterpiece," as Małgorzata Baranowska described it — which was a book that was definitely much darker in comparison with the poet's earlier work, and in which the feelings of astonishment about the world, as well as restrained despair, truly dominated and intertwined with each other.[11] This dark tone surprised critics. As Marian Stala wrote:

> Without sadness, without the accompanying atmosphere, there would be no "The End and the Beginning," and such poems as "Sky," "Hatred," "The Real World," "Elegiac Calculation," "Cat in an Empty Apartment," "Parting with a View," "One Version of Events" …
>
> I mention so many titles because I myself am astonished with the scale of the phenomenon … and the conclusion that imposes itself, one that is so different from many sentences that were said and written before about the author of *The People on the Bridge.* Still: regardless of the happy photographs, regardless of the unquestionable sense of humor — in her later years Szymborska is largely a poet of sadness. [12]

Szymborska's sadness is, however, not a characteristic feature of only her later poetry. The poet's specific signs can be already noticed in *Calling Out to Yeti,* especially when reading the book some years later and having the hindsight of her later work. They do appear, although without being named, and are revealed in the experience of the existential crisis that is the book's subject. We get to know them at its source, so to say, through observing how the bright, joyful, and even a bit cheeky delight of a young woman who spoke to her loved one becomes marked with deep melancholy and skepticism, through the influence of further life experiences:

> With smiles and kisses, we prefer
> to seek accord beneath our star,
> although we're different (we concur)
> just as two drops of water are.
>
> ("Nothing Twice")

11 Małgorzata Baranowska, "Jawa nie pierzcha," in *"Tak lekko było nic o tym nie wiedzieć…" Szymborska i świat* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1996), 106.

12 Marian Stala, "Smutek Szymborskiej," in: *Druga strona. Notatki o poezji współczesnej* (Kraków: Znak, 1997), 71.

However, although the experiences pressure the poet to rethink the world once again, the strength of her delight does not weaken. This strength comes from the wish to be close to the world, from a specific bond connecting the poet with reality. It evokes a desperate sense of the one-sidedness of this bond — a feeling of the world's elusiveness.

In *Calling Out to Yeti* there is one poem showing that what happens under the cover of the night can also be good and fortunate. The night is peaceful and understanding for lovers. It shields them, at the same time making naked and helplessly evident what connects them. Love is the only experience the poet wishes to free from the laws of time:

> Still, time's unbounded power
> that makes a mountain crumble,
> moves seas, rotates a star,
> won't be enough to tear
> lovers apart: they are
> too naked, too embraced,
> too much like timid sparrows.
>
> (PNC, 3)

Szymborska beseeches reality in the poem "I'm Working on the World," although she also knows that when love fades away, it rather becomes similar to a "a little farce, with songs" ("Buffo"; PNC, 21). In *Calling Out to Yeti*, erotic poems are not only a poetic presentation of love affairs. It seems that the poet, when writing about love — and it is always sensual, physical love — simultaneously expresses her own affection for the world. The image changes under the influence of the poet's existential crisis. In the course of the "story," constructed from particular poems in the collection, it also gains an ironic meaning. A significant example is the poem "Sen nocy letniej":

> Już las w Ardenach świeci.
> Nie zbliżaj się do mnie.
> Głupia, głupia.
> Zadawałam się ze światem:
>
> Jadłam chleb, piłam wodę,
> Wiatr mnie owiał, deszcz mnie zmoczył.
>
> …
> podmuch zrywa twojej damie
> radioaktywny płaszcz, Pyramie.[13]

13 "The woods in Adrennes are already shining. / Stay away from me. / Stupid, stupid. / I've been in touch with the world: / I've eaten bread, drunken water, / The wind has swept

"I've been in touch with the world," I was "contaminated" — she warns. But how does one live differently, if not by "being in touch" and deeply experiencing reality? Without a doubt, the world is not an ideal and safe place. It is less and less suitable as a setting for a love idyll. We have not been given any other world. Wisława Szymborska's version of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* seems to be a terrifying nightmare, but nevertheless it is only a dream. It leaves hope that the real world will turn out to be friendlier, that there will be something there that would encourage anyone who decidedly avoids contact with it to live in our world — someone like the Yeti.

Why Yeti?

The decades of the 1940s and 50s were a period of transition in history. The foundations on which the old world was built were shaken. They commenced an era of atomic militarization, plans to conquer space, and dynamic development of science and mass communication. Two things strengthened among the people: their faith in the progress of civilization and their belief that no phenomena will remain a mystery for human kind.

In Poland, during the Socialist Realism period, when — in terms of scientific discoveries — the press wrote mostly about the pseudo-achievements of Miczun and Łysenko, the existence of the Yeti was one of these mysteries; it was known as the "the secret of the Himalayas." Throughout the years primarily "Przekrój" (although some daily newspapers as well, like "Dziennik Polski") reported about the progress of succeeding expeditions setting out into the highest mountains of the world in search of the snow man.[14] Anonymous authors of those articles declared their faith in the existence of the Yeti, and in their capacity to track him down. They referred to the memoirs of the famous Sherpa Tensing.[15] In August 1956 "Dziennik Polski" informed its readers:

> The most mysterious, arousing many disputes "individual" of the Himalayas — the "yeti" — has appeared once more. Lately, it has been the third instance in the course of the last three years — signs of the mysterious creature were found on one of the

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through me, the rain soaked me through./ … /a burst tears off your lady's / radioactive blanket, Pyramus."

14 For instance see, "Kim jest Yeti?," *Przekrój,* 23 May 1954; Tom Stobart, "Wędrówka po śladach Yeti," trans. Julian Kydryński, *Przekrój,* 12 Dec. 1954; "Znów ślady Yeti," *Przekrój,* 17 July 1955; "Wielka panda czy mały Yeti?," *Przekrój,* 8 Jan. 1956; "Nasz kuzyn Yeti?," *Przekrój,* 30 June 1957.

15 See, "Wierzę w Yeti," *Przekrój,* 28 Aug. 1955.

> snowy tops of the Eastern Himalayas, although as before the "snow man" remains elusive and unseen.
>
> … Sherpa Tensing, an Everest climber, is an enthusiastic supporter of the belief in the existence of the "yeti." Although Tensing himself never saw the creature, he bases his opinion on the stories told by his friends and relatives. … On the other hand dr. Stafford Mathews, a New Zealander, an experienced alpinist, refers to the theory of the "yeti's" existence as nonsense. … Among the Sherpa there is a strong belief that the "yeti" is an evil ghost.
>
> The most recent finder of the "yeti's" footprints, Byrne, intends to go back to Sikkim with a well-equipped team this year. Their mission — according to Byrne's statement — is solving the mystery of the "snow man" — "once and for all."[16]

The search for the snow man sometimes took a terrifyingly grotesque form, such as that reported by "Dziennik Polski" in March 1957 in the column "What's Going on in the World":

> Hunting for lions and elephants in African jungles is no longer an attraction for American millionaires. Moreover, the numbers of lions and elephants shrinks dramatically. Tom Slick from the state of Texas, who raised a fortune on oil, came up with a new idea. He decided to hunt down the Yeti, a legendary inhabitant of the Himalayas, capture him alive, and transport to the US. Slick has already left for Eastern Nepal, having secured a permit from the local government to organize an expedition. The visionary millionaire is sure of his success, although more reasonable people have their doubts …[17]

"Przekrój" published satirical pictures mocking the tireless searchers of the Yeti:

16 "Kim jest 'yeti'? Jeszcze jedna próba rozwiązania tajemnicy Himalajów," *Dziennik Polski,* 29 Mar. 1956.

17 "Polowanie na Yeti," *Dziennik Polski,* 29 Mar. 1957.

In the same issue, an article entitled "Our Cousin Yeti?" also appeared that suggested the Yeti may be a descendant of the gigantopithecus.[18] The piece was accompanied by a large illustration depicting a chimpanzee and the gigantopithecus:

NASZ KUZYN YETI?

18 "Nasz kuzyn Yeti?," *Przekrój,* 30 June 1957.

Although the article was published at a time when *Calling Out to Yeti* had been already accepted to print, and thus too late for us to assume that the illustration could in any way inspire Szymborska, in the context of the poet's work the search for similarities between anthropoids and the Yeti seems significant.

For readers of those times, the Yeti was, therefore, a sensation approached with a wink, a mysterious snow man one could fantasize about. He was also, especially for explorers setting off for Himalayan expeditions, a subject of insatiate curiosity and promising subject of research. In the era of jets and planned expeditions to the Moon, the surprising popularity of the searchers for the Yeti seemed like an anachronistic phenomenon, more attuned to the eighteenth-century adventure novels than to the reality of the second half of the twentieth century. Therefore, it provoked questions about the reasons for which people so willingly wished to capture, see, and tame the creature. Was it simply curiosity? An unfulfilled instinct of an explorer? Or perhaps a sense of superiority over other forms of being, a desire to dominate and control the world? Perhaps a need to master anxiety felt in the presence of a difficult secret or mystery? And, finally, why would people want to force this creature, wary of the world, to live in our reality, full of pain, suffering, and death?

It seems that similar questions accompanied the creation of the poem "Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition," an "un-titular" poem, although in fact one that explains the title of the collection. "So these are the Himalayas," begins Szymborska, clearly suggests that she is present in those "mountains racing to the moon," "stomping my feet for warmth / on the everlasting." This way the poet builds a specific poetic situation. She speaks about herself, saying that she is where she really was not, as the poem's title informs. Perhaps, as Tadeusz Nyczek has suggested, when speaking these words, she is looking at illustrations in the press, imagining being in the Himalayas.[19] Perhaps it is just a record of one more dream. There is no doubt, however, that the poet *is there* and calls out to Yeti:

> Yeti, down there we've got Wednesday,
> bread and alphabets.
> Two times two is four.
> Roses are red there,
> and violets are blue.
>
> Yeti, crime is not all
> we're up to down there.
> Yeti, not every sentence there
> means death.

---

19 Tadeusz Nyczek, "Po raz piąty," in his: *Tyle naraz świata. 27 x Szymborska* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2005), 56.

> We've inherited hope —
> the gift of forgetting.
> You'll see how we give
> birth among the ruins.
>
> Yeti, we've got Shakespeare there.
> Yeti, we play solitaire
> and violin. At nightfall,
> we turn lights on, Yeti.
>
> …
> Oh Yeti, semi-moonman,
> turn back, think again!
>
> (PNC, 18—19)

Calling out to Yeti is, however, "calling out into emptiness, into silence, into nothing." There is no one among the white desert, no one answering the call. Regardless of this, the poet does not resign, although it is not safe to call "inside four walls of avalanche," where "neither moon nor earth. / Tears freeze." That is how you can only call someone out of great longing or loneliness, and Szymborska's notes from a nonexistent Himalayan expedition are in fact an expression of this longing and loneliness. Calling out to Yeti does not mean waiting for the legendary snow man to show up, but is a search for the affirmation of the meaning of the world, the world with which the Yeti does not wish to have anything to do. It is an attempt to make sense of reality, to bring back faith into the belief that evil goes away, that hope and time heals wounds and that the world's imperfection can be balanced through the progress of civilization and through art.

The poet's calling is answered only by an echo — "a white mute." Yeti, if he exists, looks down from unattainable mountain peaks — similarly as Master Twardowski, "the semi-moonman" from the distant Moon — on human deeds, but apparently does not wish for any part in it. Furthermore, the name "Half-Twardowski," which the poet gave to the mysterious snow man, is not only a humorous allusion to the place where the Yeti is hiding (Himalayas are "mountains racing to the moon"; a place "neither moon nor earth"), but also to the historical and political situation Szymborska was in. Yeti Half-Twardowski is, indeed, our Yeti, familiar, Polish, one that nevertheless decided to keep away from Polish reality.

Mysterious, unreachable, constantly tracked down by people believing in his existence, the Yeti had become a point of reference for Szymborska's existential questions and an ironic figure of the absence of God, who, as the poet wrote in the poem that opened the collection, one night in her life began "day after day to move / from literalness / to metaphor." Searching and calling for Yeti can be interpreted as a symbolic image of the modern man's struggles with himself and his own life, undertaken tirelessly in the face of metaphysical emptiness.

The poet also made this image the reference point for the whole book. It was undoubtedly a gesture that proved her existential pessimism. However — regardless of the feelings of loneliness, fear, and spiritual despair, which were perfectly perceptible in *Calling Out to Yeti* — Szymborska gave her "Bildungsroman" a positive ending, although ultimately marked by sadness. As the Yeti argued himself, hope is a hereditary gift. Nature has equipped us with the strength to give "birth among the ruins" and to preserve the memory of the good sides of our imperfect existence. The poet decided to use this gift and agree with the fact that the world will always be just as we make it ourselves and that it is tailored for us, humans. Surely we can always (no one can strip us of this privilege) express our objections and think of a second version — a corrected version.

Working on the World

"I'm Working on the World" is — next to her debut poem "Szukam słowa" ["I'm Looking for the Word"] — so far the only poem in whose title Szymborska used the verb in the first person singular, the only one in which she so clearly and decidedly emphasized her "I" as the author. However, since the title "Szukam słowa" was not invented by the poet, but by Adam Włodek and Tadeusz Jęczalik, we can assume that "I'm Working on the World" is truly the only one of its kind in Szymborska's work. In "[Ja] obmyślam świat" ["*I'm* working on the world"] there is some kind of manifestation in those words, as well as strength of the creative gesture and expression of personal declaration, and on the other hand, something in the vain of encouraging (humorously, self-ironically) shouting of a newsboy announcing a new edition:

> …
> revised, improved edition,
> featuring fun for fools,
> blues for brooders,
> combs for bald pates,
> tricks for old dogs.
>
> (PNC, 3)

These words form a punch line that is a summation of the whole collection. They are a testimony of maturity, a sign that she is coming out of the crisis, a positive — although characterized by auto-irony, as well as melancholy and skepticism — gesture directed towards the world. At the same time, they mark a new horizon of Szymborska's poetry. Since this day, the poet seems to be saying, I am thinking of the world.

Thinking of the world is not only imagining and designing reality but also thinking about the world, coming to terms with it, and existing in it consciously;

it is gaining knowledge about the world, an ability of using it, and accepting the rules governing it. While thinking of the world, the poet makes a gesture that has a double meaning — a gesture of resistance against the necessity of living in an imperfect reality, and a gesture of a creator who can create a new and better world using his/her words, but who is also aware that his/her power will be limited *only* to the world he/she has created. The real world will never be subjected to him/her.

In the year 1945 Wisława Szymborska had her debut, having the conviction that poetry has the strength of creating reality and making it better. The harsh lesson of history has taught her that the poetic word is as weak and imperfect as a person — the poet who utters it. It does not have the power to save, it cannot protect or bring back any being, it cannot resurrect that what has passed away, it cannot change the past, and it cannot protect anyone from the destructive effect of time. It is only a sign of memory, a sign of our presence in the world nothing more. In the poem "Rehabilitacja" the poet wrote:

> Gdzież moja władza nad słowami?
> Słowa opadły na dno łzy,
> słowa słowa niezdatne do wskrzeszania ludzi,
> opis martwy jak zdjęcie przy błysku magnezji.
> Nawet na półoddechu nie umiem ich zbudzić
> ja, Syzyf przypisany do piekła poezji.

Regardless of this, in the poem "I'm Working on the World" Szymborska creates a positive poetic program. She discovers that poetry can become — as she will write some years later — a "saving railing," helping us to understand the world for our own private order. It can become an art of life, an art of reading the script of life, which — regardless of what you may gain from it — is a masterpiece in its diversity and magnificence. When she was composing *Calling Out to Yeti,* Szymborska already had the means to play her part in the score. The most important were imagination, allowing for transgressing the laws governing reality, irony, helping to keep distance to oneself and the world, and, most of all, skepticism, which frees us from the belief in the existence of eternal, ideal, and unchangeable things. She could therefore write:

> Obmyślam świat, wydanie drugie,
> wydanie drugie, poprawione

adding in the end:

> Świat jako taki. Tylko tak
> żyć. I umierać tylko tyle.
> A wszystko inne — jest jak bach
> chwilowo grany
> na pile.

The Touching "Untouched Detail"

Piotr Michałowski

The agnosticism of Szymborska's poetry is the consequence of her doubting in universals; the poet avoids speaking about specific states that could be evidence for the existence of general principles, but undermines these principles or makes them relative. In relation to the rules, she acts like a prosecutor who — abstracting from an objectified assessment of the defendant's act — only gathers evidence of the crime and unmasks false testimonies of defense witnesses. From a fragmented description of reality, which focuses only on a particular case, we receive a very careful general diagnosis: "it's not always so." This imprecise conclusion may signify different proportions of statistical events: either "sometimes it's different" or "most often it's different."

While discussing the poet's subsequent poetry volumes, Stanisław Barańczak pointed out twice that the defense of "particularity" forms the main thread in Szymborska's poetry.[1] This theme, the critic argues, shapes the polemical style of the utterance ("it so because … however …") and justifies the use of irony as "artistic consequence of defending the particularity against the terror of collectivism."[2] Such an attitude is sometimes present *expressis verbis* — as aphoristic puns directed against the rule: "That's how it goes with universal truths," that they are uncomfortable ("Parable"). Breaking free from the pressure of mass reception of reality is not only practically motivated:

> My choices are rejections, since there is no other way,
> but what I reject is more numerous,
> denser, more demanding than before.
> A little poem, a sigh, at the cost of indescribable losses.
>
> ("A Larger Number"; PNC, 145)

The defense of an exception has both a logical dimension, as well as an existential, psychological, and moral one. Logical — because an exception has an epistemological value: sometimes only a detail reveals the difference in a sea

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1 Stanisław Barańczak, "Posążek z soli," in *Etyka i poetyka: Eseje 1970–1978* (Kraków: ABC, 1981), 130–133; Stanisław Barańczak, "Niezliczone odmiany koloru szarego," in *Przed i po* (London: Aneks, 1988), 111–115.

2 Stanisław Barańczak, "Niezliczone odmiany koloru szarego."

of similar phenomena. Maria Stuart and Queen Elizabeth could have thought similarly, but the victim is different from the executioner:

> The difference in dress — yes, this we know for sure.
> The detail
> is unyielding.
>
> (“Beheading”; PNC, 87)

Existential, because there exist peculiarities. Also in nature, although the process of evolution had indeed eliminated odd beings, there is still:

> And after all she does permit a fish to fly,
> deft and defiant. Each such ascent
> consoles our rule-bound world, reprieves it
> from necessity’s confines — more
> than enough for the world to be a world.
>
> (“Thomas Mann”; PNC, 97)

The exception saves the world from being understood, provides strangeness, (“Allegro Ma Non Troppo”). It obliterates harsh distinctions and concepts; it shows intermediate states that exist even between life and death — a partial salvation:

> In danger, the holothurian cuts itself in two.
> It abandons one self to a hungry world
> and with the other self it flees.
>
> (“Autotomy”; PNC, 134)

The psychological and moral sense of an exception reveals itself in the way of thinking about youth (“Likeness”) or about the loved ones who have passed away (“Memory Finally”) through stopping time or an idealizing of a selection of memories, and an individual’s fate can be considered as a coincidence that saves life or sentences to annihilation. Both salvation (“Could Have”) and death (“Report from the Hospital”) can be an exception — it depends on the perspective and point of view that the rule imposes.

Everything is entitled to the status of an exception to an individual, event, being, life, and finally, the world. So the surface of the logical background of negation changes; however, it is not valuated negatively. The salvaged exception is rather a supplement to the world, which is full of “omissions,” rather than an exchangeable element; the correction has a positive value. The commonly adopted hierarchy of events is, however, challenged:

> When I see such things, I’m no longer sure
> that what’s important
> is more important than what’s not.
>
> (“No Title Required”; PNC, 225)

The purpose of pointing to an exception is therefore a correction in proportions.

Everything that remains in opposition to the official order of the world, out of reach of popular opinion or on its margins, can be saved: incidental, unheroic episodes in history, shyly omitted in history books ("The End and the Beginning"); lost civilizations ("Atlantis"), and dying nations ("Some People"[3]); trillions of episodes from our own life that were doomed to oblivion ("May 16, 1973"). It can also save a particular moment, event, and most importantly, a particular person who breaks away from social rights ("Clochard") or ideas (Job in the prose of "Synopsis," the mythological prophetess in "Soliloquy for Cassandra"). It defends its autonomy and its right to a unique being.

In Szymborska's poetry, the motif of privacy ("Klucz" [Key], "True Love") appeared the earliest, returning sometimes in the "Leśmian-style" reflection on the alienation of love ("Commemoration").

However, the rebellion against "the larger number" came to the fore most strongly against the statistics that disdains the details, for which:

> A thousand and one is still only a thousand.
> That *one* seems never to have existed:
> a fictitious fetus, an empty cradle,
> a primer opened for no one,
> air that laughs, cries, and growls,
> stairs for a void bounding out to the garden,
> no one's spot in the ranks.
>
> ("Starvation Camp Near Jaslo"; PNC, 42)

Rounded numbers describe collective death (as in the poem above) and collective life ("Census") with similar coldness. The number and crowd, in which "the statistical head" gets lost ("Snapshot of a Crowd"), sentence the individual to being anonymous, or not being at all.

Among numerous programmatic utterances, referring to the primacy of exception over principle, there are attempts to present a defense of this attitude — some are straightforward ("A Larger Number"), others are in the form of ironic apologies addressed to the rule ("Under One Small Star"). In the collection *The People on the Bridge* the reflection on the method becomes more dense: it appears in the form of a balancing inventory of salvaged exceptions ("Miracle Fair," "Into the Ark") or the crucial confession that the chosen "detailed" vision of the world remains only a matter of individual (and thus also "exceptional") taste: "I prefer exceptions … / I prefer the time of insects to the time of stars" ("Possibilities"). One wants to add a quote from another poem: "[I prefer] Thursday over infinity any day" ("Warning"). The human perspective of such a choice does not,

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3 *Tygodnik Powszechny,* no. 34 (1994): 1.

however, eliminate another — similarly human — tendency: the tendency for generalizations. And this trap is part of Szymborska's poetic experience as well.

As a result of accumulating partial negation, a vision of the world as unrecognizable chaos is born — a collection of exceptions governed by accident. An excessive faith in an exception sometimes paradoxically changes into a dogma, since — although constructing utterances from negations — it assumes that a negative principle takes the place of the positive principles that are rejected: "Nothing can ever happen twice" ("Nothing Twice"; PNC, 20).

The accumulation of negations pushes reasoning into the hands of absurdity: a negation of negation must be a statement. A critique of every superstition brings to life a new superstition, which in turn provokes criticism — and so on, *ad infinitum.* This opens unlimited perspectives for poetry, understood as a constant critique of reality, critique focused on a detail that is evidence, which is non-functionary autotelic. Evidence supplied by experience is, indeed, as important for knowing the whole as a shiny pebble of a long-lost mosaic. Hence, the anti-scientist confession: "in burning of his notes, … in the scattering of numbers, … in the shattering of tablets" ("Discovery"; PNC, 124).

Outside Human Perspective

Anthropological perspective appears already in *Calling Out to Yeti* and grows gradually in the following books. It grows rather in terms of quantity and does not reveal a linear development of views: threads that were abandoned after being tested by irony and concepts that were compromised earlier and persistently return in newer forms. No negation is final since it is also a subject to doubt — prompting constantly renewed attempts at defining the existential situation. The "unready" knowledge (or rather: lack of knowledge) on this subject is shaped by hesitation, alternately bringing it closer to two poles of conclusions. This becomes clear when in one poem a thesis is confronted with an anti-thesis:

> In short, he's next to no one,
> but his head's full of freedom, omniscience, and the Being
> beyond his foolish meat —

The ending neutralizes this irony through a specifically expressed admiration for the phenomenon of existence:

> He's no end of fun, for all you say.
> Poor little beggar.
> A human, if ever we saw one.
>
> ("No End of Fun"; PNC, 106)

The balance between skepticism and admiration is indeed preserved, but it is a dynamic, wavering balance, prone to surprises, such as newly discovered arguments that can temporarily tip the scales in favor of one of the opposing options.[4] What remains in place of a conclusion, is only astonishment at humanity as a phenomenon and as a paradox that does not accept itself as such:

> The son of an actual woman.
> A new arrival from the body's depths.
> A voyager to Omega.
> …
> His movements
> dodge and parry
> the universal verdict.
>
> ("Born"; PNC, 79)

The source of existential anxiety is the contrast of behavior atypical compared to the whole biosphere: a psychic maladjustment to the rest of the world — precisely the status of "an exception" to the common principle: "We left animals / Who will leave us" ("Notatka," ["Note"]). The need for preserving individual values is accompanied by the fear of being alienated from the Universe.[5] The biological form — similar to the others — does not justify the suggestion of uniqueness:

> Ten billion nerve cells. Ten pints of blood
> pumped by ten ounces of heart.
> This *object* took three billion years to emerge.
>
> ("A Film from the Sixties"; PNC, 94; emphasis P.M.)

The astonishment results from the affiliation of the subject who perceives the world through the human species, which in turn seems like "an accident": "Why …? Sewn up not in scales, but skin?" ("Astonishment"; PNC, 128); but also, it seems like a final judgment: "… you leave me with my lone / nonconvertible, unmetamorphic body" ("An Effort"; PNC, 8).

The image of the world is polluted by human perspective, which is our doom and which seems a genetic burden and main obstacle from knowing the reality — in the vast majority nevertheless "inhuman." Astonishment at the exceptional "case," which is the imposed form of existence, incites to rebel against the limitations of exploration that result from this irreversible fact. Anthropocentrism is negated indirectly — through the creation of alternative worlds — which are "possible" insomuch as improbable:

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4 See, Magnus J. Kryński and Robert A. Maguire, *Poetry* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1989), 222.

5 See, Elżbieta Kram-Mikoś, "Obmyślam świat. (Nad wierszami Wisławy Szymborskiej)," *Polonistyka,* no. 4 (1983): 250.

> The long-suspected meanings
> of rustlings, chirps, and growls!
> Soliloquies of forests!
> The epic hoots of owls!
> Those crafty hedgehogs drafting
> aphorisms after dark,
> while we blindly believe
> they're sleeping in the park!
>
> ("I'm Working on the World"; PNC, 3)

The change of perspective appears through subsequent distancing: "not necessarily the human being," "not only animals and plants," and finally, "not only the Earth." These escape routes run in parallel and sometimes cross each other, without preserving any universal strategy of the transcendental description of the human — most certainly because of fear of the fixed form of trivialized science fiction that would imprison the disobliging hypothesis of a passing thought in a stereotypical image.

An attempt to save the human perspective is the imaginative journey into extreme or atypical states of humanity — close to absolute freedom defined by negation and resulting from the lack of ownership ("Clochard") or a loss of mental health ("Lazarus Takes a Walk"). Also a shadow shows an externalized perspective — "own shadow," but to some extent remaining independent ("Shadow"). The path of liberation from a routine view of the world is revealed by ontogenesis: the naïve child's perspective (philosophically "confirmed" by Berkeley's views), perhaps "cleases the door of perception," and brings us closer to truth? ("Interview with a Child"). Extreme sensualism is a rejection to interpret reality: elements exist only in individual acts of perception; there is a lack of an entirety bound by cause and result. There are only exceptions, perceived through this particular exception, which is the subject. Its apparently privileged position — in the zero point of perception — does not, however, result from belonging to a higher species, but from its transient role: from a single act of perception.

Hence, this provocative idea of an experimental change of the point of view and formulating hypotheses: how does the world look like in nature's eyes? First, we seek the answer among our close and distant relatives, the monkey:

> In fables, lonely, not sure what to do,
> he fills up mirrors with his indiscreet
> self-mockery (a lesson for us, too);
> the poor relation, who knows all about us,
> though we don't greet each other when we meet.
>
> ("The Monkey"; PNC, 27)

The tarsier is a monkey whose name in Polish sounds much less grandly: "*wyrak upiór*." Perhaps this particular "tiny creature, nearly half of something, / yet nonetheless a whole no less than others" knows the answer that we search for in ourselves since the beginning of our species' existence.

> But what you've come to know about yourselves
> will serve for a sleepless night from star to star.
>
> ("Tarsier"; PNC, 98)

A much harder, but much more free, hypothesis addresses the zoo-psychology of species that are more distant from us in terms of evolution, such as a dreams of a reptile ("Sen starego żółwia," ["The dream of an old turtle"]), or a look of a dying beetle lying on a country road ("Seen from Above"). Outside of the range of common experience, there is a world seen through the eyes of plants and inanimate nature: a tree ("Jabłonka," ["Apple tree"]), water, ("Water") or a stone ("Conversation with a Stone") — "other-beings" ["innobyty"] not available for humans, autotelic.[6]

Irrespective to the degree of kinship of or foreignness from these objects, the description and guesses as to their inner life will be contaminated by anthropocentrism. The hypothesis that is born is flawed since all the attributes assigned to autonomic forms of existence are only a simple negation of human features: a monkey directly "looks" into humanity as into a mirror and a turtle observes the world from a lower level that is close-up and fragmentarily; of course, in comparison to humans, however, it can live long — again, longer than *homo sapiens*. It does not care about human history, big politics, and existential problems. A human is a necessary measure for comparison; a human is the inevitable reference and topic, on which the "romantic irony"[7] focuses. The turtle, and other phenomena of life, is portrayed only as counterarguments, or any other clue submitted in the process against human arrogance. The negation of human features happen when they are being "uninteresting," "unconsciouss" (but not in Jungian sense); "incomprehensible" and "non-belonging" ("Jabłonka," [Apple Tree]); "painless" and "unminding" ("View with a Grain of Sand").

"The buzzard never says it is to blame. / The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean," states the poet in a poem, the title of which clearly reveals an anthropocentric point of view: "In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself" (PNC, 168).

The comparison of humans with other representatives of life leads only to one irrefutable conclusion: an observation of difference. Difference does not authorize us to assign hierarchical value to state superiority, nor inferiority. The competing points of view do not provide a basis for a total critique or negation of humanity as

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6 A term coined by Stanisław Balbus.

7 Artur Sandauer, *Samobójstwo Mitrydatesa* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1968), 354.

a fundamental value. A certain "excess" of anthropocentrism can be mocked and can become a subject of harsh revision and correction. And so certain shameful features are negated: cruelty towards other species ("Zwierzęta cyrkowe," ["Circus animals"]) or towards your own species (Abraham's sacrifice in the poem "Noc," ["Night"]) and a compromising lack of species self-knowledge ("The Monkey," "Brueghel's Two Monkeys"). Imperfection is exposed directly or through parody. This is the meaning of the absurd invocation delivered in defense of culture and directed towards the contesting "snow man" ("Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition"), or a lecture by the custodian (guide) of a paleontological museum, for whom the remains of a dinosaur provide a premise for the scientific apotheosis of her own species and civilization ("Dinosaur Skeleton").

Existence provides us with as many reasons for pride as for humility, as many pieces of evidence of greatness as of smallness: next to the monkey and beetle there is the universe, also existing, and beyond life there is eternity. The transcendental perspective sets the boundaries for human imagination: the hypothesis concerning the existence of the world can be spun only from a position of far-away future ("Archeology"), Cosmos ("The People on the Bridge"), afterlife ("The Letters of the Dead"), God ("Maybe All This," "Slapstick"), or archpoet — the all-powerful artist-creator ("Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem").[8]

Beings created by humans surpass humans multiple times. Ideas turn out to be most alienated or overwhelmingly "inhuman." Nature suggests them and makes us aware that it is "not for us such idiotic / onionoid perfections." ("The Onion"; PNC, 166). On the other hand, the existence of an idea undermines the foundations of humanism, since "only what is human can truly be foreign." ("Psalm"; PNC, 148).

Paradoxically "foreign," and thus "inhuman," are those creations of human imagination, such as myths of happy societies ("Utopia"), which make us aware of the misery of reality, and scientific abstractions, which are supposed to give meaning to this reality. Everything that results from human aspirations and transcends his biological status is culture.

Complete negation would also be "inhuman." Its limited power and range, designed with analytic subtlety, save Szymborska's world — on the moving border between existence and nonbeing. Perhaps it is worth to repeat after the poet:

> We're extremely fortunate
> not to know precisely
> the kind of world we live in.
>
> ("We're Extremely Fortunate"; PNC, 258)

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8 See, Edward Balcerzan, *Poezja polska w latach 1939–1965* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1982), 246.

The attempts to logically interpret Szymborska's poetry inevitably lead to obvious conclusions and revealing truths; if they surprise us at all, then they would do so mostly with their banality. Certain acts of negation frequently hide a common thought, which can be shared by both great philosophers, as well as common people. That is why the discussion about the influence of this or that philosophy on Szymborska's "worldview" does not seem to be especially meaningful. The multitude of interpretative ideas reveal a comprehensive context, neither of which is a universal key that would fit to every poem or even a whole series gathered in a single collection.

The poet's position can be best described as an attempt to know the world, with the assumption that it is unknowable, and the acceptance that we have the right for relentless disagreement. The source of this position can be traced both to philosophical concepts as well as to transhistorical human tendencies. It can be explained through the mechanism of reactance, a need for defiance, or an individual's self-defense against human truths and a rebellion against transhuman truths. Furthermore, we can use another argument from the domain of psychology: negative events and assessments are considered to be more rational.[9]

In the end, it is not philosophical depth that makes this poetry great but precisely the originality of the poetic language. Although the epistemological value of these "discoveries" seems questionable, the process of obtaining them is still essential. This dynamic portrait of a thinking "exception" emerges from the tumultuous variations on different subjects of humanistic reflection.

[1996]

9 See, Maria Lewicka, *Aktor czy obserwato:. Psychologiczne mechanizmy odchyleń od racjonalności w myśleniu potocznym* (Warszawa-Olsztyn: Polskie Towarzystwo Psychologiczne 1993), 135–157.

"Written on Waters of Babel": Silence and Rhetorical Strategies of Wisława Szymborska

Dorota Wojda

This essay is an attempt to use the category of silence in analyzing the poetry of the author of *A Large Number*.[1] The analysis seeks to expose the specific character of inexpressibility and rhetorical strategies present in the poems. Often associated with these categories, silence and silencing will be used here in several ways. Firstly, they will be treated as poetic figures that rely on locating the sense of the utterance in the wordless spaces of the text, or cause the desired information to be derived from the written text only partially, or produce a complete inversion of the poem's meaning as opposed to its literal reading. Secondly, these categories will relate not only to simple phrases, but equally to larger structural entities. And thirdly, the notion of silence also serves as a metaphor that portrays the beings that do not exist in the text, or suggests that there may be something more to them then what meets the eye.

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1 See, Sławomir and Teresa Cieślikowscy, "Sacrum i maska, czyli o wypowiadaniu niewypowiedzialnego," in *Sacrum w literaturze*, ed. J. Gotfryd (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1983); Teresa Cieślikowska, "Przemilczanie w prozie" and "Sugestia jako zasada narracji," in *W kręgu genealogii, intertekstualności, teorii sugestii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1995); Izydora Dąbska, "Milczenie jako wyraz i jako wartość," *Rocznik Filozoficzny,* no. 1 (1963); Izydora Dąbska, "O funkcjach semiotycznych milczenia," in *Znaki i myśli. Wybór pism z semiotyki, teorii nauki i historii filozofii* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975); Bronisław Drąg, "Milczenie w strukturze dzieła literackiego," *Ruch Literacki*, no. 5 (1991); Anna Martuszewska, "Pozytywistyczna mowa ezopowa w kontekście literackich kategorii dotyczących milczenia i przemilczenia," *Pamiętnik Literacki,* no. 2 (1986); Christiaan Lucas Hart Nibbrig, *Rhetorik des Schweigens* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981); Ihab Hassan, *Literature of Silence* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967); Maria Kalinowska, *Mowa i milczenie* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1989); Krystyna Pisarkowa, "O komunikatywnej funkcji przemilczenia," *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze*, no. 27 (1986); Ryszard Przybylski, "Drabina do otchłani. Esej o milczeniu," *Znak,* no. 10 (1992); Jolanta Rokoszowa, "Język a milczenie," *Biuletyn Polskiego Towarzystwa Językoznawczego*, no. 40 (1986); Stefania Skwarczyńska, "Przemilczenie jako element dzieła literackiego," in *Z teorii literatury. Cztery rozprawy* (Łódź: Poligrafika, 1947); George Steiner, *Language and Silence*: *Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

Therefore, what will be analyzed will be, on the one hand, significant gaps, and on the other, the formulas of the meaning of which is situated, so to speak, outside of them. According to the literature on the subject, this differentiation is expressed through the opposition of *significant silence* and *silencing*.[2] For me, the central thesis is consistent with Hart Nibbrig's postulate: "hermeneutics of silence should explain words that remain silent, preserve the suppressed meanings, explain the breaking off and breaking down of sentences, and make the silence that appears intelligible in the context of interpersonal situations."[3]

Many works dedicated to the phenomenon of silence point to its characteristic ambivalence; according to Maria Kalinowska, "it stretches between two opposing poles: the pole of wholeness, infinite divinity, and the pole of nothingness, emptiness, absurdity."[4] In Szymborska's poetry, the semantics of silence could also suggest that silence is both a negative repercussion resulting from the lack of dialogue and a positive result of the fact that the world is not easily reduced to words only. We may assume that the poet's work records a transition from observing and expressing the imperfection of speech to overcoming the natural limitations of language.

The most basic illustration of the natural insufficiency of language seems to be the disappearance of verbal contact between people who are unable to communicate because they have exhausted their mutual bond. This happens in "An Unexpected Meeting": "Our tigers drink milk. / Our hawks tread the ground. / Our sharks have all drowned. / … We all fall silent in mid-sentence, / all smiles, past help. / Our humans / don't know how to talk to one another" (PNC, 40). Here the animals mentioned are allegorical splinters of the dark sides of human nature. Their proverbial aggressiveness is gone. But the possibility of communication has disappeared together with it. A slightly different situation is presented in the poem "The Tower of Babel." The context of the biblical confusion of tongues forms the background for the absence of dialogue presented in the poem. A woman and a man talk to each other as though they could not hear each other's questions and answers: "The north wind shook / the walls; the tower gate, like a lion's maw, /

2 See, Izydora Dąmbska, "Milczenie jako wyraz i jako wartość," and Stefania Skwarczyńska, "Przemilczenie jako element dzieła literackiego."

3 Christiaan Lucas Hart Nibbrig, *Rhetorik des Schweigens,* 42–43, quotation after: Bronisław Drąg, "Milczenie w strukturze dzieła literackiego,"480.

4 See, Aleksandra Konieczna, "Stan zagrożenia. Problematyka alienacji w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej," *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego*, no. 14 (1979); Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Arcydziełka Szymborskiej," in *Felietony poetyckie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1982); Wojciech Ligęza, "Przesądzeni. ‚Monolog dla Kasandry' Wisławy Szymborskiej," *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego*, no. 195 (1979); Anna Nasiłowska, "Kamienie," *Twórczość*, no. 3 (1991); Wiesław Paweł Szymański, "Wiersz o kropli deszczu," *Poezja,* no. 2 (1970).

yawned on its creaking hinges. / At that moment, / myriad explosions shook the sky / … But I'm not crying. / … Never mind, darling / never mind" (PNC, 57).

The absence of communication happens also between a man and other forms of being: an angel, devil ("Pogoń" ["Chase"]), or someone portrayed in a painting ("Pomyłka" ["Mistake"]). In the last case, it is impossible to establish communication because the number dialed on the telephone is inaccurate. The sound of the ringing telephone is heard in the seat of kings and prophets and is empty at night. We can say that similarly to the legendary sleeping knights, indifferent to the false alarm, they do not leave their beds; in fact, they are not able to do it since they belong the world of the art gallery. The separation of different beings is also shown in "Conversation with a Stone." No matter whether the stone is a personification of nature or an alchemic figure of unconsciousness, the impenetrability of its essence makes every human attempt to establish contact doomed to fail.

"Conversation with a Stone" also shows the positive aspects of the subject, which initiated into silence, points to the fact that the constitution of nature prevents us from articulating it though thought and language. The subject, then, begins to discover the power that rests in the reality that escapes the order of words. Silence, therefore, is no longer a result of the weakness of speech, but a peculiar communicating matter congruent with the extralinguistic substance of the world. The process described is identical to the formation of a specific epistemological position. The two collections, *Salt* and *Could Have*, are particularly significant for the purpose of documenting that as, especially in the latter, the subject's position on the phenomenon of inexpressibility, up to now only hinted at, becomes perfectly clear.

Here the starting point is a specific vision of the world as an infinite collection of individual beings functioning as "Inexhaustible, embraceable, / but particular to the smallest fiber," ("Travel Elegy"; PNC, 38), constantly exposing its rich diversity: "So much world all at once — how it rustles and bustles! / Moraines and morays and morasses and mussels, / the flame, the flamingo, the flounder, the feather / … All the thickets and crickets and creepers and creeks! / The beeches and leeches alone could take weeks" ("Birthday"; PNC, 129).[5] The observing subject feels the need to categorize each of the events and to preserve them through the act of poetic expression.

As already mentioned, since this creation is not far from the notion of the imperfection of language, it makes itself visible, first and foremost, when the perception of the richness of forms is complemented with the recording of its constant diminishing. In this moment, the emptiness and failures begin to show

5 See also: "Into the Ark," "Surplus," "Pi."

themselves through the metaphor of silence. It functions on several levels: from an ontological perspective, it is a synonym of what is a thing of the past that is still unfulfilled or currently remaining unrealized; on the epistemic plane, it is an equivalent of conditions that have been forgotten or remain in memory only partially and unreliably, an equivalent of forms unknown to the subject because of their potentiality, and also an equivalent of the snippets of reality that that are not included in the cognitive perspective that is simultaneous with them. Furthermore, the metaphor also fits the absence of the word as a result of nonbeing or the limitation on verbal language.

The source of these limitations comes from the fact that language is an arbitrary creation that does not coincide with the substance of the world: "We call it a grain of sand, / but it calls itself neither grain nor sand. / It does just fine without a name," ("View with a Grain of Sand"; PNC, 185), "Why am I staring now into the dark / and muttering this unending monologue / just like the growling thing we call a dog?" ("Astonishment"; PNC, 128). Since words are fleeting, they lack the universality of real events that they unsuccessfully try to imitate. This is best portrayed in the poem "Water."[6] The titular element functions as a specific *coincidentia oppositorum.* Irrespective of the metamorphoses of times, spaces, and roles it must play, its being does not change: "the Pacific is the Rudawa's meek tributary, / the same stream that floated in a little cloud over Paris / in the year seven hundred and sixty-four / … You've been in christening fonts and courtesans' baths. / In coffins and kisses. / … Whenever wherever whatever has happened / is written on waters of Babel" (PNC, 58). Contrary to aquatic matters, language is divided into different idiolects that are not even worthy of expressing admiration for the unity of separateness: "There are not enough mouths to utter / all your fleeting names, O water. / I would have to name you in every tongue, / pronouncing all the vowels at once." One can think that she "would have to" speak not in the language of men but that of angels.

Szymborska's poetic practice is, therefore, extremely specific as it exists — somewhat contrary to, or even though, or perhaps because of — the existing conviction about its own imperfection. Because of this, it can include the phenomena both existing and available to cognition as well as those that are their negatives. This results in the formation of two complementary patterns of communication within her poetic practice. The first relies on the search for the smallest incidents, on extending the existing stories and showing such creatures as the holothurian or the tarsier, and on the construction of possible worlds and the reconstruction of worlds only allegedly existing.[7] Very often it takes the form of long, tautological

6 See, Wiesław Paweł Szymański, "Wiersz o kropli deszczu," 36–40.

7 See, Stanisław Balbus, "Poetyka i światopogląd 'światów możliwych' Wisławy Szymborskiej,"*Ruch Literacki,* no. 1–2 (1994).

series of enumerations. Poetry becomes a sort of enclave for "banished beings"[8]: "Into the ark, for where else can you go, / … you details, ornaments, and whims, / silly exceptions, / … countless shades of the color gray, / … and the belief that all this / will still come in handy someday" ("Into the Ark"; PNC, 212). It would seem that the ideal form of this sort of practice is the formation of an infinitely dense network of signs that imitate everything that "could have" been: "Alone. With others. On the right. The left. / Because it was raining. Because of the shade" ("Could Have"; PNC, 111). It is, however, impossible to shape such a subtle linguistic texture because the intensity of exposing the discontinuity of the matter of language grows simultaneously with the strengthening of the intentions to destroy it.

The repercussions of this paradox boil down to the existence of a second complimentary pattern of communication. It relies on the indirect style of expression, which shares many similarities with negation and is based on silence. In addition to describing what frequently remains hidden, or what is inexpressible, this type of articulation also imposes limits in communications on the subject. The strategy that is used relies on making silence the figure of being that is not mentioned directly in the text and is a positively valorized category with an almost infinite semantic capacity: " … keeping silent — for the sake of the lake / that still goes unnamed / and doesn't exist on this earth, just as the star / reflected in it is not in the sky" ("Water", PNC, 58), "I can't tell you how much I pass over in silence" ("A Large Number"; PNC, 145), "I prefer many things that I haven't mentioned here / to many things I've also left unsaid" ("Possibilities"; PNC, 214). This kind of treatment makes speech acts that are not symbols function as supremely polysemantic constructions.

Both poetic strategies can be used to create a single text. Often they build even bigger compositional units, the most characteristic of which are the ones based on antiphrasis. Models of verbal excess and understatements complement each other and closely adhere to the complementarity of portrayed worlds and anti-worlds. Therefore, in Szymborska's poetry, the phenomenon of silence is both a necessary evil and a kind of salvation. This ambivalence is best described with the words: "My identifying features / are rapture and despair" ("Sky"; PNC, 223). A whole range of intermediate conditions exists between these two extremes, which is similar to the formula of negativities opalescent with multiple shades of meaning.

As I have already mentioned, Szymborska's poetics relies on a versatile use of those elements of language that are commonly denoted as flawed. It may seem that these constructions express the issues that are mutually exclusive, provide too little or too much information, or provide it at the wrong time. When classifying

8 Edward Balcerzan, "W szkole świata," *Teksty Drugie*, no. 4 (1991): 30.

Szymborska's rhetorical figures — based on the category of silence — the ordering principle is the basic division between figures of words and figures of thought. The analysis will necessarily be limited only to selected poetic realizations.

One of the basic figures of speech, funded on disconnection, is the elliptical-asyndetonic word order that grants them a characteristic simplicity and linguistic economy.[9] Most often it is present when tensions presented in the text demand to be toned down and substituted with equivalents ("Starvation Camp Near Jaslo," "Astonishment"). A conciseness of the poetic texture becomes an irreducible element of enumerative catalogs often appearing in Szymborska's poems: "It happened earlier. Later. Nearer. Farther off. / … What would have happened if a hand, a foot, / within an inch, a hairsbreadth from .." ("Could Have"; PNC, 111), "I prefer movies. / I prefer cats. / … I prefer exceptions. / I prefer to leave early" ("Possibilities"; PNC, 214).[10]

The figures of ellipse and asyndeton can also built larger poetic wholes. The poem "Parada wojskowa" ("Military Parade") is constructed according to this rule and is based on repetitions of only three words: "— air — water — earth —." Originally these words signified particular natural elements, but along with the development of military technique, they also began to stand for ballistic missiles. Here we see a significant interaction between these two semantic fields. An additional sense is provided by the poem's ending: "Earth Water Air." It can be interpreted in three ways: a collective petition for providing basic needs, an aggressive demand for extending the available living space, or an allusion to the act of begging God to protect the nation from the devastating effects of air, hunger, fire, and war.[11]

The elliptical construction forces the reader to activate her/his pre-text knowledge, and therefore, the briefness makes this poetic utterance become an even more inclusive act. Because of moments that are potentially deprived of information, there is a place for irony, wit, expression of disapproval, or elimination of pathos.

Some tautological constructions, created through additions, are a specific form of silence. Frequently, specific words create a figure that is based on using the

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9 On the problem of ellipsis in language see: Maciej Grochowski, "Czy zjawisko elipsy istnieje?," in *Tekst. Język. Poetyka: Zbiór studiów,* ed. Maria Renata Mayenowa (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1978).

10 On enumeration in Szymborska's poetry see: Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Arcydziełka Szymborskiej," 121; Jan Prokop, "Wisława Szymborska. Odkrycie," in *Liryka polska. Interpretacje,* ed. Jan Prokop (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971); Wojciech Ligęza, "Przesądzeni. ‚Monolog dla Kasandry' Wisławy Szymborskiej,"

11 See, Aleksandra Konieczna, "Stan zagrożenia. Problematyka alienacji w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej," 98.

semantic softness of an individual construction, which occurs in linguistic practice. In a similar fashion, the phrase: “Where Hiroshima had been / Hiroshima is again” (“Reality Demands”; PNC, 232) suggests that the synonym for annihilation is no longer up to date since the city destroyed had regained its original appearance. In this case, the tautology is, thus, only illusory.

An opposite situation appears when the pleonasm does not present a direct contrast, but instead expresses the particularity of forms so significant for Szymborska’s poetry: “Oh how grassy is the hopper, / how this berry ripely rasps” (“Allegro ma non troppo”; PNC, 132). Similarly, one of the most surprising phenomena described in “Miracle Fair” is the fact that cows are, in fact, nothing more that exactly that — cows.

Paronomasia is a peculiar category of tautology. Sometimes its purpose is to focus on relationships in nature: “I’m a trap within a trap, / an inhabited inhabitant, / an embrace embraced, …” (“Sky”), or to show the possibilities of transgressing barriers assigned to certain phenomena: “In a humble from-here-to-here? / A fly caught in a fly? A mouse trapped in a mouse?” (“Interview with a Child”; PNC, 130). It may also happen that the paronomasia coincides with negation, abandoning the standard way of thinking about the world: “The lake’s floor exists floorlessly, / and its shore exists shorelessly” (“View with a Grain of Sand”; PNC, 185). In this case, we also encounter ambiguity. [The original Polish] “bezdennie” (“floorlessly”) means, within the constraints of the poem: “having no awareness of being the floor,” and within the rules of language, “limitlessly, inexhaustibly.”

The specificity of tautologies stems from the fact that they often seem redundant and therefore far away from the ideal of the required semantic capacity. We deal with an opposite interpretative situation when these means are supposed to carry certain information. From this perspective, their communicativeness is only deceptively doubtful. Generally, the reader almost always assumes that the poetic tautology, indeed, carries some meaning, and therefore looks for such a way of reading that the apparent nonsense — through introducing an adequate context — is explained.

Aposiopesis — abrupt, unfinished phrases — plays a special role among the figures of thought. It can signal the impossibility of expression: “Not leaving … any golden thought / about life that is like” (“Wiersz ku czci,” [Poem in honor]), “in a Paris like — / in a Paris which — / (save me, sacred folly of description!)” (“Clochard”; PNC, 35). Sudden silence may also suggest reluctance to directly mention the spheres that function as taboos: “They really knew what a moment means, / oh any moment, any one at all / before —” (“Soliloquy for Cassandra”; PNC, 83). It also happens that a sentence is interrupted because of a hidden feeling of hope: “I know that silence will welcome me, but still. / … Nothing that could show that” (“Pogoń”), “A few of them / have actually turned back. / … And with

something they seemed to have won in their hands" ("One Version of Events"; PNC, 254). In these passages, the absence of the word serves as a sign representing different intentions that have brought it into existence.

This rule also applies to the information gaps that are filled as the reader continues to read the poem. These types of figures operate, in the first place, through gradation of tension, surprise effect, and the concept of pun, sometimes realizing the pattern of the dialectical *praeparatio.* They are particularly present in structures based on antiphrasis. The suggestion of a possibly ironic utterance gains credibility thanks to the closing utterance. The supposed advertisement of a tranquillizer is challenged by a tricky observation: "Sell me your soul. / There are no other takers. / There is no other devil anymore" ("Advertisement"; PNC, 120).[12]

No less frequent, a similar gradation is used in the poems deprived of the interlational character. Contrary to the antiphrasis, which originally seems to be a praise or reprimand of a certain event, in this case at first the reader seems to be dealing with something completely disorienting. This happens in the poem "Experiment." First, we learn that "we were shown an interesting experiment / involving a head." Next it turns out that "[t]he head / a minute earlier was still attached to…" At this point the sentence is interrupted before informing us about the head's owner. It is, however, evident that "by now it was cut off" and "was doing just fine." A moment later, the attributes of the independent organ begin to reveal its previous ownership: "It pricked up its ears at the sound of a bell. / Its moist nose could tell / the smell of bacon from odorless oblivion …." Finally, the riddle is solved. It turns out that "[a] dog's faithful head, / … squinted its eyes when strokes, / convinced that it was still part of a whole." The ending of the text presents the reaction of someone observing the controversial demonstration of the progress of civilization: "I thought about happiness and was frightened. / For if that's all life is about, / the head / was happy" (PNC, 152).

A similar situation is present in the poem "Clothes." At first the enumeration at the beginning does not seem to be reasonably justified: "You take off, we take off, they take off / coats, jackets, blouses, double-breasted suits, / […] skirts, shirts, underwear, slacks, slips, socks." "Only after a few similar stanzas the context becomes clear: "for now, the doctor says, it's not too bad, / you may get dressed, get rested up, get out of town" (PNC, 187). This is followed by yet another enumeration that relates to rapidly putting on clothes. In this case, the gradation of tension is clearly assigned to the temporal unawareness of patients, but their relief is certainly greater than the feeling of satisfaction felt by the curious reader.

12 The same technique appears in several poems from the collection *A Large Number.* Here are the chosen concepts: "Not for us such idiotic / onionoid perfections" ("The Onion,"); "Only what is human can truly be foreign." ("Psalm"); "So much good money wasted in outer space" ("Warning").

One could think that in Szymborska's poetry the poetic devices described above fulfill several essential functions. They also undergo a sort of dignification since their location in the text enables a fuller articulation and, then, a subsequent partial elimination of the deficiencies of speech. The model of negativity is in line with these constructions; it is only the activity of reception that causes the elliptical word order to become extremely capacious — the unspoken conclusion comes to light and the answer to the riddle, included in the ending, is no longer a surprise, even before it has been read.

In Szymborska's poetry, the poems based on the idea of opposing different spheres of reality occupy a prominent place. They are most often governed by the principle of negation that provokes a clarification of a given antonym through the negation of its opposite. In Szymborska's case, this is embedded in epideictic utterances. It is, however, a specific utterance relying on antiphrasis; being a seeming praise of a certain category, it only secretly valorizes its opposite. This can be also considered a dialectic *concessio,* which is the apparent agreement with the opponent. It is a network of opposing, counterpointed contrasts. And if so, a series of negations is present directly or indirectly. The categories, contrasted with each other, function, thus, simultaneously on two planes, which results in a tension within the antiphrasis.[13] This structure is nothing more than an extended form of irony that is *ipso facto* a poetic equivalent of the interlational technique in prose that relies on disrupting the cohesion of the text and comparing opposing utterances.[14]

This device is used in the poem "The Onion," which is based on the idea of a paradox. It begins with a sentence apparently referring to a dialogue taking place earlier beyond the range of the text: "The onion, now that's something else." While reading further, it becomes evident that this "other" is a human. The whole poem was conceived as a double comparison of the onion's constitution with that of humans; double, because the literal reading is a reference to the contrasting physical construction of the two beings, while what is significant on the metaphorical level is their psychological condition.

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13 On these types of constructions see: Ryszard Matuszewski, "O wierszach Wisławy Szymborskiej," in *Z bliska: szkice literackie* (Kraków: Wydawictwo Literackie, 1981). The critic included the following poems: "Warning," "In Praise of My Sister," "Thank-You Note," "Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem," "A Large Number."

14 On irony in Szymborska's poetry see in this volume: Stanisław Barańczak, *Americanization of Wisława;* also: Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Błazen i Hiob," in *Klucze do wyobraźni: szkice o poetach współczesnych* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1964); Ryszard Matuszewski, "O wierszach Wisławy Szymborskiej"; Marian Stala, "Radość czytania Szymborskiej," in *Chwile pewności: 20 szkiców o poezji i krytyce* (Kraków: Znak, 1991).

If the original thesis is the existence of such a differentiation, whatever is said of the vegetable does not fit the characteristic of human kind. “Its innards don’t exist. / … At peace, of a piece, / internally at rest” — the negations that are described result in positive qualities typical for humans. And on the contrary: if it is “[n]othing but pure onionhood” and “It follows its own daimonion / without our human tears” — then a human representative does not have these virtues. The text, thus, opens up a space of negation that is directly absent in itself; while praising the onion, it in fact criticizes it, and the discreet approval refers, indeed, to the imperfection of human nature (PNC, 166).[15]

A contrasting scheme is used in the poem “True Love,” which apparently criticizes the titular emotion.[16] It is indirectly juxtaposed with an opposing phenomenon — a failed romance. Like many other poems of the author, this one uses the style of a rhetoricized speech, too. The orator lists a number of flaws characterizing the seemingly blasphemous feeling. But it is enough only to change the perspective and everything previously considered reprehensible suddenly transforms itself into an advantage. The text’s high point unmasks puritanical hypocrisy: “Let the people who never find true love / keep saying that there’s no such thing” (PNC, 141).

The examples presented in this text prove that the counterpoint structure of a poem is characterized by polyphony, which is typical for the figures based on silence, and by openness to a number of possible and mutually polemical interpretations.[17] It raises many essential issues that could not be covered in this text, such as: the status of semantic surplus shaping irony, the activation of additional contexts of a poem, or the use of linguistic jokes — the issues that ask for a closer examination.

[1996]

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15 Other poems not mentioned here are also based on the negated, apparent praise: “Museum,” “No Title Required,” “ In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself,” “Lesson,” “Funeral,” “Tarsier,” “Utopia.”

16 Other poems based on this scheme: “An Opinion on the Question of Pornography,” “Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem,” “The People on the Bridge,” “Warning,” “Psalm,” “No End of Fun,” “Dinosaur Skeleton.”

17 On polyphony in Szymborska’s poety see: Julian Kornhauser, “Wisława Szymborska,” in *Światło wewnętrzne* (Kraków: DNar3, 1984), 85; Seweryn Pollak, “O poezji poszukującej,” *Twórczość*, no. 1 (1966): 67; Adam Zagajewski, “Wirówka swobody,” *Znak*, no. 4 (1977): 483.

Postcard, a Sister of Lyric Poetry

Małgorzata Baranowska

Perhaps a postcard should be considered a younger sister of lyric poetry. Essentially it is primarily about emotions. A "classic" postcard from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century is almost entirely dedicated to expressing emotions, both in its iconography and in the purpose of buying and sending it. A postcard, because of its nature, seems to be dear to poets. And this not everyone can see? Perhaps some people only pretend to be indifferent to their charm; we do not look through their secret drawers.

Older, illustrated postcards are characterized by a kind of kitsch beauty. They are decorated with the fanciest materials: cork, fur, hair, feathers, metals, glass, cloth, cotton, beads, and others. They feature colorful windows in their printed houses, cats' tails made from small springs, satirical portraits with moving eyes; moreover, they squeak, bark, fold and unfold, turn one landscape into a bunch of others, "officially" present one scene and another one when we look at them against the light. Considering the competition, the producers' inventiveness was indeed important.

Do these tricks sufficiently explain the popularity of postcards in the period between 1890 and 1914 (indeed their position was very strong even up to the 1920s)? No. Neither postal regulations nor elaborate techniques can explain this. The postcard's secret lies in its attempt to create its own universe. Who would not like to have the whole universe at hand, divided into small bits? The postcard's imagination mostly focuses on the thing that is apparently impossible to illustrate: emotions. This encouraged masses of people, who individually would never express their emotions, to use this safe (because conventionalized and not breaching their timidity) card with a recipe for emotions. And that was because a postcard never hides its main purpose: to make one's heart beat.

Contrary to friendship books, postcards have one major advantage: they use a great variety of ready-made images that can enhance, or even replace words. They can be also sent to however distant destinations. At first it was hard to write a letter on them, since on the back (the reverse) there was enough space only for writing down the address. And since their front (the averse) was decorated with an image, someone possessing more epistemological inventiveness (more than was required for addressing the postcard) was forced to write on the picture.

Frequently the text had little relation with the image; so, we may find joyful messages written on photographs of catastrophes, and tragic news on cheerful pictures. A good example is a luxury postcard written in Lviv on May 10, 1900. It presents a nice, beautiful young lady wearing a necklace, stole, and hat that is covered (probably aiming for greater elegance) with something shiny, perhaps powdered glass. In addition to a few simple words, above the hat's brim we find the following message: "Karolek Woliński from Freiburg, whom you must remember, shot himself on Tuesday, May 8. The reason — a matter of the heart."

This message belongs to the real world, not the postcard's world. Yet such an event as a suicide, especially because of love, is a typical postcard theme: love and death are the great, favorite subjects of humanity, melodrama, and the postcard. It is hard to think of any emotion, custom, or gesture that the postcard would exclude: from birth to "welcoming in the Eternal Harbor," from tentative courtship to passionate love, and from playfulness to a terrible misfortune. Postcards were also used, together with all of the formalities, for events such as engagement and wedding parties, not to mention for every virtue and multitude of sins. The postcard's subjects are often that of ideas and symbols, such as Faith, Hope, Love, Beauty, as well as Longing, Treachery, Downfall. We must not forget about landscapes, history, religious scenes, volcanoes and waterfalls, mountains and oceans, chimaeras and dwarfs, giants and saints. The postcard loves everything that was unordinary and always reduced its subject to a stereotype.

A postcard was offered to the whole world. Its soul was the domain of dreams — about love, better times, beautiful clothes, and far-away journeys. It would provide everything to anyone who had never been in love or had not traveled anywhere. But it could also inform about one's travel. In this world a train could even ride through the center of the Eiffel Tower, with a man or woman leaning out of the train to inform about the sender's whereabouts. "I'm here," said the postcard, leaving only space for a signature. It was also able to help make communication easier, in the symbolic language of emotions, using stamps pasted in different positions, playing cards, and flowers: "Correspondence through flowers. If you want to express one of the following emotions, write your signature under the appropriate flower." On one postcard that I own there is a signature written under a picture of a forget-me-not flower: "Remember about me." It is quite simple, but do we know the secret meanings of other plants? E.g. "Caraway seed: we have been betrayed; Cress: I did not mean to offend you; Ivy: undying love; Reseda: more than your beauty I love your kindness; Lilac: do not make me wait any longer!"

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, postcards became a phenomenon incomparable with any other, thanks to their mass-popularity and "ideological program" of creating a whole postcard-world with the Earth, the

Moon, the people, the strange and supernatural phenomena, and the recorded feelings and events. It was a striking victory of emotions and imagination over formalized mail.

For a long time the fact that Wisława Szymborska collects postcards was an open secret (albeit guarded). No one forbid from speaking about it, and yet no one has ever written about it. And then suddenly in spring 1993 a two-page article appeared in "Przekrój" (issue 15/1993), entitled: "I always had a fondness for kitsch… Wisława Szymborska's old postcards." Not only did she officially acknowledge the existence of a collection, but we could even see nine old postcards reproduced. On them, altogether, there were seven children (including one sitting inside a bottle with medicine), two women (one sitting on a rabbit, one next to a giant pink egg), one man (with a big belly and small moustache), two lovers (hard to count separately since they are hugging each other), three rabbits, four maybugs (each carrying a four-leaf clover), nine dogs (barking from music sheets). Quite a lot, isn't it? There were only nine postcards, but what richness of content they had.

The "classic" postcard has always had a tendency not only for exaggeration, but for a hasty synthesis of the world, often obtained though a simple accumulation of repeating motifs. These motifs were the postcard's own language.

In the article from "Przekrój," Szymborska reminisced about her first postcard: "I remember my first postcard that I had found in my parents' mail. Among others, mostly the postcards with the picture from Toruń or Truskawiec, this particular stood out because of its picturesqueness. It was a photomontage consisting of a rather primitive aeroplane and three odd ladies, carelessly posing on the machine's wings. Around it there were pink and blue clouds, which meant that the aeroplane was flying, interestingly — without a pilot. I decided this postcard would be mine. Later I began to add other ones. Naturally each one was kitsch, but kitsch with a kind of imaginary frolic. Things had to collide with each other: naivety with pretentiousness, melancholy with idiocy."

So the whole thing was already decided in the poet's childhood? Reality clashes with the fantastique, the big with the small, caricature with humorousness — a postcard provided everything, its ambition was to satisfy every taste, especially the one for kitsch.

Szymborska writes further: "I have always had a fondness for kitsch. I really do not think that such taste could exclude admiration for Art written with a capital "A." One can have good and bad taste at the same time, the thing is to know in what situation one should activate which."

One of the biggest secrets is to not think or see Szymborska's world, but rather to have the poet present it. People often have contradictory emotions. They commonly have both bad and good taste. Sometimes they are simultaneously happy and sad, patient and impatient, curious about a phenomenon and pushed

away by it. However, they do not admit to it too often. They mostly try to agree with themselves on a position and provide a chosen, straight version. The poet does this differently. She always tries to present the world with all of its complications and contradictions. The fact that we think it is simple is only a matter of her mastery.

Who but Szymborska would dare to describe the process of thinking, as she did in the poem "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography" (from *The People on the Bridge,* 1986):

> There's nothing more debauched than thinking.
> This sort of wantonness runs wild like a wind-born weed
> on a plot laid out for daisies.
>
> Nothing's sacred for those who think.
> Calling things brazenly by name,
> risqué analyses, salacious syntheses,
> frenzied, rakish chases after the bare facts,
> the filthy fingering of touchy subjects,
> discussion in heat — it's music to their ears.
>
> (PNC, 208)

Exactly "nothing is sacred" — pompous style, boredom of excessive seriousness, political commissioners' censorship, renowned paintings, commonly accepted phrases, history nor language, and even coquetry, beauty, an innocent, dignified Corinthian pillar, a nice cat or a rooster, a pretty ballerina or Francis Joseph. "Debauchery of thinking" can be done everywhere and without limitations. You can analyze, divide into parts, peep under covers and even under bodies, and see bare facts. The poet does this, not only when thinking. She also works in space, taking pictures from old newspapers and turning them into something new. When she makes her own postcards, Szymborska extracts hidden shapes of surprising associations.

Her friends have been receiving letters written on collage-postcards for years. As we see, she has been also making postcards that are not intended for sending since she has also published those that have been never mailed out. The elements of the picture, cut out with precision and glued onto a postcard-size cardboard, create an entirety that, upon the first glance, seems surreal. It was indeed the surrealists who discovered the postcard for thought and poetry, including them into the realm of art even in their most lush kitsch. Surrealists left us with games (inherited from Dadaism) that involved cutting out particular sentences from serious texts to achieve the effect of ridicule. In Poland it was a quite popular game after October 1956, until the general gloom did not return.

In the early 1970s André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* was published in Poland (in: *Surrealizm. Teoria i praktyka,* selection and translation by Adam

Ważyk, 1973), which included "Poem" — a poem consisting entirely of titles and fragments of titles taken from newspapers. Here is a fragment:

The most beautiful straws
HAVE A FADED COLOR
UNDER THE LOCKS
On an isolated farm
FROM DAY TO DAY

the pleasant
grows worse
A carriage road
leads you to the edge of the unknown
coffee
preaches for its saint
THE DAILY ARTISAN OF YOUR BEAUTY
MADAM
a pair
of silk stockings
is not
A leap in into space
A STAG[1]

Under the influence of the Polish translation of the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, a short-lasting fashion gained popularity in Poland: collecting absurd newspaper clippings (a delayed development in the field of surrealism). Breton directly linked such activities with the collage art of the painters like Picasso or Braque. He wrote: "*Everything is valid when it comes to obtaining the desired suddenness from certain associations.*"[2]

The poet knew and very well understood this tradition — collage, discoveries of newspaper absurdities, and not to mention the world of postcards. I have referred to this tradition only because of a certain technique taken from surrealism. If I am writing about the poet's collection, the reason is that it is impossible not to connect her life-long interest in postcards and its emotional narrative and common beauty with this domain of "postcard art," which the poet has been practicing for years.

Of course, today it is not possible to return to surrealism. Many surrealist discoveries have become gentle and ordinary, even though they were once characterized by rapacity. Its view on postcards also seems innocent and dreamy. Kitsch has transgressed every barrier of art long ago and nowadays one looks for wonder somewhere else. These former rebellious artists perceived the postcard as a source of imagination, wonder, and surprise. They infused it with their great

1 André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 41-42.

2 Ibid., 41.

struggle against French rationality. The collage technique and the theory of randomness (so important for surrealists and connected with their playing with newspaper clippings) served an identical role. Szymborska's postcard and collage is not a continuation of these ideas.

As a collector, the poet perhaps feels a shiver of delight, similar to the one experienced by surrealists, when she faces the mysterious, irrational wonder of kitsch. As a poet and creator of kitsch, she, however, acts differently. She can always reach the detail that escapes us. She does not see things, "more or less," like we do. She always extracts an individual, an animal, a thing from the great number of people, animals, and things — about which she does not forget either.

In her work dreams sometimes occur, but they are never a principle of creating the world. Instead, it is quite to the contrary. Everything happens with eyes wide-open. There is no escape, consolation, or better worlds. There is however *irony,* a joke that appears even in extreme situations, some kind of omnipresent skeptical laughter.

It is quite extraordinary, especially in the context of the general seriousness of Polish poetry. Something is lurking in these poems, ready to reveal itself at a given moment. The fabric of Szymborska's poetry is based on the most important question — about existence. The setting always consists of the most ordinary everyday reality that is seen as unordinary. During her poetry readings laughter is often heard, breaking the silence. It is precisely that lurking presence that shows its face — the poet has discovered a small detail in the background of infinity, a small being in the chain of beings, and a lack of consequence in human character.

Although it is seen with sharp precision, this world does not feature unambiguous certainty. It is rather characterized by extraordinary ambiguity: it seems enormous and small at the same time, tragic and funny, solid and constantly collapsing, elapsing, changing. Most importantly, it is constantly being supervised by the mind. This philosophy is often considered the domain of seriousness. And this philosophical poet suddenly confronts us with a hilarious, surprising thought. Is fate sometimes funny? Naturally, yes, as only it can. The irony of fate, the amusement brought by our clumsy actions (consequences of living "more or less," as we often do), the trouble with juxtaposing infinite notions with the odds and ends of everyday life, are at times the material of the "ridicule" in Szymborska's poems. I have written "ridicule" in quotation marks. But if someone has never laughed while reading her poems, then he or she has probably not understood them. And who was not terrified because of them?

Her poetry constantly asks the following question: what kind of creation are humans? Are they the subject of an on-going transformation in the evolution of beings?

> I lost a few goddesses while moving south to north,
> and also some gods while moving east to west.
> …
> I've shed my skin, squandered vertebrae and legs,
> taken leave of my senses time and again.
> I've long since closed my third eye to all that,
> washed my fins of it and shrugged my branches.
>
> Gone, lost, scattered to the four winds. It still surprises me
> how little now remains, one first person sing., temporarily
> declined in human form, just now making such a fuss
> about a blue umbrella left yesterday on a bus.
>
> ("A Speech at the Lost-and-Found"; PNC, 127)

Szymborska's poetry and collage are characterized by an extraordinary, surprising use of colloquial phrases, which provides them with ambiguity, restores their radiance. Would anyone else be able to use such phrases as "shed one's skin," "leave one's senses," "wash one's hands" (here: "fins")? "Shrug" (here: "shrugged my branches")? The poet frequently draws apparently rational conclusions from the meaning of a certain phrase, which leads to absurdity.

What I consider to be the treasure of my collection, or rather the treasure of my life, are the postcards received from Szymborska— her own collages. Just like me, she also has a chest of drawers (apparently hers is not painted like mine) in which she keeps old postcards. Because she very rarely visits Warsaw (and I almost never leave it), I have never had a chance to stand close to Szymborska's collection, and, similarly, she has never had a chance to stand next to mine. However, we are perfectly aware of our collections. When I had the opportunity to briefly talk with the poet for the first time, our conversation concerned postcards (even though the meeting took place during the 1975 Congress of Writers in Poznań).

My favorite postcard (which I have had received much later, with a letter) is one that shows a cat climbing on an ancient pillar, just from thin air. He climbs high, and even looks at us. He is just lifting his last paw. Three of them are already on top, on the chapiter, the fourth is not. We do not know whether the cat will stay there, or immediately jump. Perhaps he will start to carelessly clean himself?

For me this is the characteristic feature of Szymborska's thinking, her poetry, her humor, and her way of perceiving the world. She always seems to find every instance of pompousness, and strangely always brings in an element that fully exposes and destroys it. When looking at her collages, I think about how they connect with her poetry. In fact, she does exactly the opposite of the whole art of postcards. Everyone who collects postcards identifies with this world, which has its own language — a language of kitsch and clichés, yet a language brought to life by the postcard. It is precisely because the postcard is kitsch that it can be a

safe haven. If there is despair, then it is tamed — similarly as love. Everything has a kind of pink stamp, something that helps to express non-stereotypical feelings in the most stereotypical way. I like the postcard, although it is a horrible corollary of clichés. Szymborska, with her own brand of irony, and because she has been collecting these awful clichés, dressed in pretty pictures, for so long, transforms her postcards into something completely different. There are no clichés here, only irony — the same as in her poems, which are very gentle, yet very startling.

Among the postcards printed in "NaGłosie," I especially like the postcard-size cardboard depicting a hand with a rope. There is only one raised hand, as if it was going to tie a loop around a beam. Underneath, in big letters, there is a (glued-on) sign that reads, "A POSSIBLE INTENTION". Therefore, are we supposed to unambiguously think that someone, specifically the owner of a hand, could hang himself? But nothing is stated clearly. And we do not know the source of irony. Just like in the poems. If we wished to analyze it, then it would turn out that what is changed is simply a detail in language. A small shift in reality has this ironic effect.

For instance, let us look at IN THE SPOTLIGHT [originally: "na widelcu" — literally: "on the fork"). Today no one uses this [Polish] phrase, but in the past it was used to state that someone is garnering attention. What do we see here? On the postcard we only see a fork, and on the end of the fork we see a pretty ballerina. Szymborska lives in Kraków. As an ultimate location for various old papers, she cuts out different things from old newspapers. On one of her old postcards, we see a couple of old male (probably) nurses carrying a man on a stretcher. Because he is carried by nurses, we are supposed to think that he is in a bad state. But he is in an even worse state since two additional legs are sticking out from under the stretcher. There is also a caption: THIS IS DISTURBING. You just cannot stop laughing, although generally nothing is happening here. On the next postcard there is no commentary, only a woman looking at herself in a mirror. In the reflection her head is at a right angle to the torso. In several of Szymborska's other collages, I have seen the head separated. But, here, there is an excellent suit and a pair of skeleton legs sticking out from the head. There is another example that pertains to the head: ELIMINATION OF BALDNESS. On the card we see a good-looking man from the beginning of the twentieth century or even the end of the nineteenth century. Everything is great, except for the fact that part of his head is cut off at the top. If we get rid of half of the scull, we also get rid of baldness, don't we?

Who exactly is the tailor's dummy on skeleton's legs? What is the meaning of the suit that hangs on him? Who is hidden above the legs, up to the knee? Why did the reflection in the mirror change its place suddenly and out of nowhere?

Apparently nothing is happening in these pictures. Yet, we can immediately see how a fragment can upset (as on the picture entitled *This is Disturbing*) or

make one laugh. Does the world look like we think it does, if using scissors one can ridicule our experience?

The poet does not trust anything. For her, even though "nothing is sacred," she constantly "touches sensitive topics." For instance, what is the meaning of the image of a loop and a rope (also a fragment) with the caption: "a possible intention?" In the world of this work, the most significant fact is that the horror of existence is not subject to relief, hypocrisy, and clichés. What can a delicate person do? He or she can use what, as it is generally considered, differentiates him or her from other beings; specifically, one can use thinking and laughter.

"Real," "classic" postcards keep us away from inconvenient truths. Additionally, they have one important feature: they take everything seriously, including a joke. If you are to laugh, then croak, but do not ironize or analyze. If we are making fun of an old sentimental postcard, then we do it at our own risk. She is not laughing at herself; she neither knows how nor does she want to. Kitsch is based precisely on the lack of perspective. It presents itself with dead seriousness, as a pure beauty.

The world of postcards recognizes only beauty or superb beauty. The postcard also likes to present extreme ugliness, but only as a curiosity, a freakishness of nature. The postcard's domain consists of different forms of apotheosis, of worshiping people who are famous, great, and powerful. Let us say that we can see Mickiewicz among the clouds, and behind him are the characters from *Sir Thaddeus,* or Krasiński wearing a laurel wreath. Naturally, emperors, kings, and generals were also perfect for receiving the honor of postcard apotheosis. Napoleon had become perhaps the most famous postcard hero in Europe.

One the one hand, I am referring to this fact because of a certain poem from the collection *A Large Number.* On the other hand, I have a suspicion, or even certainty, that the whole concept of a large number (and this one from the large number) could not have been invented if Szymborska had not understood the concept of a collection. She knows that things exist individually, and not only does she know it, but she also makes us aware of it. Szymborska's human is always a separate being, and yet she always reminds us that everything belongs to this great world collection. There is a poem in the collection *A Large Number* that would not have been written if Szymborska was not a postcard collector (the poem is entitled "Sen starego żółwia" ["The Dream of an Old Turtle"]). The turtle dreams about a fragment of the Emperor:

> Dwie nogi na przystanku z Austerlitz do Jeny,
> A w górze mgła, skąd śmiechu słychać terkot.
> Możecie wątpić w prawdziwość tej sceny
> i czy cesarski ten trzewik z klamerką.

> Trudno osobę poznać po fragmentach:
> po stopie prawej albo stopie lewej.
> Żółw niezbyt wiele z dzieciństwa pamięta
> i kogo wyśnił — nie wie.
>
> Cesarz nie Cesarz. Czy przez to się zmienia
> fenomen snu żółwiego? Ktoś, postać nieznana,
> potrafił urwać się na chwilkę z zatracenia
> i światem się przemyka! Od pięt po kolana.[3]

Personally I cannot "doubt in the authenticity of this scene." I simply know it. That does not mean that the poet had to see it. Perhaps it was only a dream of the turtle? Perhaps she did see a series of postcards … Perhaps she even owns it? But that is exactly Szymborska's greatness. When I analyzed these wonderful collages and poems in "NaGłosie," and she later sent me, as a thank-you present, a collection of her own postcards, which illustrated the whole issue, she did not explain to me whether she had seen the series or not. That is because there, the poet and her poetry, must be a mystery. Szymborska understands this and never explains anything.

I know poets who react to different small things. Sometimes you imagine something about a poem and then the poet starts to straighten it up. He or she explains how things really are: where the poem came from, etc. In fact this should delight me since such explanations are good and helpful for the history of literature. But the poetic mystery is lost. Szymborska always keeps her secrets unresolved. She is a very mysterious person. Up to this point, I do not know whether she has seen the series or has not. I do not even have the entire series. It is about the French Emperor. There are at least two different series of postcards with an image — divided, but also multiplied — of Napoleon. There is one where he is wearing a dress uniform (white stockings and shoes with clasps); this image consists of twelve such cards. In the second series of postcards, Napoleon is in a battle dress (in long boots with clasps and spurs); this series consists of ten cards. On other cards in these series, there are some cards where Napoleon is shown in a close-up, in the background of a historical event like a battle. When the postcards are lined up in the right order, you can see a big picture, suitably big for the Emperor. A kind of a puzzle game. A very rare thing. I only have the bigger part of the series

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3 "Two legs at the stop from Austerlitz to Jena, / and the fog above, from where one hears the rattle of laughter. / You can doubt the authenticity of this scene / and whether the shoe with a buckle was the emperor's. // It is hard to recognize a person from pieces: / from the right foot or left foot. / The turtle does not remember much from its childhood / and who he has dreamed about — he does not know. // An emperor or not an emperor. Does it change / the phenomenon of the turtle's dream? Somebody, an unknown figure / can save itself for a moment from oblivion / and dashes through the world! From heels to knees."

in the battle dress. I did not buy these postcard at once, so there are still some missing. I do not have Napoleon's knee, but really I do not collect Napoleon's knees. I can wait.

I have a reproduction of the first series, where Napoleon is in the dress uniform. On the bottom postcard we can see the dream of the turtle from the poem. But first this stanza:

> Cesarz zaistniał co prawda nie cały,
> w czarnych trzewikach przegląda się słońce,
> wyżej dwie łydki, zgrabne dość, w pończochach białych
> Żółw nawet nie wie, że to wstrząsające.[4]

And how does it look like on these postcards? These calves are "quite nice," indeed. They are quite elegant. The shoes shine exquisitely. They reflect the sun. But here in this postcard-fragment, behind the left heel of the big Napoleon, behind the small Napoleon that sits on a rock above the sea, there is a separate, enormous sun that shines on him (the small Napoleon) from behind: the glory of Fame and Magnitude. There is also an eagle that is lowering his unambiguous "wing of fame" on Napoleon. The eagle and the sun do not have anything to do with the rest since they have not been part of the turtle's dream. The turtle saw "not the whole emperor." Perhaps this is the Emperor from this series of postcards? What is extraordinary in Szymborska's work is that, so far, she has not even told me if any secret exists at all.

Perhaps the poet's collection includes these postcards? But in the world of her imagination this could be an insignificant fact. She always extracts a certain fragment just like in a photographic close-up, as if she suspected that the entirety, because of its nature, is unknowable. In the postcard world the fragment of the Emperor, without the rest of the series, could not be possible. To draw attention to a fragment is, however, a characteristic trait of Szymborska's style. An unsuspected juxtaposition of fragments helps her to point out the ambiguity of reality.

"Classic postcards" were far away from such ideas. Their double meaning was limited to puns or, for instance, the discovery that a couple dressed in sporting clothes hiking in the mountains would become naked, displaying a much less touristic scene, when the postcard was put against the light. Among the common production of many millions of items, it is not easy to find these few cards that show a bizarre product of imagination.

From the point of view of the old postcard world, the poet's collages are anti-postcards. They are characterized by skepticism, absolutely contradictory to

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4 "Not the whole emperor, indeed, came into being, / the sun looks into the black shoes, / then the two calves, quite nice, in white stockings. / The turtle does not even know this is terrifying."

the postcard aesthetic. Their humor is often absurd, and the irony thin. Some have double meanings. Some have poetic allusions. From the point of view of Szymborska's work, she always remains true to herself (she was an astonishing poet who never ceases to prove how much poetry can be found in a rational outlook on the world).

After Szymborska had received the Nobel Prize in Literature, a text appeared in "Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej" (issue 12, 1996), under the title "Listy Wisławy Szymborskiej" (to Irena Szymańska and Ryszard Matuszewski, edited by Anna Bikont and Joanna Szczęsna), that included a reproduction of her collage postcards. I must mention one of them. In the picture we see a man's head (again, separated from the body) with a wonderful mustache, from the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as two snowflakes, on the top and at the bottom. But the main "content" is a dream book. Yes. Only that it is a "random" dream-book, with quotations cut out and glued around his head in a shape of a star.

Part of the star's quotations from the left side of the snowflake:

A brush betokens slander.
Washing yourself, you will be rich.
Seeing a spoon, you will be a guest.
Dreaming of a stomach, you lose something.
Playing with a doll, discontent.
Emerald means the same as sapphire.

Part of the star's quotations from the right side of the snowflake:

Eating rice, a larger family.
Being drunk, health.
Seeing a fake coin, shame.
Theatre, the same as drama.
Seeing a screw, you will be mocked.
Lavender means suffering.
Lips are the same as mouth.
Seeing a shoemaker, expenses.

Wisława Szymborska, a philosophical and highly sophisticated poet, perfectly knows, and can use the language of postcards, dream books, and fashion journals from the beginning of the twentieth century. If she uses them, it is always in her own, paradoxical, funny way, contrary to their "natural" character.

At the first glance there seems to be nothing strange about the dream book presented in the poet's postcard. But what is the meaning of the following, already quoted "explanations?":

Emerald means the same as sapphire.
Theatre — the same as drama.
Lips are the same as mouth.

There is no explanation given to what it means if you dream about a sapphire. Then, how are we supposed to know what the meaning of the emerald is? There was no mention of a drama, so what about the theatre? We do not know what the meaning of a mouth is, so are lips unimportant?

Such a thing would neither happen on an old postcard nor even in a dream book, for that matter. They could not leave us in such a state of suspension. Didactics and a desire for creating a whole universe of popular kitsch would force both the postcard, as well as the dream book, to explain everything till the end. Szymborska's card doesn't even have a title. Considering the poetics of this text, we guess that it is a dream book but it is still a speculation. Especially since the head on the card is watching, its eyes are open.

As usual, Szymborska subtly violated the tradition of such an utterance, placing her unique "mark" (which could be called her paradoxical quotation marks).

Two pages with reproductions of postcards made and sent by the poet; a text with a description of her letters (written by two recipients of those letters); and additionally a description of parlor tricks (which she does and initiates), create a quite surreal whole. There had been no such publication in the Polish press for years. And this is not a metaphor. These two pages from "Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej" is surrealism in its purest, historical shape. And is this Szymborska's own, specific character? It could not be otherwise.

Most importantly, there are no programs, especially the loud ones, especially as a group. It consists of an intimate entirety: games enjoyed in a small circle, a private dinner, a parlor game without any publicity, playing cards for years in silence. If these two article pages would concern a surrealist, everything would be completely the other way: a program, excessive loudness, the cards and games would be interpreted as a grand idea, and a dinner in a larger group (with poetry and art performances).

I am really not criticizing surrealists. Twentieth-century art owes them a great deal and up to now the tradition derived from their actions is one of the most important threads of modernity. Not to mention the fact that they have discovered the postcard for art. They have also discovered kitsch for contemporary anthropology. They were the discoverers of wonder in the ordinary, in the most ordinary things, in advertisement, and in the street.

Let us, however, return to the publication from "Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej." Irena Szymborska writes about games initiated by the poet. It is hard to say which of them seems more surrealist: the collage-postcards or these games. Surrealists loved them, considering them to be one way of artistic creativity. Their best-known game, which has its place in the history of art, is "Cadavre exquis" — "Exquisite Corpse" (this is a name taken from the first sentence that is created in the game, "La cadaver exquis boira le vin nouveau" — "The exquisite corpse will drink the

new wine”). This once popular game involved writing words on pieces of paper, folding the corner of the page to hide the word, and then handing it to the next player until a sentence is created (most often completely meaningless). Surrealists played the game just like everyone else while “adding” to it an ideological, artistic meaning, and therefore, making it a part of history. Naturally, they played a lot of other games. Everything was done in order to stimulate the imagination.

Here is the first of the games presented by Szymańska: “We have spent multiple summers in the House of Creative Work, in ‘Astoria’ in Zakopane, playing parlor games, in which Wisława Szymborska is an unmatched specialist. She was also their initiator. The ‘Green Corpse’ game: someone starts with a simple story. The rules prohibit the player from using adjectives at this point. Next the players — naturally not knowing the text — name adjectives that are then inserted into the text in the order they are uttered. That is the source of the game’s name, “The Green Corpse,” although I remember another one, ‘the dirty Soviet Union.’”

Today when I look at these surrealist, but so “Szymborska” in style, pages from “Gazeta Wyborcza,” I wonder whether my analysis of the relation between the poet and surrealism, presented at the beginning of this essay, was perhaps a bit too cautious. But no. Attention! We cannot get carried away by her different abilities, her multiple threads. While reading her poems, one can give into the pleasure of simplicity that emanates from them. While analyzing, one must focus on the complications of her world, never forgetting about this simplicity.

When you start to track down surrealism, she becomes even more surrealistic. When we try to approach it from the perspective of Baroque, she becomes baroque beyond all imagination. All of this is naturally in her distinct style. The same would happen if we tried too hard to divide her poetry into separate threads: historical, anthropological, and philosophical. This would also happen if we tried to extract from it the lyrics of emotion. The poet does all of this at once. Whoever tries to over interpret one of these threads should be warned. He or she will get lost and will not be able to see the unique entirety of Szymborska’s work.

Close Reading

Closer to the Poem: Cognitive Grammar as a Tool of Interpreting Poetic Text (Wisława Szymborska's "A Medieval Minature")

Elżbieta Tabakowska

Introduction

The first part of this essay's title is a travesty of a comment, taken from the renowned poetry critic Marian Stala's interesting and perceptive essay, on an interpretation of Wisława Szymborska's poem "Cat in an Empty Apartment," which was recently published in the literary magazine "NaGłos."[1] The decision to award Szymborska with the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature resulted in Poland reprinting a spectacular number of her poems and publishing old and new reviews, analyses, and interpretations of her individual poetic texts. Among these works, which were mostly written by literary critics, there was a significant exception: a still (?) unpublished paper by Maria Zarębina, which was presented during the conference of the Linguistics Commission of PAN in Kraków on 22 January 1997 and was entitled "Szymborska's Four Poems Read by a Linguist." Among these four poems was "A Medieval Miniature," to which Professor Zarębina dedicated a separate essay that concentrated on the problems with its translations.[2]

Both of professor Zarębina's linguistic analyses clearly show how a collaboration between literary and language theorists can prove especially helpful in the interpretation of a text. Naturally, a poetic text is the best material for anyone who looks for a practical confirmation of the following thesis: due to the specific character of a poetic text, it generally has an internally coherent structure in which the concentration of linguistic means (greater than in other types of texts) allows for an empirically-justified linguistic argument that is without the need of introducing shortcuts, paraphrases, and other moves, which — in one way or another — destroy the text's authenticity and integrity.

The material that will illustrate the thesis that I wish to present in this essay is Wisława Szymborska's well-known poem, which I cite below for the reader's convenience:

1 Marian Stala, "Kot i puste mieszkanie," *NaGłos,* no. 24 (1996): 95–99.

2 Maria Zarębina, "Tekst oryginału a tekst przekładu," *Biuletyn PTJ* 46 (1991): 41–50.

Po najzieleńszym wzgórzu,
najkonniejszym orszakiem,
w płaszczach najjedwabniejszych.

Do zamku o siedmiu wieżach,
z których każda najwyższa.

Na przedzie xiążę
najpochlebniej niebrzuchaty,
przy xiążęciu xiężna pani
cudnie młoda, młodziusieńka.

Za nimi kilka dwórek
jak malowanie zaiste
i paź najpacholętszy,
a na ramieniu pazia
coś nad wyraz małpiego
z przenajśmieszniejszym pyszczkiem
i ogonkiem.

Zaraz potem trzej rycerze,
a kazdy się dwoi, troi,
i jak który z miną gęstą
prędko inny z miną tęgą,
a jak pod kim rumak gniady,
to najgniadszy moiściewy,
a wszystkie kopytkami jakoby muskając
stokrotki najprzydrożniejsze.

Kto zasię smutny, strudzony,
z dziurą na łokciu i z zezem,
tego najwyraźniej brak.

Najżadniejszej też kwestii
mieszczańskiej czy kmiecej
pod najlazurowszym niebem.

Szubieniczki nawet tyciej
dla najsokolszego oka
i nic nie rzuca cienia wątpliwości.

Tak sobie przemile jadą
w tym realiźmie najfeudalniejszym.
Onże wszelako dbał o równowagę:
piekło dla nich szykował na drugim obrazku.
Och, to sie rozumiało
arcysamo przez się.

Up **the verdantest** of hills,
in this **most equestrian** of pageants,
wearing **the silkiest** of cloaks.
Toward a castle with seven towers,
each of them by far **the tallest**.

In the foreground, a duke,
most flatteringly unrotund;
by his side, his duchess
young and fair beyond compare.

Behind them, the ladies-in-waiting,
all pretty as pictures, verily,
then a page, the **most ladsome** of lads,
and perched upon his pagey shoulder
something **exceedingly** monkeylike,
endowed with **the drollest** of faces
and tails.

Following close behind, three knights,
all chivalry and rivalry,
so if the first is fearsome of countenance,
the next one strives to be more daunting still,
and if he prances on a bay steed
the third will prance upon a bayer,
and all twelve hooves dance glancingly
atop **the most wayside** of daisies.

Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary,
cross-eyed and out at elbows,
is **most manifestly** left out of the scene.

Even the least pressing of questions,
burgherish or peasantish,
cannot survive beneath **this most azure** of skies.
And not even **the eaglest** of eyes
could spy even the tiniest of gallows —
nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt.

Thus they proceed most pleasantly
through **this feudalest** of realisms.

This same, however, has seen to the scene's balance:
it has given them their Hell in the next frame.
Oh yes, all that went without
even **the silentest** of sayings.

(PNC, 156—157)

Everyone writing about this poem — regardless of their scholarly field and theory formation — agree on two obvious points. Firstly, "A Medieval Miniature" is a "translation of art into poetry,"[3] that is "a transposition of art categories into poetic language."[4] In search of the original painting (or rather the source of poetic inspiration since the poem seems to be a "synthetic image"), scholars refer to the famous collection of miniatures known today as "Calendar cards," which Pol van Limbourg gave in 1400 to de Berry, who was the prince of Burgundy.[5] Secondly, the accumulation of superlatives is the main poetic device used in the poem;[6] these " … naïve (? — E.T.) superlatives," "beautifully fitted to the style of medieval miniatures" constitute the poem's form and content.[7]

Similarly to both of Zarębina's presentations, the subject of my analysis will be the category of the superlative (specific examples of its use have been highlighted in bold). Although I have chosen a single and unique text, I treat it as an illustration of much wider range of phenomena relating to the organization of the entire text and coherence of its interpretation. I also wish to demonstrate that instruments developed on the basis of cognitive linguistics enable for a much more subtle analysis of a text and interpretation of its meanings while also making it possible to grasp and precisely describe accurate intuitions of a literary critic. It, thus, allows us to paraphrase Stala's words and get *closer* to the poem.

When speaking about the function of the superlative in "Miniature," Zarębina states that in order to express poetic content "[Szymborska] uses the same linguistic structure — categories of inflection, lexis etc."[8] This formulates, therefore, the basic thesis of cognitivism, which states that grammar is symbolic. The only difference is that cognitivists grant the right (and obligation?) to use linguistic structure in order to express meanings to every user of language in every act of communication. While discussing specific examples of the usage of superlatives in "Miniature," Zarębina writes that they are forms of degree in "analogic type [*najkonniejszy, najjedwabniejszy, najpochlebniej, najpacholętszy, przenajśmieszniejszy, najgniadszy, najprzydrożniejszy, najżadniejszy, najlazurowszy, nasokolszy, najfeudalniejszy*], since the basic words *are not gradated*."[9] Such a categorically

3 Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Arcydziełka Szymborskiej," in *Radość czytania Szymborskiej,* ed. Stanisław Balbus and Dorota Wojda (Kraków: Znak, 1996), 356.

4 See, Wojciech Ligęza, "The World in a State of Revision," in this volume.

5 Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages,* trans. F. Hopman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).

6 Maria Zarębina, "Tekst oryginału a tekst przekładu,"; Maria Zarębina, Cztery wiersze Szymborskiej czytane przez językoznawcę," *Stylistyka,* no. 7 (1998): 396–397.

7 Jerzy Kwiatkowski, "Arcydziełka Szymborskiej," 356.

8 Maria Zarębina, "Cztery wiersze Szymborskiej czytane przez językoznawcę."

9 Maria Zarębina, "Tekst oryginału a tekst przekładu," 41.

formulated statement is naturally difficult to accept from a cognitivist perspective because the listed forms of the highest degree indeed do not occur in contemporary Polish; therefore, they are not conventionalized forms, which is the case because we do not need them in our everyday life. Yet, their creation, *per analogiam,* does not cause a problem to any native user of Polish. Moreover, the long-debated problem of the legitimacy of the distinction between inflexion and derivation is again recalled in this context (see: Varro's *declination naturalis* and *declination voluntaria,* and contemporary[10]) since the process seems not only to be regular but also complete (but this is a subject that must be left for another time).

At this point, I would like to return to the main thesis of this essay: due to grammar's symbolic function, it can serve to create the image of the world.

The Category of Superlative — Semantics

In scholarship dedicated to the category of degree, Polish grammar linguists generally adopt the basic semantic distinction between the features that are *gradable and non-gradable*, which is a division that is regarded as corresponding to the objective reality.[11] Only those lexemes that name the features belonging to the first category are subject to grammatical gradation; it is here that another essential differentiation appears: between *relative* gradation (when the comparative and superlative "describes a feature of a thing by comparing it with the identical feature of other objects or other features of the same object"[12]) and *absolute* gradation (when "the feature distinguished in the thing is defined … without comparing it with identical features of other objects or other features of the same object"[13]). The Aristotelian belief that language is a reflection of (objective) reality, which lies in the roots of this categorization, indeed does not accept most of the superlatives from Szymborska's poem as correct grammar forms. Only the three lexemes of *the tallest, most flatteringly,* and *most manifestly* [*najwyższa, najpochlebniej, najwyraźniej*] can be considered as correct and sanctioned by the convention of contemporary Polish. In the meantime, not only is each one understandable for the reader, but their interpretation is successfully embedded in the entire text.

10 Adam Heinz, "Fleksja a derywacja," *Język Polski* 41, no. 5 (1961): 343–354.

11 Krystyna Kallas, "Słowotwórstwo przymiotników," in *Gramatyka współczesnego języka polskiego* (Warszawa: PWN, 1984).

12 Stanisław Szober, *Gramatyka języka polskiego* (Warszawa: PWN, 1962), 98; Krystyna Kallas, "Słowotwórstwo przymiotników," 438.

13 Stanisław Sober, *Gramatyka języka polskiego*, 99; Krystyna Kallas, "Słowotwórstwo przymiotników," 438.

1. *Seven towers, each of them by far the tallest* [*Siedem wież, z których każda najwyższa*]. At first glance, this phrase certainly seems "strange." The adjective *tall* [*wysoki*] is a so-called relative adjective because its value is determined every time pragmatically (e.g. *a tall man* vs. *a tall tower* [*wysoki człowiek vs. wysoka wieża*]). Traditionally, this type of superlative adjective is attributed a relative character; that is, the basic meaning of such formations is attributing a feature in the biggest degree of intensification, which is compared with the degree with which it occurs in other elements of a given set to the object *X* (wherein it must be a set of at least three elements). According to this interpretation, one of the seven towers from *Miniature* should simply be taller than the remaining six. Meanwhile, each tower aspires to the status of "the tallest" [*najwyższej*] in a way that is competing with the rest; moreover, each one also wants to be the tallest in the absolute sense. If we accept — according to our semantic intuition — that the (great) height of the tower is an essential characteristic of a "good" ["dobrej"] tower, and thus considered a prototype representative of its own category, then each tower from Szymborska's poem should be considered such a prototype. On the conceptual level, this is naturally possible. The scale, on which "tall" things are ordered, constitutes the part of the cognitive domain that includes the notion of height, which is above a certain pragmatic norm (the space in which not-tall things are situated). Since the cognitive abilities of the human brain limit this scale "from the top" ["od góry"], absolutely "the tallest" ["najwyższa"] is, therefore, not "the tallest of all (possible) towers" ["najwyższa ze wszystkich [możliwych] wież"] but "the tallest tower existing a person can imagine" [najwyższa wieża, jaką człowiek potrafi sobie wyobrazić"]. The feature of "height" ["wysokości"] has, then, an absolutely "maximum intensity" ["maksimum natężenia"] that corresponds not to objective reality but to our abilities of conceptualization. For each of the seven towers, the point of reference is the last, highest point on such a scale. When we interpret it this way, the image of "a castle with seven towers, each of them by far the tallest" ["zamek o siedmiu wieżach, z których każda najwyższa"] is no longer surprising. Moreover, it becomes a part of a larger, coherent image.

2. *The verdanest of hills, the most azure of skies* [*najzieleńsze wzgórze, najlazurowsze niebo*]. In academic publications there has been much space devoted to the problem of adjectives describing colors, and they are a grateful topic for linguists, psycholinguists, and psychologists. According to them, the cognitive domain of a color has three basic parameters: brightness, shade, and saturation (the cognitivist characteristic of the color domain is presented by Langacker[14]). It is then easy to understand why we perceive the color's feature as gradable and simply capturing the

14 Ronald W. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Theoretical Prerequisites* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 150–151.

prototypical notion of "intensity." Following the standpoint of cognitive grammar, an adjective describing a color is, however, not a scalar adjective; it expresses a relation that involves ascribing an impression of some feature (in this case the impression of a color) to a thing (e.g. a hill). It is, therefore, a relation between two notions. The category of color is, however, a radial category that is created on the basis of a prototype. This structure is evidently supported by adjectival word formation in Polish where next to *green* [*zielony*] we have also *greenish* [*zielonawy, zielonkawy*]. It characterizes the peripheral space of the category of "green," whose prototype is the maximum possible saturation of this color. That is why the form *the verdanest* [*najzieleńszy*] — in addition to its relevant meaning (that is "the most green from at least three," "najbardziej zielony z conajmniej trzech") — may also have the meaning of an absolute superlative: "the most green hill a person can imagine existing" ["najbardziej zielone wzgórze, jakie człowiek potrafi sobie wyobrazić"]. In the analyzed text, the absolute superlative *the tallest,* forced by the direct context, "strengthens" such an interpretation; what is more, the entire image does not suggest the presence of other (less green?) hills.

However, there are several horses present although — as in the case of the seven castle towers — each one is "the most bay" [najgniadszy"]. Dictionaries distinguish not only different shades of bay coat color (including "bright bay," "cherry bay," "brown bay," "dark bay") but also other characteristics distinguishing a bay horse (the color of the tail and the mane, and parts of the legs). The existence of a "prototype" of the conceptual category of "bay color" is then naturally implicated by the dictionary definition: a horse that is "the most bay" is simply one whose color is the combination of the largest number of definitive features of the notion of "bay." "Absolutely the most bay" naturally has all of these features. And that is how each of the bay horses presented in "Miniature" is supposed to be.

Before the reader gets to the thirtieth line with the phrase *this most azure of skies* [*najlazurowsze niebo*], the principle of "absolute" interpretation of the meaning of superlative forms is most probably perceived as a conscious creative choice. This time the consistent interpretation of the form is additionally strengthened by a pragmatic factor: in our ordinary perception of the world we deal only with one sky (hence the "strangeness" of the unconventional form of *sky — skies*). Szymborska, thus, wants to "situate" this one and only sky in the conceptual center of the domain, which in the color space of the mind corresponds to the content of the adjective *azure.*

3. The most wayside of daisies, the eaglest of eyes, this most equestrian of pageants, the most handsome of lads [stokrotki najprzydrożniejsze, najsokolsze oko, najkonniejszy orszak, paź najpacholętszy]. The following four adjectives come from — respectively — a prepositional phrase ("daisies on the wayside"

[“stokrotki, które są przy drodze”] — locative relation[15]) and from nouns (comparative relation: “eye like an eagle eye” [“oko, które jest jak sokoła”] “a handsome lad” [“paź, który jest jak pacholę”][16] and locative relation: “pageant that rides on horses” [“orszak, który jedzie na koniach”]). According to Zarębina, superlatives based on basic forms with locative meanings create the biggest problems for interpretation. Since what does it mean that daises grow “on the wayside” (in comparison with other daisies), or that a pageant “is equestrian” (in comparison with other pageants)? Then, why don’t the poem’s readers — nor, more importantly, expert interpreters — have any problems with understanding it? The answer is because for them units of meaning are not lexemes, but — once again using the language of cognitivists — cognitive routines. They are structures that have been fully mastered by the users of language and as such do not require a conscious analysis of their internal composition. The idiomatic phrases of wayside daisies and equestrian pageant are examples of such units. They express notions much more complicated than those that can be characterized as “locative relation”: wayside daises are small, white, grow in clumps, etc; an equestrian pageant moves with a specific rate and in a specific order and particular riders are supposed to follow certain rituals, etc. It is, then, easy to imagine a maximal accumulation of those features, and, therefore, a prototype of specific categories. The “poetic” quality of both forms comes from their low degree of conventionalization. Ordinarily a precise reference to the heart of the category, its prototype is unnecessary for speakers, and excessive meticulousness results in an effect that one of the mentioned critics described as “playful.”

While in these cases isolating the most salient feature from the speaker’s perspective is rather subjective, the idiom *eagle eye* [*sokole oko*] clearly highlights the feature of visual acuity; *the eaglest of eyes* [*najsokolsze oko*] is an eye that possesses this feature to the maximum degree. Contrary to *eagle eye, the most ladsome of lads* [*pacholęcy paź*] is not an idiomatic phrase (thus not a unit in Langacker’s terminology), but rather it is just a lad who has the features of a lad. The expressiveness of features that constitute the notion of a “lad” is probably subjective to some extent: it can be a page (most of all), “young” (most of all), “pretty” (most of all), “with blond hair” (most of all), “slim and lithe” (most of all), etc. However, the rule of the prototype does not change: the best representative of the category “ladsome” is such a lad who would combine the maximum number of such features. And exactly this would be *the most ladsome of lads.* Although it is a radial category, within “ladsome” we would also include lads who resemble it just in one respect (e.g. they are thin and young).

15 Krystyna Kallas, “Słowotwórstwo przymiotników,” 433.

16 Ibid., 423.

4. The silkiest of cloaks and the feudalest of realisms [płaszcze najjedwabniejsze, realizm najfeudalniejszy]. Substantial adjectives silk [jedwabny] and feudal [feudalny] relate the things they modify to the semantic space of a quality. This space is defined as a set of specific parameters that have one or the other value within a specific range. For instance, for "silk" it will be such parameters as the fabric, softness, shine, thickness, price, type of weave, etc. In the conceptual sense, "feudalism" has an analogical structure. By following this perspective, cognitive grammar categorizes this type of notions as "abstract substances."[17] Within a given category, some features will be naturally more important for the language users than others (e.g. Zarębina — subjectively — recognized "shiny" as this type of feature[18]). According to the definition of a prototype, the best representative of a particular category will be the element for which the maximum number of parameters has the maximum value. In other words, the silkiest of cloaks is made of a fabric (substance) that is silky to the highest degree. And the feudalest of realisms is one that shows a highest degree of all of the features of such a system (abstract substances). Both are therefore prototypes of their categories.

5. *The drollest of faces* [*przenajśmieszniejszy pyszczyk*]. According to its etymology, the prefix *prze-* expresses a notion of going beyond a particular limit.[19] Such limits can be the walls of a more or less abstractly understood container (e.g. *przelewać się — overflow*), an obstacle standing on the way (e.g.: *przeskoczyć — jump over, przezwyciężyć — overcome*), etc. In adjectival formations of contemporary Polish, the prefix *prze-* expresses the speaker's belief that the accumulation of a feature goes beyond the limits of a (pragmatic) norm; for example, *prześmieszny* means "more than funny." Additionally, *the drollest* is one whose drollery goes beyond the limits of the norm understood in *absolute* terms, that is he or she is even funnier than you can imagine. And this is exactly the "exceedingly (something which exceeds understanding) monkeylike" on the page's shoulder in "Miniature."

6. *The least pleasing of questions, burgherish or peasantish* [*najżadniejsza kwestia mieszczańska czy kmieca*]. Traditionally regarded as quantitative pronoun, *least* is generally included in the class of adjectives.[20] It is intuitively considered to be non-gradual by language users. Indeed, it characterizes a semantic space in which the speaker locates elements whose most distinct feature, according to him or her, is not belonging to some other set. For instance, by saying that someone has no

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17 Ronald W. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar,* 208.

18 Maria Zarębina, "Cztery wiersze Szymborskiej czytane przez językoznawcę."

19 Agnieszka Pasich-Piasecka, "Polysemy of the Polish verbal prefix *prze-,*" in *Images from the Cognitive Scene,* ed. Elżbieta Górska (Kraków: Universitas, 1993), 11–26.

20 Roman Laskowski, "Przymiotnik," in *Gramatyka współczesnego języka polskiego* (Warszawa: PWN, 1984), 35.

reason to believe me, I locate in a certain specific common domain each of the reasons that (potentially) could occur. Such an imprecise location is sufficient enough for the purposes of normal communication. We can, however, imagine a situation in which further specification would be required: for example, there should be no reason to prompt my interlocutor not to trust me, but I consider the likelihood of some of them to be bigger than that of others. Which means that I consider some to be "more least" than others. It is, then, possible to think about "the least," not only among those that I can think of, but also "the least generally" in the absolute sense. It will be such a reason that is situated in the center, and thus is a prototypical element of the category.

7. *Exceedingly* and *most manifestly* [*nad wyraz, najwyraźniej*]. Both expressions — a prepositional phrase and a superlative adverb — are completely grammaticized in contemporary Polish: this means that they have already lost their old semantic transparency, assuming the function of a modulant. Dictionary synonyms prove this "bardzo" for *nad wyraz,* "przypuszczalnie" for *najwyraźniej*). The context in which they were used here, however, restores this transparency and brings into attention the past absolute sense of the superlative. This phenomenon — interesting in itself — could apparently seem as something unique and particular. It is, however, of a very broad reach because it is an example of a modification of the meaning of particular lexemes not through their direct context but the *entire* text in which they were used.

8. *A duke most flatteringly unround* [*xiążę najpochlebniej niebrzuchaty*]. According to its semantic characteristic, an adverb expresses a relation between an activity, a state or process, and a feature that belongs to this activity, state, or process.[21] In our case, it is a relation that relates the "duke," who is "unround," to the (axiological) scale expressed by the adjective "flattering." The superlative *most flatteringly* indicates the highest, final point of this scale. The semantic field (or, as cognitivists would rather say, in the base) of the adjective *flattering* — and the adverb *flatteringly* — hides a schematically outlined figure of someone who "flatters" and makes someone else feel better (or himself; compare with *flatter yourself* …) about his or her own value. And he or she does so often unbelievingly. This someone is the author of the original "Miniature" painting. In the context of the entire text, the absolute superlative *most flatteringly* forces us to doubt the realism of the whole picture, which is, after all, "the feudalest of realisms" and, thus, is untrue in its status as the ideal prototype.

21 See, Renata Grzegorczykowa, "Słowotwórstwo przysłówków," in *Gramatyka współczesnego języka polskiego* (Warszawa: PWN, 1984), 456.

9. *Without even the silentest of sayings* [*arcysamo przez się*]. The "broken" idiomatic expression in the two-line verse closing "Miniature" is probably the farthest deviation from the linguistic convention. However, here the superlative is not based on the pronoun "*samo*" ["itself"],[22] but it is based on the whole phrase ["*samo przez się*"] whose meaning could be paraphrased as "without anybody's participation, without commentary, explanation," etc. Hence, something that is understood "*arcysamo przez się*" [or "without even the silentest of sayings"] is something that is obvious and indisputable in an absolute way (similarly as medieval "duality"), such as the dichotomy of good and evil, hell and heaven, and God and Satan.[23]

Image and word

Johan Huizinga argues that the mutual relationship between art and literature is one of the crucial elements in the definition of the late medieval period. *Image and word* is the title of one of the most important chapters of his classical monograph. By borrowing this title, I wished to summarize what — based on the analysis of the text — a linguist can say about this relation.

Let us return for a moment to Szymborska's poem and its literary prototype. The art of the late Middle Ages, which is represented by the brothers Limbourg, consisted of "minuteness in the execution of details."[24] It shared "the general and essential tendency of the spirit of the expiring Middle Ages: that of accentuating every detail, of developing every thought and every image to the end, of giving concrete form to every concept of the mind."[25] In fifteenth-century literature, the identical characteristic of "the minute execution of details", considering the simplicity of medieval means, means an accumulation of nouns that are combined with a scarcity of adjectives, and although boring for contemporary readers, things are only mentioned, not described and what dominates are nouns, not adjectives. In its contemporary version — Szymborska's formally sophisticated poem — this accumulation of elements, which critics consider one of the two (next to syntax parallelism) favorite tricks of the poet,[26] becomes something completely different: an accumulation of adjectives and adverbs in superlative. Furthermore, this superlative becomes an iconic copy of the medieval world of the brothers Limbourg, which is a world of ideal beings or — translated into the language of cognitive grammar — a world build of prototypes.

22 See, Maria Zarębina, "Cztery wiersze Szymborskiej czytane przez językoznawcę."

23 The polish prefix "arcy" is the equivalent of the English "arch" as in "archduke."

24 Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages,* 254.

25 Ibid., 265.

26 See, Marian Stala, "Kot i puste mieszkanie," 129.

As a result we do not receive a simple, but also a faithful, "translation" from image to word, but one of many possible translations and possible interpretations. This is not only due to the general "incompatibility" between image and word, which is the problem that language cannot express everything that the eye can see, but also because of the character of the human conceptual apparatus. Szymborska's "Miniature," although painted in words, is not a simple attempt of "transposition of painting categories into poetic language" but a specific conceptualization that is conditioned by her (and our) knowledge of medieval art. It is an iconic image perfected in the smallest detail. It is an idealized, perfect vision of the medieval world of Burgundy miniaturists. At the same time, it is an image that can only exist in the human mind. In the painting, the superlative will always be only a comparative: the eye will register only the highest of the seven towers and the verdanest of hills. In the linguistic image, however, the range of the superlative is limited only by the limits of our imagination.

In the presented analysis, I focused only on one of many "painting techniques" that are illustrated by "A Medieval Miniature." The number of techniques in creating a text (this text, a poetic text in general, and a text in general) is a function of the complexity of language. The incompatibility of "the image of the world" and "the linguistic image of the world" indeed does have many aspects. Most of them are in the field of linguistic scholarship. The instruments created by cognitive linguistics — often in an obvious reference to earlier intuitions — can turn out to be very useful.

A Flawless Mirror, a Distorting Mirror of Postmodernism: Szymborska's Poetry in German

Andrzej Kopacki

"Wisława Szymborska offers us a flawless mirror, not a distorting mirror of postmodernism," writes Karl Dedecius, the author of the German translation of *Sto wierszy, sto pociech,* which is a collection of the Nobel Prize winner's poetry.

At first, the judgmental impetus of this distinction moved me with the dignity of its intentions and after a moment, once I calmed down a bit, put me in a slight panic. So there is Something in this poetry that is not Something Different — I thought, perhaps not too creatively, and a terrifying suspicion crept on me: Something against Something Other, Something Other against Something, perfection versus deformity, if not to say: deconstruction. My imagination trembled upon the sight of, let's say, Lyotard who, after crushing to smithereens a mirror of, let's say, Stendhal, rushes now to throw heavy objects at Szymborska's mirror. The postmodern miasma immediately offered an evil thought: if poetry is a mirror, and if a translation attempts to mirror the original, and if criticism of the translation wishes to illustrate it, then we are dealing with a play of mirrors. While reading *Sto wierszy*, I was surrounded by these mirrors tirelessly mirroring and distorting. I had no other choice: I surrendered with a wicked (I need to confess) sense of relief and let go of the responsibility for their paeans and grumbles. The Flawless Mirror and the Distorting Mirror of Postmodernism were chatting (in male voices) in this manner:

FM: "I'm Working on the World" is the first poem in the anthology, which strikes me as symbolic in relation to this translation. The translator did exactly this kind of work — he "devised" Szymborska's world in the language of translation. Because of his linguistic inventiveness, he was able to build coherent poetical spaces in almost each and every poem, spaces in which German readers can find everything that is important and that a translation should not leave unacknowledged omit … Excuse me, what are you doing?

DMoP: I'm sniffing. It smells a lot like "semantic dominant" to me.

FM: Nonsense! A grand misunderstanding. Naturally, we may discuss the legitimacy of specific compromises. Even so, I am talking here about the translator's sovereign work, one that respects the factual formal requirements of the language of translation and does not harm the original. Let us proceed to the examples.

DMoP: Yes, indeed.

FM: The translation of the terrifying poem “Still” is a textbook example of a masterful translation. The formal aspects are flawless: the rhythm, the rhyming, and even the enjambment (the third and fourth verses of the second stanza) all remain in place. The semantics were perfectly transferred in 99% — I hope you are not planning to point out one or two examples where the rhyme led to a word surplus…

DMoP: Sure. There will be a better time to discuss redundancy. For now, let’s return to the “working on” the world. Can you explain why in German this “working on” forced the translator to abandon the intimate convention in which “I” addresses “You” (in the second, sixth, seventh, and eighth stanza)? Almost until the end (excluding the half-verse in the last stanza, which comes out of nowhere and is solely dictated by the rhyme scheme) the translation speaks in *pluralis maiestatis*. Let me cite only the third stanza, where “we” is where it should be:

Ta, dawno przeczuwana,
nagle w jawie słów
improwizacja lasu!
Ta epika sów!
Te aforyzmy jeża
układane, gdy
jesteśmy przekonani,
że nic, tylko śpi!

The long-suspected meanings
of rustlings, chirps, and growls!
Soliloquies of forests!
The epic hoots of owls!
Those crafty hedgehogs drafting
aphorisms after dark,
while we blindly believe
they’re sleeping in the park!

(PNC, 3)

Dieser längst geahnte,
plötzlich in der Wirklichkeit der Wörter
improvisierte Wald!
Diese Epik der Eulen!
Diese Aphorismen eines Igels
ersonnen, wenn
wir überzeugt sind,
daß er pennt.

The world is free from the burden of "working on." The forest improvises, the owls make epic poetry, the hedgehogs create aphorisms, while we — mere spectators in this theatre! — suspect the hedgehogs to be lazy and NOTHING more. Meanwhile, in German, the forest is an object and not a subject of the improvisation; hence, our conviction that the hedgehog is sleeping becomes poetically futile. In the fifth and seventh stanzas the inadequate solutions are forced by rhyming: in the second example, the individuality and fragility of the intimate image: "Only a death like that. A rose / could prick you harder, I suppose" ("Bólu więcej / miałeś trzymają różę w ręce") is inflated to the dimensions of a maxim: "Wer / eine Rose in der Hand hält, leidet mehr."

FM: What a fraud you are, a moral and intellectual crook! You choose the easy way of criticism, making allegations from the obvious lack of correspondence between certain decisions of the translator and the original.

DMoP: I'm merely suggesting that the "sovereign" creation can be mistaken.

FM: How many more "slips" did you encounter on these 324 pages? Please, extract them from the rest of the book and cite, cite!

DMoP: On 162 pages, since half of the book consists of originals and they cannot be wrong. And as for the entirety — aren't you aware that there is no such thing as entirety? There is only poetical sense and nonsense that we are only arbitrarily babbling about, a kind of semantics, prosody in the glimmering thicket of linguistic traces, and then there are specific decisions made by the translator. Their criticism is not the same as a criticism of your imagined entirety. If I'm reading the poem "Possibilities"*:* "Wolę zera luzem / niż ustawione w kolejce do cyfry", and compare it with the translation: "Ich mag die Nullen lieber lose / als zur Zahl formiert,"[1] then I must criticize the simplification, lack of flexibility, and poetic quality of this phrasing. When in the poem "Stage Fright" I see: "wiersze … od święta, od parady, od wielkiego dzwonu" and the literal translation: "Gedichte … vom Fest, vom großen Läuten, der Parade,"[2] then I will argue that the translation doesn't do justice to the meaning — the festive nature of poetry writing. When in the afterword I read about the "obvious necessity" of Szymborska's rhymes, then I point out their absence in the translation of the poem "Poetry Reading."

FM: But you say nothing about the brilliant rhyming in the poem "Commemoration." The translation imitates the beauty of a litany in every little detail, including the peculiarities in the word stress in German. What is more, a true jewel decorates the closing apostrophe to the swallow: the swallow as "heaven's cross-eyed glance" ("zez na niebiosach"; PNC, 23) — "Silberblick des Himmels!" Brilliant!

1 "I prefer zeroes on the loose / to those lined up behind a cipher" (PNC, 214)

2 "the poems … dressed in their Sunday best from head to toe," (PNC, 179)

Generally, how can one present effective counterarguments to your ill-intentioned demagogy at all? One would need to quote entire poems. For example: "Starvation Camp Near Jaslo" or "On the Banks of the Styx."

DMoP: You are not ready to talk about the costs. You can praise the creation of "coherent spaces," but also responsibly note its drawbacks: in the poem "Séanse," why does the translator turn "Henry," "Agnes" and "Sophie" into "Heinrich, Agnes and Sophie," and "… the corner of Maple and Pine" — "Schuster-und Jagiellonenstraße"? Or, especially — why does "Półtwardowski" ("Semi-moonman") from the poem "Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition" become "Halbfaust" ("Half-Faust"). Doesn't your precious entirety perceive differences at all — for instance between the identities of the literary names?

SM: "Wyrok skazujący na ciężkie norwidy" from "Poetry Reading" — "verurteilt zu lebenslänglichem Büchner"[3] — is a quite good translation; you can hear its necessary polysemy. Do you have, in fact, any serious criticisms that you could generalize?

DMoP: Here you go. I'm talking about the cost. I don't consider it to always be a justified inventory of fortunate coincidence or to be a necessary price of being correct as they can also turn out to be unfortunate choices. In the poem "Warning" we have a depleting shortening of Szymborska's verse: "powaga — bo nie daje się obrócić w żart" ("der Ernst — weil witzlos"),[4] and a moment later an intrusive swelling: "Ograniczeni" ("Spötter sind beschränkt").[5] Am I exaggerating? The same happens in the poem "Over Wine": first, a wordy verse inplace of "I let myself be invented" ("Pozwoliłam się wymyśleć") — "Ich ließ geschehen, daß er mich ausdachte" — and then in the last sentence a reduction of the subordinate clause: "where a picture used to be" ("z którego zdjęto obraz") to the abrupt "kein Bild" (PNC, 46). Let's agree to call it compensation predicated on the intralinguistic easements. Yet, in the poem "A Palaeolithic Fertility Test" the repetitive verses: "Why would the Great Mother need a face. … What would the Great Mother do with feet" (PNC, 102) are condensed into a simple "Wozu auch …"

FM: It's a good choice since a repetition would require a verb, which is a solution you would immediately call unnecessarily garrulous!

DMoP: Perhaps. For me, however, the translation of the last verse of the poem "Być prześmiechem ornamentu" ("the ornament's last laugh") as "Das Ornament verspotten," results from a lack of creativity. Never mind the details. The difference

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3 "One sentenced to hard shelleying for life," (PNC, 51)

4 "not gravity (no use for levity)" (PNC, 164)

5 "Narrow-minded" (PNC, 164)

between us is that you admire the aesthetic integrity of our miss poetry in her German version, while I say: our poor thing has sinned, here and there…

FM: Who would've thought you were such a moralist?

DMoP: …often, indeed, only by chance. In the translation of the poem "Wyjście z kina" ("Leaving the cinema"), the assonance and the whole poetic mist turns into a much clearer and quite exact rhymes a b a b, with an oxytonic stress in every other verse. And then in *Sky* the mistake is the strikingly pronounced alliterations in the fourth stanza, which must deceive (and seduce) the German reader since they are not in the original…

FM: What a whimsical fellow you are. How you like to complain!

DMoP: You know too well that what you call me, my apparent identity, is indeed offensive…

FM: Offensive "in the thickness of linguistic traces," I know, I know. But perhaps you should try and notice a masterpiece among these thickets, the poem "A Medieval Minature." With brilliant archaizations, the translation perfectly expresses the superlatives and diminutives of the original, including the ornamental spelling. What linguistic mastery was required to develop all these moves and paint (mostly with adjectives) the image of "this feudalest of realisms!" A really good job!

DMoP:

> Najżadniejszej też kwestii
> mieszczańskiej czy kmiecej
> pod najlazurowszym niebem.
>
> Kein allereinzigstes der Probleme,
> ob bürgerlich oder bäuerlich,
> ist an diesem allerblauesten Himmel zu sehen.
>
> Even the least pressing of questions,
> burgherish or peasantish,
> cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.
>
> (PNC, 156)

The "kwestia mieszczańska" ("burgherish question") is a specific collocation, which at best echoes the discourse of social history and at worst ideology. Szymborska immediately contrasts it ironically since "kwestia kmieca" ("peasantish" questions) does not resonate in this way (contrary to "chłopskiej" ['peasant']). The irony culminates in "this most azure of skies" ("pod najlazurowszym niebem"). The sky is described as a "realistic" painting. The German translation omits this contrast and, in turn, proposes an overinterpretation "in *this* bluest sky," adding a metaphoric dimension to the painting.

FM: I still argue that it's an excellent translation. Generally, the poems with an aesthetic, historical, or mythological leitmotiv are the best ones in the German translation, for instance, "Rubens' Women," as well as "Allegro Ma Non Troppo," which is a poem with great rhythmic qualities…

DMoP: The last stanza is messy. There is no rhyme that would highlight these qualities.

FM: How cheap is that! You condemn not only Entirety as a specific category for describing the world, but also the poem's entirety. Your reading is deformed *per definitionem.*

DMoP: A poem lives thanks to its different formulations.

FM: But of course! Please, appreciate the moves that are evidence of the translation's great class. "A Moment in Troy," a brilliantly translated poem, includes the following solution: a "gesty rzeźbią się same / w odniechceniu natchnionym," in translation: "und Gesten meißeln sich selbst / im begnadeten Leichthin."[6] Here you can see the faithful invention I was talking about. Or in "Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem": "O 'państwieniu się' (sic!) ludzi nad ludźmi", in German: "An das 'Bestaaten' (sic!) der Menschen durch Menschen."[7] This "Bestaaten" has a suitable equivalence: it's a neologism, it has "country" (*Staat*) in it, as well as a reference to "Beschatten" — police invigilation. What more do you want?

DMoP: Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's… (*DMoP starts coughing*)

FM: What a foul desertion! You're running away from the battle!

DMoP: You better look at how Ophelia flees from the scene in the poem "The Rest":

Ofelia odśpiewała szalone piosenki
i wybiegła ze sceny zaniepokojona,
czy suknia nie pomięła się, czy na ramiona
spływały włosy tak, jak trzeba.

Na domiar prawdziwego, brwi z czarnej rozpaczy
zmywa i — jak rodzona Poloniusza córka —
liście wyjęte z włosów liczy dla pewności.
Ofelio, mnie i tobie niech Dania przebaczy:
zginę w skrzydłach, przeżyję w praktycznych pazurkach.
Non omnis moriar z miłości.

6 "and gestures sculpt themselves / in inspired nonchalance," (PNC, 31)
7 "and by the "authoritorture" (sic!) of some people by others," (PNC, 162)

> Her mad songs over, Ophelia darts out,
> anxious to check offstage whether her dress is
> still not too crumpled, whether her blond tresses
> frame her face as they should.
>
> Since real life's laws
> require facts, she, Polonius's true
> daughter, carefully washes black despair
> out of her eyebrows, and is not above
> counting the leaves she's combed out of her hair.
> Oh, may Denmark forgive you, my dear, and me too:
> I'll die with wings, I'll live on with practical claws.
> *Non omnis moriar* of love.
>
> (PNC, 34)
>
> Ophelia sang die tollen Lieder ab
> und floh von der Bühne, besorgt,
> ob ihr Kleid nicht zerknittert war, ob das Haar
> auf die Schultern hinunterfloß, wie sich das gëhört.
>
> Zu wahrer Letzt wäscht sich die schwarze Verzweiflung
> aus ihren Brauen und zählt — als Polonius' natürliche Tochter —
> sicherheitshalber die Blätter nach, die sie aus dem Haar herausholt.
> Ophelia, Dänemark möge mir und dir vergeben:
> Beflügelt gehe ich unter, in praktischen Krallen werde ich überleben.
> *Non omnis moriar* aus Liebe.

It's an exquisite poem about art and life: in the first stanza three thirteen-syllabic verses, the fourth longer by one syllable, rhyme b b. This fourth verse corresponds with the content's dynamic: Ophelia's role is done and the actress leaves the stage and goes to the "prosaic" backstage. The second stanza returns to rhyming (d e f d e f); it has five thirteen-syllabic verses and a sixth eight-syllabic ones. Such a specifically designed formula is used to tell a story about a different kind of art — the art of life and survival that requires being careful and yet still being art. In this quotation, the lyric "I" and "You" (Ophelia) meet, love and death meet in art ("on wings") and a practical life that isn't, however, divorced from art. This is visible precisely in the formal rigor of the second stanza, as well as in the content: backstage Ophelia is still "Polonius's true" and Horatio connects the intentional survival with the text's duration. Here the form is very important, e.g. when in the beginning of the second stanza the poem poetically deconstructs the idiomatic expression ("to make matters worse"), and the banal "doom and gloom" is turned into a characteristic. The translation reflects this only partially, and most importantly, this metric light-heartedness. The whole second stanza includes only one rhyme… Did I provide you with enough reasons for my discontent? Hey, why are you suddenly so gloomy?

That is how FM and DMoP were lazily conversing. I was about to begin listing the unique contributions of the translation's Author to the visibility of Polish poetry in Germany — there are several anthologies of Szymborska herself (*Salz. Gedichte,* 1973; *Deshalb leben wir. Gedichte,* 1980; *Hundert Freuden. Gedichte,* 1986) and her poems have been published individually in dozens. The collection published by Wydawnictwo Literackie includes poems from the period 1957—1996, so I felt compelled to ask about the criteria for their selection. I truly missed "The Onion" (interestingly translated into English by Barańczak and Cavangh), as well as "Brueghel's Two Monkeys," a poem which, after all, already exists in Karl Dedecius's translation…

None of my intentions worked out. The mirrors were silent, and what is worse, they began to slowly decompose: M coincided with P, the other M melted into F. Only D and M remained unmoved in the alphabet, seemingly close, and still completely untranslatable into each other…

No Conversation or Translating Szymborska into French

Krystyna Rodowska

"Why Wisława Szymborska?" (implicitly: why did she receive the Nobel Prize?), wonders Alain Bosquet, a renowned French poet, writer, critic and translator, in an article published in "Le Figaro" in January 1997. And he concludes that we must not hurry to answer the question since the present shape of the poet's translations into French, presented by Piotr Kamiński, indeed, does not allow for a proper assessment of the real rank and quality of this poetry. Although Bosquet did voice a lot of criticisms, he expressed his utter disappointment cleverly (Is he disappointed with the poetry or only the translation? Or, perhaps he feels helpless). He restrained from openly depreciating the Polish Nobel Prize winner's work, through the use of the psychoanalytical concept of "transference." In Szymborska's "female needlework (*ouvrages de femme)*, he does however, find "a power of skepticism, resembling Fernando Passoa," and "suppressed passion" (*une rage rentrée*), as found in Henri Michaux. But, at the same time, Bosquet also keeps with the spirit of questionable courtesy for the "uneven" Szymborska, since he puts the entire blame on the translator of the book *De la mort sans exagérer,* accusing him of being too ambitious and of believing in his self-sufficiency.[1] The translator should have known that only "true poets" are able to carry the responsibility for the final version of the translation, and thus, he should have decided to collaborate at least with some French poets and translators, once associates of Kot-Jeleński, who made it possible in the 1960s to publish a monumental anthology of Polish poetry. It is worth adding that in the list of French and French-Polish poets and translators, the so-called "adaptors" of philological translations, among such names as Paul Éluard, Jean Grosjean, Roger Caillois, André du Bouchet, Andrzej Wat or Jerzy Lisowski, we may also find the name of Alain Bosquet, which adds a certain zest to the author's claims presented in the essay concerning the translations of Wisława Szymborska's poetry.

Nevertheless, why does Bosquet, who incidentally demonstrates knowledge of contemporary Polish poetry (he points to several present-day alternative candidates for the Nobel Prize, among them Herbert Różewicz, and previously Miron Białoszewski, while also admonishing the omission of Tuwim and Ważyk), mention only one of the translators of Szymborska's poetry? Perhaps

1 Wisława Szymborska, *De la mort sans exagérer — O śmierci bez przesady,* trans. Piotr Kamiński and Arthème Fayard (Kraków, Paris: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997).

the editor's order was so urgent that there was no other way than to do it in a hurry. Apparently, Bosquet was not aware of the earlier anthology prepared by two translators: Krzysztof Jeżewski and Isabelle Macor-Filarska. This work was published a year before the Stockholm jury honored the poet.[2] Nor did he read Isabelle Macor-Filarska's own anthology (accompanied by an introductory essay), which consisted of fifteen poems by Szymborska and twenty-one by Ewa Lipska.[3] Therefore, three books "came to existence" (?) at roughly the same time, presenting the poet's work at length by translators most certainly aware of the author's potential for receiving the Nobel Prize. Currently, the situation is complicated by an unfortunate — it must be clearly stated — circumstance: only one of the mentioned anthologies, published by Fayard with the poet's formal blessing (thus only Kamiński's anthology), reserves the exclusive right to present her poetry to the general public. Nonetheless, the fact remains that three books were published in France, and the two that are chronologically earlier were not in the least illegal, pirated publications. Why is this unfortunate? Because it builds a monopoly of one translator, who — as it turns out — is not infallible; therefore, it is impossible to properly present Szymborska's poetry to French readers. This means that *de facto* it works to her disadvantage.

The organizers of the IV Salon of Eastern- and Central-European Literature (that took place, as each year, in Die, which is a early-medieval, mountain town in Southern France with great cultural traditions) failed to mention Jeżewski's and Macor-Filarska's anthology, unrivalled in the year 1995. As it happened I was able to attend the event, and had a chance to have a look at the stand that presented the translations of Polish literature, next to Russian, Czech, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Albanian. Naturally, among the exhibited books of Polish writers, you could find translations of Gombrowicz, Witkacy, and Schulz, as well as Adam Zagajewski, Kazimierz Brandys, Paweł Huelle, and Manuela Gretkowska. "And where's the anthology of Wisława Szymborska?" I asked. Consternation. And again, just like in Alain Bosquet article, there came a twisted answer: that the publishing house is so small, the circulation symbolic, and finally, is this absence so significant when compared to the presence of so many other Polish writers? And, implicitly, who is this Wisława Szymborska?

This would roughly be the background for the three (and more) voices crying in the French wilderness, overcrowded by different "poetry celebrations" and poetic festivals, in the name and for the name of Wisława Szymborska.

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2 Wisława Szymborska, *Dans le fleuve d'Héraclite,* trans. Christophe Jeżewski and Isabelle Macor-Filarska (Pas-de-Calais: Maison de la Poésie Nord, 1995).

3 Wisława Szymborska and Ewa Lipska, *Deux poétesses polonaises contemporaines,* trans. Isabelle Macor-Filarska and Grzegorz Spławiński (Mundolsheim: L'Ancier Editeur, 1996).

It is time to take a look — in the light of available comparisons — at the ways of introducing Szymborska's poetry, which is singular and distinct even in her home country, into the contemporary poetic French language. Both anthologies take on the challenge of bilingualism, though the first also includes several earlier texts prepared by Szymborska's other translators: Allan Kosko, Kot-Jeleński, and Lucienne Rey, while both Kamiński's representative anthology (divided into two volumes) and Macor-Filarska's monolingual collection are both auteur books.

I must confess that the French critic's unfavorable comments addressed to Piotr Kamiński's translation (a French philologist, translator of Genet, who for many years worked in Paris as a RFI journalist) — summarized as being "heavy," painstaking, yet in the end doing a disservice to the poet — influenced my reading of *De la mort sans exagérer,* as I approached it with caution, even skepticism. Even so, upon reading it, I was rather frequently pleasantly surprised; this impression only strengthened when I compared it with the translations done by Krzysztof Jeżewski: a Polish poet living in France since 1970 and a long-time translator of Polish poetry (into French, and French into Polish), including Norwid. His translations never stray away from being correct. Their greatest sin is often their literal understanding, resulting from a falsely understood — in my view — reverence for the original, and a lack of his own interpretative ideas.

Here are some examples and comparisons; taken from both bilingual anthologies, they force us to quote the fragments of the Polish original versions. "In Heraclitus' River," one of Szymborska's early, although already fully mature poems:

W rzece Heraklita
ryba łowi ryby,
ryba ćwiartuje rybę ostrą rybą,
ryba buduje rybę, ryba mieszka w rybie,
ryba ucieka z oblężonej ryby.

In Heraclitus' river
a fish is busy fishing,
a fish guts a fish with a sharp fish,
a fish builds a fish, a fish lives in a fish,
a fish escapes from a fish under siege.

(PNC, 61)

In Krzysztof Jeżewski's translation:

Dans le fleuvre d'Héraclite
la poisson pêche le poisson,
le poisson écartèle le poisson avec un poisson tranchant,
le poisson bâtit le poisson, le poisson habite le poisson,
le poisson s'évade du poisson assiégé

The same fragment in Piotr Kamiński's translation:

> Dans le fleuve d'Héraclite
> poisson pêche poisson,
> poisson équarrit poisson avec poisson tranchant,
> poisson construit poisson, poisson habite poisson,
> poisson s'enfuit de poisson assiégé

Everything sounds almost identical, but something is missing: there is no article! The article, excellent in its simplicity, signals the philosophical intention of the poet, who in her numerous "enumerations" creates an ironic and tragic distance between the outline of "a larger number" (already present in this poem), the multitude of beings, accidents, and biological impulses, and the "particularity" that breaks away from this image, fleeting, pathetic in its delicacy, unsuccessful, and yet worthy of attention and emotion. The difference between these two translations is narrow, but at the same time significant. Jeżewski, attributing his fish with the defined article *le,* monumentalizes the noun, making its designate stand for a representative of the species, type, generalization — and this is not the case. Kamiński, by depriving the noun of its article, throws all this "fish" into one gregarious and anonymous bag, only to let (according to the poet's intent) the thinking and feeling singularity shine through this dark, restless mass: "moi poisson singulier, moi poisson distinct" ("I, the solitary fish, a fish apart"). This also belies the gregariousness to which it, however, belongs. Jeżewski simply translated the words of the poem. Kamiński, in a very uncomplicated way, which however, proves his knowledge of the language's true spirit, was able to grasp the poet's way of thinking about reality and the human condition.

In Piotr Kamiński's translations — contrary to what Bosquet seems to be suggesting — I see an idea realized, sometimes better, sometimes worse, about how Szymborska should sound in French. Indeed, it is an almost hopeless challenge! For instance, how does one keep the balance between colloquialisms, the apparent coldness of Szymborska's language, its tendency for "shortcuts," and the old-fashioned elegance written into it, or the occasional discreet stylization? How does one present the surprising variability of its registers? How does one translate the unique character of Szymborska's spirituality (a discretion in dealing with the most dramatic events, best exemplified e.g. in the poem "Cat in an Empty Apartment")? Moreover, how does one save the charm, perhaps the most feminine and omnipresent category in the Szymborska's poetry, otherwise consciously distanced from her own feminine "I"? The famous sentence: "Die — you can't do that to a cat," personifies the four-footed "lyric subject," and accentuates the dimension of living of the subject proper, hidden behind the "cat":

> Nic niby tu nie zmienione,
> a jednak pozamieniane.

Niby nie przesunięte,
a jednak porozsuwane.
I wieczorami lampa już nie świeci.

Nothing seems different here,
but nothing is the same.
Nothing has been moved,
but there's more space.
And at nighttime no lamps are lit.

(PNC, 238)

Despair is domesticated "in a cat's way." Instead of screaming and silence there is a dance on graceful pawns. Kamiński attempted to express this:

Rien n'a, semble-t-il, changé
et pourtant rien n'est pareil.
Rien n'a été déplacé,
et pourtant rien n'est à sa place.
Et même, le soir, la lampe ne s'allume plus.

In his choices Kamiński is creative, although sometimes he goes too far with his "unfaithfulness," a problem to which we will return later. He wishes to present Szymborska in French as a poet thoroughly contemporary, alive; to emphasize her gift of aphoristic condensation of meanings; to sharpen the irony present in her paradoxes. Very often he succeeds. His language is sometimes blunt, more so than in the original, although it also amazes with its sweetness and bombastic, dictionary erudition: the piled-up surplus that mocks itself, as it happens in certain places and poems in Szymborska's oeuvre. This intention is not always convincing. I especially like his simplest "gimmicks," based on the subtleties of grammar, flexion and French syntax, as, for instance, in the poem "Could Have." Although similarly as Jeżewski and the Spanish translators, Kamiński was not able to think of a more suitable title, translating it as "Cas où," literally: "In the case of" (Jeżewski, on the other hand, translated it as "Tout hasard," literally: "Any case"). Let us look at the original:

Ocalałeś, bo byłeś pierwszy.
Ocalałeś, bo byłeś ostatni.
Bo sam. Bo ludzie. Bo w lewo. Bo w prawo.
Bo padał deszcz. Bo padał cień.
Bo panowała słoneczna pogoda.

Na szczęście był tam las…
Na szczęście szyna, hak, belka, hamulec,
framuga, zakręt, milimetr, sekunda.
Na szczęście brzytwa pływała po wodzie.

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others. On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck — there was a forest.
You were in luck — there were no trees.
You were in luck — a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,
a jamb, a turn, a quarter inch, an instant.
You were in luck — just then a straw went floating by.

(PNC, 111)

Jeżewski "corrects" the poet's elliptical constatations and makes them more precise, adds articles, as if he did not understand that the language of the original intends to express the ruthless, speeding mechanism of chance — a potential accident, and the exploding force of the philosophy of "speculating," so typical for Szymborska, that is therefore embedded in them.

Tu as survécu, car tu étais le premier.
Tu as survécu, car tu étais le dernier.
Car tu étais seul. Car il y avait des gens.
Car s'était à gauche. Car s'était à droite.
Car tombait la pluie. Car tombait l'ombre.
Car le temps était ensoleillé.

Par bonheur il y avait une forêt.
Par bonheur un rail, un crochet, une poutre, un frein,
un chambranle, un tournant, un millimètre, une seconde.
Par bonheur le rasoir flottait sur l'eau.

By using the *passé composé*, the translator unnecessarily individualizes and relates to modernity what was assumed to be a dispassionate registration of events pressed into one block, a chronicle of accidents that did not happen. Though, naturally, this is up for discussion since the pressure (intentional) may shape the narrator's emotions, influencing his evaluation of the event that fortunately did not happen. This is different in Kamiński's translation:

N'en réchappa que le premier.
N'en réchappa que le dernier.
Car seul. Car foule. Car gauche. Car droite.
Car pluie. Car ombre.
Car le soleil brillait.

Par bonheur il y avait forêt.
Par bonheur rail crochet poutre frein
verrou virage millimètre seconde.
Par bonheur une paille flottait sur l'eau.

The different solutions are visible to the naked eye, and it is not a rule that such comparisons always act in favor of Kamiński. In my opinion, in Kamiński's text the beginning of the second stanza is flawed, both for substantive and grammatical reasons; the third person singular appears out of nowhere, while the whole poem is written in the poetics of a dialogue with some friendly "you", the pronoun "*en*" does not sound legible nor correct. If we accept the translator's interpretation, the decision to use *passé simple* seems right since it consequently — once more! — strips the noun of its article, and enables to emphasize the narrator's (author's) distance to her own emotions. The presence of the noun "une paille" (straw, [also in the English version]), instead of "le rasoir" (razor) may, however, raise doubts. A single (*une*) straw floating blithely on the water suddenly and arbitrarily changes the mood of the poem since a floating razor is, indeed, a somewhat rare sight, and precisely this unlikely sharp tool — in the reality of the image — fits the catalogue of things, situations, and natural phenomena dangerous for human life, and this catastrophic tone is created in the poem. The dramatic character of "le raisor" escapes the translator, whom I would strongly advise to be more discerning when interpreting works he co-authors in the future. That is why every now and then Kamiński's inventiveness — the presented example is not solitary — brings about unsuccessful effects, in which case we may, indeed, speak of his unfaithfulness to the author.

In my essay, I would like to bring out those moments and places in the art of translation when Piotr Kamiński's version, as well as Isabelle Macor-Filarska's — who creates, contrary to Kamiński, a more literary and elegant language — sparkles with novelty, becomes irrefutably creative, caught up with the "joy of writing," which the poet herself expressed so many times. In Kamiński's anthology such a masterpiece is the poem "Les femmes de Rubens" ("Rubens' Women"), and in Isabelle Macor-Filarska's anthology, most certainly "Le clochard" ("Clochard"), "Portrait de femme" ("Portrait of a Woman), "Le trac" ("Stage Fright") — the latter being much better, in my opinion, than Kamiński's. "Rubens' Women" is one of Wisława Szymborska's best works from her early period (it comes from the volume *Salt,* 1962), directly inspired by art. Using Baroque language, the poet challenges the formal excess, while remaining far from mimicry, answers to Rubes' eruption of excess with a condensation of grotesque synthesis and straightforward, although sophisticated, humor:

> Waligórzanki, żeńska fauna,
> jak łoskot beczek nagie.
> Gnieżdżą się w stratowanych łożach,
> śpią z otwartymi do piania ustami.
> Córy baroku. Tyje ciasto w dzieży,
> parują łaźnie, rumienią się wina,
> cwałują niebem prosięta obłoków,
> rżą trąby na fizyczny alarm.

> Titanettes, female fauna,
> naked as the rumbling of barrels.
> They roost in trampled beds,
> asleep, with mouths agape, ready to crow.
> Their pupils have fled into flesh
> and sound the glandular depths
> from which yeast seeps into their blood.
> Daughters of the Baroque. Dough
> thickens in troughs, baths steam, wines blush,
> cloudy piglets careen across the sky,
> triumphant trumpets neigh the carnal alarm.
>
> (PNC, 47)

Here is Kamiński's "Les femmes de Rubens":

> Gargantuelles, faune femelle,
> nudité tonnante des tonneaux.
> Elles se nichent dans des lits ravagés,
> bouches ouvertes, couqueriquantes…
>
> Barocchantes! Pâte gonflée,
> vapeur des bains, vins cramoisis,
> porcelets blancs galopent au ciel,
> trompettes hennissent l'alarme charnelle.

Again, when compared with these fireworks of verbal ideas, associations, and alliterations (the exclamatory pant of excess that is sometimes, for greater dynamic, reduced into a synthetic abbreviation) Krzysztof Jeżewski's translation of "Rubens' Women" sounds stiff and modest, which is simply a sin with this kind of text. Instead of the lively "faune femelle" — literally: female animals — we have the polite "faune feminine"; moreover, we have "colossale," instead of the lovely "gargantuelles" and "barocchantes," which melt "Baroque" and "bacchantes" in one word — the literally translated "filles du baroque."

Isabelle Macor-Filarska turned out to be similarly inventive in her transposition of the poem "Clochard": her "voleteurs, bassots, chauve-baboins et parpaillots / champignelles, soudainots, têtes toujambes, multitude, gotique allegro vivace" are a brilliant equivalent of another, no less exotic fauna: "hellephants, hippopotoads, croakodilles, rhinocerberuses, / behemammoths, and demonopods, / that omnibestial Gothic *allegro vivace*" (PNC 35) ("fruwale, niżły, małpierze i ćmięta / grzaby, znienacki, głowy samonogie / wieloractwo, gotyckie allegro vivace") from the poem of the author for whom the figure of a Parisian ragamuffin takes on the same mythical dimension as stone gargoyles or Gothic chimaeras. Macor-Filarska's renderings often sound much better in French than the loose; though they are not entirely free of distortions of meaning or stylistic register, such as those

found in the translations presented by Kamiński. This talented French translator of Polish poetry and Polish women poets in particular (we will hear about this in a second) worked together with Grzegorz Spławiński as her consultant (with a degree in philosophy living in Paris for many years, and son of a well-known poet from Kraków). She is an exquisite specialist in both French and Polish poetry, as reflected in her several-hundred-page-long postdoctoral dissertation in which she conducted a comparative analysis of both of these poetries. She has a good pen for writing critical texts and essays, as she proves for instance, in the introduction to her anthology of Szymborska's and Lipska's poetry, in which she attempted a personal comparison of the philosophical attitude and poetics of both Polish authors, juxtaposing Szymborska's sarcastic stoicism that nonetheless affirms reality, with Lipska's despair and absurdity of pain, expressed through oneiric visions and techniques close to surrealism. It is also worth noting that Macor-Filarska fought for the possibility to publish her translations of Szymborska in French literary magazines at a time when no one in France even heard about the potential Nobel Prize winner.

As a translator she also seems to have her own idea about how Szymborska should sound in French; in her best translations I find lightness, rhythm, intonation, elegance, and the deceitful simplicity of the original. In terms of language, Isabelle Macor-Filarska is at home at every moment, and moves through the space of the familiarized poem with a naturalness of someone who is additionally bestowed with an irrefutable poetic ear. For instance, let us consider the beginning of her "Vue au grain de sable" (it happens that the title sounds better in Kamiński's version, suggesting a "still life" convention), that is "View with a Grain of Sand":

> Zwiemy je ziarnkiem piasku.
> A ono siebie ani ziarnkiem, ani piasku.
> Obywa się bez nazwy
> ogólnej, szczególnej,
> przelotnej, trwałej,
> mylnej czy właściwej.
>
> We call it a grain of sand,
> but it calls itself neither grain nor sand.
> It does just fine without a name,
> whether general, particular,
> permanent, passing,
> incorrect, or apt.
>
> (PNC, 185)

Macor-Filarska:

> On l'appelle grain de sable.
> Lui ne se dit grain ni sable.

Il se passe de nom
général, particulier,
passager, durable,
faux ou juste.

Piotr Kamiński:

Nous l'appelons grain de sable
Mais lui-même ne s'appelle ni grain ni sable
Il se passe de toute appellation
générale ou particulière,
éphémère ou définitive,
appropriée ou inexacte.

In French more clever and more natural is most certainly "on," not "nous," Macor-Filarska's "il se passe de nom," and not "de toute appellation," which feels like a too-obvious translation. Kamiński, whom I praise for his courageous inventiveness of certain solutions, sometimes falls short in his feeling of the (French) language, especially when he falls into the trap of Szymborska's enumerative panting, and tries to replicate his own earlier methods of their rendering — without verifying the final result. Below is a fragment of the poem "Stage Fright," in which the poet humorously distances herself from the role of the "poet." It is a role that is forced upon her during poetry reading evenings, from the clichés of festive props:

I czy nie lepiej boso,
niż w tych butach z Chełmka
tupiąc, skrzypiąc
w niezdarnym zastępstwie anioła —

Gdyby chociaż ta suknia dłuższa, powłóczystsza,
a wiersze nie z torebki, ale wprost z rękawa,
od święta, od parady, od wielkiego dzwonu,

And wouldn't I be better off barefoot
to escape the clump and squeak
of cut-rate sneakers,
a clumsy ersatz angel —

If at least the dress were longer and more flowing
and the poems appeared not from a handbag but by sleight of hand,
dressed in their Sunday best from head to toe,

(PNC, 179)

Kamiński's translation:

Et ne vaudrait — il pas mieux pieds nus
Plutôt que dans ces deux Eram

Tapantes, craquantes
Ingrat ersatz d'ange.

As far as "ces deux Eram" (recalling an inexpressive brand of shoes known to every French citizen) seems like a justifiable equivalent of "cut-rate sneakers" [originally: "butów z Chełmka," literal translation: "shoes from Chełmko"], it hard to say what is referenced in "ingrat ersatz d'ange"; whether shoes (instead of wings that appeared in the previous strophe) are the unfortunate ersatz of an angel, or the poet herself? Furthermore, the enumeration from the next strophe, losing the original's intonation, through rapidly accounting nouns, loses readability. And how did Macor-Filarska cope with it?

Et ne serait-ce pas mieux pieds nus
plutôt que dans ces espèces de bottes
lourdes et grinçantes
pour remplacer gauchement un ange

Si seulement cette robe était plus longue, avec une traîne,
et le poème sorti non pas du sac, mait tout droit de la manche
comme pour une grand fête avec des carillons

Even if this translation omits the brand of the shoes, nevertheless, the whole image gained cohesion, and there is no doubt who is replacing the angel. In turn, "une grand fête avec des carillons," while losing the original's nervous rhythm, recalls the atmosphere of both fete and parade, and this is the whole point here.

For Szymborska's translators the problem of finding a poetic equivalent is a tough nut to crack. What is at stake is to bring into another language, risking an arbitrary or inaccurate choice, not only the meanings of words or their logical ties, but a whole metaphorical level or levels. This language would have a multilayer suggestion that is included in the unusual use of the personal pronoun or prefix and using the ambiguity of a word or phrase (to name only few of the constructive means from Szymborska's specific language register). A classic example of the translator's failure, probably incriminating the readers' reception of the poet, is a sentence written by Krzysztof Jeżewski's in the poem "Soirée d'auteur" ("Poetry Reading"): "être condamné à des pesants Norvids) ("mieć wyrok skazujący na ciężkie norwidy" ["one sentenced to hard shelleying for life"]). This sentence has a three-line annotation, a proverbial nail in the coffin, informing the reader about Norwid (naturally written on his knees, with a capital letter) as if the translator did not notice the presence of the plural form of the common noun "norwidy," [literally norwids] which expresses — in the poet's intention — a fellowship of every poet in Norwid's fate. Piotr Kamiński, facing the same challenge, did not fall into the trap of falsely understood piousness for both Szymborska and Norwid, and found a rather poetic, and in my view, completely appropriate equivalent: "se trouver

condamné à vingt ans de rimbauds," compensating the weight of "norwidy" with "rimbauds."

I believe that these brief remarks, based on particular examples, are sufficient enough to illustrate the traps and temptations that await ambitious French translators of our Nobel Prize winner's poetry. Undoubtedly, Piotr Kamiński and Isabelle Macor-Filarska have achieved the greatest success as co-authors of this poetry. I have a feeling that Krzysztof Jeżewski's literary and personal sensibility made it harder for him to switch from the Romantic and post-Romantic mode, in which he probably feels best as a translator, to the multitude and versatility of Szymborska's style and linguistic register. His translations also fail to preserve the poet's subtlety and the creative rhyming found in certain of her poems; in comparison, this was something that was a success in Spanish translations of her work.

Out of the three anthologies, only one — arguably the most representative, also from the point of view of the poems selected — deserved a critical review in France (hence the rather pessimistic conclusion contained in the title of this essay). In France there was no revelation, no hot discussion, there was no conversation about the poetry that grows from the spirit of Descartes, Pascal, and Montaigne. Why? I leave the task of answering this question to the most inquisitive reader.

Rampa Pampa Pam: Szymborska in the USA

Tadeusz Pióro

A review of *View with a Grain of Salt,* a collection of Wisława Szymborska's poems published in the United States in 1995, appeared in 1996 in the fourth issue of the Polish magazine *Literatura na Świecie*. The bilingual anthology of Szymborska's poetry that was published in the spring of 1997 by Wydawnictwo Literackie, which also consists of translations by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, is an extended version of *View with a Grain of Salt* and includes twenty additional poems and an afterword. I will limit myself only to a few remarks. The title of this essay comes from the poem "Aging Opera Singer" (the translated passage reads: "rampa pampa pam"). The title of the reviewed collection, *Nothing Twice,* is especially alluring: the translators — if indeed they are responsible for the title chosen — seem to suggest that the translated poems published in Poland are different from the same poems published in the United States "just as two drops of water are." And they are right, as the context for the second edition is entirely different from the previous Harcourt Brace publication, since in the meantime Wisława Szymborska was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The news was accompanied by a decision to prepare translations of twenty other poems that for some reason were omitted from the American edition or were prepared only for the Polish edition, as well as an afterward in which Stanisław Barańczak writes that in Szymborska's view "the poet should be a spoilsport." And the critic? Can he or she exhibit a similar attitude? As Confucius says, "a man who walks with a snub nose is easily caught on a fishing rod."

The new translations presented in *Nothing Twice* do not bring any noticeable changes to Barańczak and Cavanagh's translating practice. Their main assets lie in the translators' great idiomatic skill and inventiveness in rhyming. But, groundless misuses that change the content of a poem or fog its clarity are well-known faults that are found in many other translations by Barańczak; they are especially evident in three of the twenty newly translated poems. Statistically speaking, in comparison with *View with a Grain of Salt* it is a change for the better*,* as there were twice as many flawed translations in the first edition. One could perhaps risk saying that literary criticism can lead to specific positive results, and although Confucius states that "fortune favors those whose judgments turn out to be true," he also warns that "a *liar* will not be believed, even when he *speaks* the *truth.*"

Let us examine two examples of the new translations of Wisława Szymborska's poems:

"Zdumienie"

Czemu w zanadto jednej osobie?
Tej a nie innej? I co tu robię?
W dzień co jest wtorkiem? W domu nie gnieździe?
W skórze nie łusce? Z twarzą nie liściem?
Dlaczego tylko raz osobiście?
Własnie na ziemi? Przy małej gwieździe?
Po tylu erach nieobecności?
Za wszystkie czasy i wszystkie glony?
Za jamochłony i nieboskłony?
Akurat teraz? Do krwi i kości?
Sama u siebie z sobą? Czemu
nie obok ani sto mil stąd,
nie wczoraj ani sto lat temu
siedzę i patrzę w ciemny kąt
— tak jak z wzniesionym nagle łbem
patrzy warczące zwane psem?

"Astonishment"

Why after all this one and not the rest?
Why this specific self, not in a nest,
but a house? Sewn up not in scales, but skin?
Not topped off by a leaf, but by a face?
Why on earth now, on Tuesday of all days,
and why on earth, pinned down by this star's pin?
In spite of years of my not being here?
In spite of seas of all these dates and fates,
these cells, celestials, and coelenterates?
What is it really that made me appear
neither an inch nor half a globe too far,
neither a minute nor aeons too early?
What made me fill myself with me so squarely?
Why am I staring now into the dark
and muttering this unending monologue
just like the growling thing we call a dog?

(PNC, 128)

The translation is close to perfection. The translators change the sequence of verses in the first few lines of the poem, which enables them to keep the rhyming scheme of the original. They do it with ease and brilliance. They introduce repetitions that are not present in the original and thus enrich the texture and enhance the

poem's meaning — "why on earth," as opposed to "czemu" ["why")] or even "czemuż, u licha" ["why, the hell"], proceeds the second "why on earth" [literally in original "of all places, why on earth?"] This is — this time using an adjective that is not Confucian — cool. There are no abuses of Szymborska's text, with the exclusion of the phrase "pinned down by this star's pin" ("przyszpilona szpilką tej gwiazdy"). Stars indeed can have pins, or even be pins, but only when keeping with the poetics that is different from the one employed by Szymborska. Beside this small detail the translation is impressive: brave, clever, at places a bit tongue-in-cheek, for example in the lovely alliteration "cells, celestials and coelenterates," where the professional term "coelenterates" helps to express the original "glony" (algae), "nieboskłony" (horizons) and "jamochłony" (nematodes) in a humorous, surprising, and effective way. In the penultimate line there is a phrase that is not present in the original — "unending monologue," which of course rhymes with "dog," while also, less obviously, referring to the rhetorical character of questions posed in Szymborska's poem. In the original it was "wzniesiony nagle łeb" (which can be translated as "a suddenly raised head"), yet another reference to the titular "astonishment" — although we should not blame the translators for this modification, which is fully justified, not only because of the formal reasons.

The situation is different in the poem "Old Folks' Home," but I will ignore both the poem and its translation since it would require a separate, lengthier essay entitled "Girls' School." I will rather focus on the poem "Epitaph" (PNC, 52) — precisely on the first line of the translation: "Here lies, old-fashioned as parentheses" [originally: "Tu leży staroświecka jak przecinek," roughly translated as: "Here lies, old-fashioned as a comma"]. Is it worth noting that the comma has been replaced by parentheses because of the requirements of rhyming? It is, since "parentheses" does not rhyme with the last words of the next verse: "the authoress of verse. Eternal rest …", unless we consider "parentheses/rest" an incomplete "eye-rhyme," that is a rhyme which is visible, but not heard, a category that exists in English prosody. Indeed, there is an interesting assonance in the words "parentheses," "authoress," "verse" and "rest," my Confucian question is, however, different: is there anything old-fashioned in a parenthesis? "Epitaph" is taken from the collection *Salt* (1962): if we acknowledge that the comma has the status of a symbol or synecdoche, we are provided with an image of a time in which "modernity" could be reduced to the use of certain poetic forms that have no relation whatsoever with the content of the poem. The irony directed at proponents of innovative poetic forms could suggests — at least according to them — that as a poet Szymborska was already dead during her life, precisely because she uses commas. It implies intolerance toward "avant-garde" poetics, reminds us of the need for aesthetic "pluralism," a specific *laissez-faire* in critical and literary relations.

Is the transformation of the comma, presented in Barańczak and Cavanagh's translation, a symptom of this *laissez-faire,* for which Szymborska (auto)ironically calls out in her poem? This could be true if we considered that everything put in parenthesis is treated differently than what is left outside. What is put in parenthesis can be perceived as separate, something from a different register or convention, similarly to expressions in pragmatic logic presented in parentheses considered "meta-expressions," and marked as "aside" in stage directions. Otherwise we would not know who is speaking to whom, and the precisely defined intention of the speaker, underlying his irony, would become obscure, in turn leading to chaos — and, as we know, linguistic chaos reflects moral and political chaos. Ha, at Wawel we like to say that chaos is the devil's work. That is why today parentheses are much more old-fashioned than the comma: people who oppose to the notion of "meta-language" and remain skeptical toward intentionality, generally have nothing against commas. "Times have changed, and what about you?", asks Kung. In the frightful face of chaos that destabilizes meanings, and when black becomes white without any proper reason, we have replaced a comma with a parenthesis, since that is the zeitgeist — this could be the translators' reply.

One of Confucius's students said that his master ordered to carve only two words on his grave: "Nothing twice." Yet those hired to fulfill the last will of the Chinese teacher misunderstood his words, and thus carved only: "Nothing, nothing." It is hard to believe this story, as it is most certainly apocryphal. If it were the other way around, and "Nothing, nothing" would be written as "Nothing twice," or even "2x Nothing," — which must look entirely different in Chinese — Confucius would be therefore considered as an ironist comparable with Socrates, perhaps even Kierkegaard, if only because of someone else's mistake.

Tandem and the Team Spirit: Szymborska Translated into Spanish

Krystyna Rodowska

In the spring of 1997, two very different collections of poems by Wisława Szymborska were published within one month. Chronologically, the first and more extensive volume, containing a hundred poems, is the result of the cooperation of a Polish-Spanish tandem: Jerzy Sławomirski, a Kraków-born Spanish philologist and Polish language lecturer in the University of Barcelona (he is also the author of a short introduction to the anthology), and Anna María Moix, a Spanish poet and prose writer. The volume was published by Lumen, a renowned Barcelonian publishing house. The second book was part of a prestigious poetry series of the Madrid-based publishing house Hiperión, which specializes in world poetry — both contemporary and classic. The names that appear on the cover: Maria Filipowicz-Rudek, a Spanish philologist and translator from Kraków, and Juan Carlos Vidal, the director of the Cervantes Institute in Warsaw, clearly point to the fact that all the translations — of poems, of the speech given by Szymborska in Stockholm, and an exhaustive essay about the poet's work written by Małgorzata Baranowska — were made in Poland. Alas, there is one more remark: the names of ten translators of the texts appear not on the front cover, but on the back cover of the book. Such a discreet way of presentation puts the translators in the shadow, and yet each one of them is undoubtedly an individual. Two of them are talented poets: the Mexican Gerardo Beltrán, living in Poland for six years, and the Spaniard David Carrión, an employee in the library of the Cervantes Institute; both had recently published volumes of poetry (in two languages) in the Polish publishing house Małe. The third one is Carlos Marrodán Casas, an exquisite translator of works by García Marquez and Vargas Llosa and secretly (up to a certain time!) a poet. The fourth is Abel A. Murcia Soriano, a lecturer of Spanish at the Cervantes Institute and lecturer of Spanish and Catalonian at the University of Warsaw. The fifth is Elżbieta Bortkiewicz, who had translated Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Bruno Schultz and Josef Wittlin into Spanish (and privately the wife of the inventive director of the Cervantes Institute). Only the sixth person is not from Poland: Xavier Ballester, a lecturer of literature at the University of Madrid, translator of Zbigniew Herbert. Both Bortkiewicz and Ballester had worked by themselves, not contributing to the "team spirit," which — up to a certain point,

fortunately — was hiding in anonymity. "The Great Four" had apparently worked as a collective. They arranged a workshop of sorts, during which they discussed, argued, and proposed corrections to their Spanish translations of Szymborska's poems. In this "team" there was Carlos Carrodán who "was the Pole" since no one else had such an ear for the nuances of the colloquial and literary Polish, for the instances of Szymborska's playing with language, and for the ambiguities of the text. Ultimately, however, they had all decided on the final shape of their translations individually, and so in the end, they agreed to sign their names under their translations — in spite of all!.

Both anthologies complement each other. *Paisaje con grano de arena* (*View with a Grain of Salt*) is based on the collection of poems translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh; it is published in the United States. The authors of the second anthology focused on *A Large Number* and *The End and The Beginning,* including several translations of the poems from earlier volumes.

Each of the two anthologies has a clearly outlined personality, and a specific vision of Wisława Szymborska's poetry. The Barcelonan anthology is more consistent in terms of the poetics of translation since it is the result of the collective work of two art collaborators; naturally, it is hard to assess the proportion of each one's contribution, however, I do not believe that Sławomirski himself only provided drafts, philological translations. In the short introduction to the anthology, Sławomirski attempts to describe the specific experiences of the Polish post-War poetry. He also justifies its distancing itself from both the philosophical rhetoric and pure lyric poetry, and its turn toward the reality of the surrounding world. The obvious recipient of the introduction is the Spanish reader, who knows almost nothing about the Polish poetry. This is why there is the presence of certain simplifications of which the author is fully aware of. In my opinion, however, this restriction does not explain the reasons why Slawomirski suggests a false clue to the Spanish readers: he throws Szymborska in the same bag as Miłosz, Różewicz, and Herbert, as though her poetry needs this type of support.

It is said that first impressions never lie, and so I will confide: the translations of the Polish-Spanish tandem mostly felt like an excellent, meticulous work, at times reaching heights of virtuosity, although somewhere along the way losing the "spirit" of Szymborska's poetic alchemy. This impression became only stronger when I compared it with the anthology published by Hiperión, even though very few poems from both volumes are duplicated. Let us consider one of the poet's most well-known poems, "Nothing Twice," which quickly began a double life in the form of a song although it had been probably conceived rather as a pastiche of "sing-along songs":

Nothing can ever happen twice.
In consequence, the sorry fact is
that we arrive here improvised
and leave without the chance to practice.

(PNC, 20)

Nic dwa razy się nie zdarza
i nie zdarzy. Z tej przyczyny
zrodziliśmy się bez wprawy
i pomrzemy bez rutyny.

The tandem rhymed it perfectly and pompously:

Nada sucede dos veces
y es lo que determina
que nazcamos sin destreza
y muramos sin rutina.

And here is the same stanza in Gerardo Beltrana's translation:

Nada sucede dos veces
ni sucederá y por eso,
sin experiencia nacemos
sin rutina moriremos.

This is written simply and normally, and with a discrete assonance in the second and third lines. Only in this version can we hear the tone of the poetic joke of the original. Let us see what happens next. On the culminating points of the stanzas the poet dances her contemplation on passing:

The next day, though you're here with me,
I can't help looking at the clock:
A rose? A rose? What could that be?
Is it a flower or a rock?

Why do we treat the fleeting day
with so much needless fear and sorrow?
It's in its nature not to stay:
Today is always gone tomorrow.

With smiles and kisses, we prefer
to seek accord beneath our star,
although we're different (we concur)
just as two drops of water are.

Dziś, kiedy jesteśmy razem,
odwróciłam twarz ku ścianie.
Róża? Jak wygląda róża?
Czy to kwiat? A może kamień?

Czemu ty się, zła godzino,
z niepotrzebnym mieszasz lękiem?
Jesteś — a więc musisz minąć.
Miniesz — a więc to jest piękne.

Uśmiechnięci, współobjęci
spróbujemy szukać zgody,
choć różnimy się od siebie
jak dwie krople czystej wody.

And how did the tandem dance?

Hoy tu Mirada rehuyo,
clavo la mía en la hiedra.
¿Rosa? ¿Qué es una rosa?
¿Es una flor? ¿Una piedra?

¿Por qué el instante presente
vértigo y pena procura?
Hoy siempre será manana:
es y sera su hermosura.

Entre sonrisas y abrazos
verás que la paz se fragua,
aunque seamos distintos
cual son dos gotas de agua.

The text here is written heavily and ceremonially, written to the sounds of a "grand bell," completely unfamiliar for the poet herself. Why is "la hiedra," ivy, in the place of the original "ściana" [the wall]?[1] Of course, this is so that it could rhyme with "piedra." In general, the tandem rhymes with ease and passion. Is this because perhaps in her youth Ana Maria Moix was a passionate song writer? The barrel organ-like rhyme is not a living tradition of Spanish poetry, which is rather a far more discreet — in this *par excellence* musical language — and more refined assonance! Szymborska herself plays, rather casually, with the word, word games, rhymes (and meanings shining through them), thus increasing the weight of her "message" with the lightness of "devices." Let us listen — if we are speaking about musical quality — to the sound of stanzas translated by Gerardo Beltrana:

Ahora que estamos juntos,
vuelvo la cara hacia el muro.
¿La rosa? ¿Cóme es la rosa?
¿Cómo una flor o una piedra?

1 In the English version of this verse, "the wall" does not appear at all — instead, we have "the clock," translators' note.

Díme por que, mala hora,
con miedo inútil te mezclas.
Eres y pore so pasas.
Pasas, pore so eres bella.

Medio abrazados, sonrientes,
Buscaremos la cordura,
Aunque somos diferentes
cual dos gotas de aqua pura.

As we see and hear, the translator reserved the rhyme for the final punch line and did not completely have the main effect with the minor ones. Because of this, and thanks to its "ordinariness," the poem becomes successful, not only pretty or even clever.

Even though the Barcelonan anthology courts us with its literary refinement and virtuosity of its artistic solutions, I prefer the more modest in size, medley-like and ultimately imperfect, Warsaw-Madrid anthology. Perhaps the latter is only a preview of a genuinely successful large number of Wisława Szymborska's poems, which — as I have heard — will be published in the nearby future by Fondo de Cultura Económica, a Mexican publishing house. This volume that is currently being prepared for publishing — which also proves the true vitality of the "team spirit," in this case represented only by two translators: Gerard Beltran and Carlos Marrodán — is also intended to be a homage to the Polish poet and translator Jan Zych, who had been translating Szymborska's poems since the beginning of his residence in Mexico, where he recently passed away.

Even the titles of the volumes containing Szymborska's poetry made me ponder not only the uniqueness of Wisława Szymborska's poetry, but, more broadly, on the particular relation of contemporary Polish poetry to language — as compared with the twentieth-century Spanish poetry. In both anthologies, the titles translated into Spanish, such as "Could Have" ("Wszelki wypadek") and "No End of Fun" ("Sto pociech"), felt flat, devoid of contexts and subtexts that shine through the multilayered formulas of the original. French translators of Szymborska dealt with the same problem and similarly did not find a good solution. How to translate the change of the Polish prefix "przy-" into "wy-" [in original the poem's title] into other languages? How powerful is their tradition and practice of word play? In contemporary French, similar tendencies are represented first and foremost by Michel Déguy. It is, however, a rather marginal current because of its experimental nature and hermeticism. The evolution of Spanish poetry went in another direction: on the one hand, the path was cleared by Vincente Aleixandre; on the other hand, it was cleared by Cesar Vellejo. What is most valued here is a visionary quality that at its best gestures towards surrealism and the presentation of the state of the spirit. Sometimes it verges on the mystical condensation of experiences, such as José Angel Valente's recorded illuminations (although there are, in my opinion, exceptions). Such an exception is (e.g. the poetry

of Angel Gonzalez) embedded in everyday realities, full of humor, irony, and self-irony (I believe that this poetry would perhaps interest Polish poets and readers the most). And therefore the problem of the translation of titles, highlighted because of the working hypothesis presented above, is simply symptomatic: in the linguistic, idiomatic detail we can discern the macrocosm of other possible expressions and their limitations. So "wszelki wypadek" ["just in case"] — in which we also hear the frightful "wszelki duch" ["all spirit"] — has nothing to do with the Spanish "acaso," or "si acaso," that is "case," "chance," "perhaps," "what if …" It is similar to the attempts to copy stereo as mono. Consequently, "No End of Fun" is neither "qué alegría más grande!" (— "cóż za radość!" [what a joy!]) and neither "qué monada! — "ach, jakie to śliczne!" ["oh, how cute!"] (you can say "qué mona" about a pretty girl). "No End of Fun" also increases, through the mocking camouflage, one's admiration for the heroism of the unfortunate creature (the human individual). In moments such as these both groups of translators had to feel the bitter taste of helplessness, which forced them to take the easier path (similarly to the case of French translators). The title "Gente en puente" ("The People on the Bridge") strikes me as memorable because it sounds as pretty as "Humpty-Dumpty;" the only problem is that Szymborska is not telling stories for well-behaved children. The French translation managed at least to avoid rhyming, while using the same words as in Spanish: "Les gens sur le pont." But what can be done when the word "hombres" (instead of "gentes") could seriously offend the female half of the audience by suggesting that only men are people? These are only a few examples that show the difficulties that the Spanish translators had to face, although generally Szymborska's poetry sounds excellent in this language (especially in the translations of the "great four": Gerardo Beltran, David Carrion, Carlos Marrodán, and Abel A. Murcia Serrano).

Contrary to the French anthologies, in both Spanish collections of the poet's work, there are just a few poems that are duplicated. This is due to the fact that the Barcelonan anthology — as I have already mentioned — is simply a copy of the American anthology, which consequently forced the authors of the second volume to self-restraint (not least because of copyright issues). Therefore, a Spanish-speaking reader has a small chance to compare different versions of the same poem. Although such a comparison creates a false impression that the two books complement each other, it prohibits him or her from, for example, experiencing a desire for, or anxiety about another, "more true" linguistic shape of the work singled out in Sztokholm (in Spain no one has heard of Szymborska before she had received the Nobel Prize). Having found myself in this rather uncomfortable position, I was more than happy to analyze two translations of "The Onion" — one of Szymborska's poetic masterpieces, combining the verbal power of a joke concerning an obvious issue (the "idiotic onionoid perfections" contrasted with the unfortunate and twisted human "anatomy"). Let us recall the beginning:

> The onion, now that's something else.
> Its innards don't exist.
> Nothing but pure onionhood
> fills this devout onionist.
> Oniony on the inside,
> onionesque it appears.
> …
> Our skin is just a coverup
> for the land where none dare go,
> an infernal inferno,
> the anathema of anatomy,
> In an onion there's only onion
> from its top to its toe,
> onionymous monomania,
> unanimous omninudity.
>
> (PNC, 166)

> Co innego cebula.
> Ona nie ma wnętrzności.
> Jest sobą na wskroś cebula
> do stopnia cebuliczności.
> Cebulasta na zewnątrz,
> cebulowa do rdzenia
> …
> W nas obczyzna i dzikość
> ledwie skórą przykryta,
> inferno w nas interny,
> anatomia gwałtowna,
> a w cebuli cebula,
> nie pokrętne jelita.

In the Barcelonan version it sounds as follows:

> La cebolla es diferente.
> De vísceras, es carencia.
> Es cebolla hasta la médula,
> a la cebollil potencia.
> …
> Nosotros, salvajez y barbarie,
> envueltas en fina piel,
> el infierno de lo interno,
> y anatomia ardiente.
> Pero en la cebolla hay solo cebolla,
> Ni intestinos hay ni hiel.

The same "Cebolla" in a strikingly different take by Carlos Marrodán:

La cebolla es otra historia.
No tiene entrañas la cebolla.
Es cebolla cebolla de verdad.
hasta el colmo de la cebullosidad.
Por fuera cebolluda,
Cebollina hasta la médula,
podría escrutar su interior
la cebolla sin temor.

En nostros extranjería y salvajismo
apenas cubiertos por la piel,
el infierno de la medicina interna,
anatomía violent,
y en la cebolla, cebolla
y no sinuosos intestines.
Reiteradamente desnuda
y hasta el fondo asíporelestilo.

At the first glance, both contenders mediating the poem rhyme without any problems. A closer look proves, however, that Marrodán weaves rhymes with assonances (interna — violenta, intestines — porelestilo), which — when compared with the boring smoothness of the competing nursery rhyme — introduces into the translation this particular quiet laughter of the original "The Onion" (so characteristic for the philosophical games of the poet). It also becomes evident that the tandem, wanting to meet the requirements of the rhyme, forces undesirable changes onto the text; for example, it uses "anatomía ardiente" (a fiery, burning anatomy) instead of "violenta" (violent, as in the original) — the latter only strengthens the course of associations, which directs us rather towards exile, wilderness etc. In the version produced by the tandem, "The Onion" loses the charm of the original poem that has been ninety-eight percent smuggled into the untypically sparkling Spanish by Marrodán, supported by the dependable "team spirit."

To be honest, this "team spirit" (many times recalled in conversations with each of the translators) sometimes left me astonished, as in the case of the simple — it would seem — poem "Some People Like Poetry" (in Spanish it's called "A algunos les gusta la poesía"). It is translated by three people together: Gerardo Beltran, David Carrionm, and Abel A. Murcia Sorano. This fact provides some insight into the scope of their ambition, and the atmosphere of their collaboration.

It seems that — contrary to France — the publication of both anthologies became quite a sensation in the Spanish literary world. It suffices to say that renowned and prominent poets and critics, such as Jaime Siles and Luís Antonio de Villena, had written about Szymborska, calling her a positive, intriguing surprise. Let us therefore patiently await the further fate of this poetic "import," which is already, as we hear, on its way to Mexico.

Praising Wisława Szymborska. On the Margins of Swedish Translations by Anders Bodegård

Leonard Neuger

1. In the late 1989 a collection of poems by Wisława Szymborska was published under the title *Utopia* in Sweden, as part of a series of poetic volumes that was translated by Anders Bodegård. Bodegård was an instructor of the Swedish language at Jagiellonian University during Poland's period of martial law (from 1981 do 1983), a thirty-year-old sensitive man, an excellent speaker of Polish, ready to sacrifice, and very involved in Polish affairs — that is how he is remembered by e.g. Jan Błoński and Roman Laskowski. After returning to Sweden, as people used to say in those times, he "committed his talent to the cause of Polish liberation," which meant journalism (interviews e.g. with Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik), essayistic writing (brilliant essays on the socio-political situation in Poland), and organizational activities (he was one of the initiators and editors of the magazine "Hotel pod Orłem" — "Hotel Örnsköld" — dedicated to independent Polish culture). The crown achievements of this particular incarnation of Bodegård were books published in his translation: *Od czerwonego harcerstwa do "Solidarności*,*"* by Seweryn Blumsztajn; a collection of essays by Adam Michnik; *Oni*, by Teresa Torańska;[1] *Droga nadziei*, by Lech Wałęsa (translated from French together with Jan Stolp, although with the Polish original at hand).[2]

2. In "Hotel Örnsköld" Bodegård published translations of poems that were a bit at odds with the image of the translator — a polonophile overcome with political passion. He published poems by Ewa Lipska, Wisława Szymborska, Bronisław Maj, and Adam Zagajewski. And not long after that also volumes, essays, and poems by Zagajewski (translated with Lars Kleberg). Finally, Bodegård also published Szymborska's *Utopia.*

3. In August 1990 Bodegård's masterpiece was published: the translation of the first volume of *Dzienniki* by Witold Gombrowicz.[3]

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1 See, Teresa Torańska, *"Them:" Stalin's Polish Puppets,* trans. Agnieszka Kołakowska (New York City: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998).

2 See, Lech Wałęsa, *A Way of Hope: An Autobiography,* trans. Sarah Tolley (New York City: Henry Holt & Co, 1990).

3 See, Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary Volumes 1-3*, trans. Lillian Vallee (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

4. *Utopia* is the second collection of Szymborska's poetry in Swedish (the first was translated by Per-Arne Bodin). In principle, Bodegård opted not to translate poems that were already included in the previous anthology. Nonetheless, *Utopia* is a representative presentation of Szymborska's work: it includes poems from *Calling Out to Yeti* (translated in its entirety), *People on the Bridge*,[4] and the more recent poems published in magazines. Lars Kleberg wrote an interesting foreword, Joanna Helander provided photographs of the author, and Szymborska herself designed the cover. We could say that *Utopia* is full of Szymborska herself, that it is her collection. The poet's shadow — and here we truly begin to praise Szymborska in Swedish — appears even in a rather unexpected place — in the poem "A Tale Begun" ("En påbörjad berättelse"). The poem, which is written in a solemn meter close to hexameter, recalls the universal evidence supporting the decision to move the birth of a child to a later, unspecified date. It is presented through the voices of different epochs and cultures. It also represents the voices of "poor people," which are testimonies from the "small world" that is always crushed by the "big world," by history. "Poor people" have their "small" ways of smoothing down history, and yet at the moment of childbirth (well, no arguments can stop procreation), it is necessary to call upon the most important instance of the "small world." One of those instances is … a grandma in Zabierzów. ("Let's send a cable to grandma in Zabierzów"; PNC, 210) This is, so to say, the central moment of the poem: the grandma in Zabierzów must garner our trust, and convince the reader that she is able to help during (or after) the labor. Moreover, she must show that neither King Harald the Butterpat, nor Minister Fouché, nor Charles the Hammer can poison her.

In the Swedish translation, there is no Zabierzów. I believe that instead of trust, a grandmother from such a town would only cause a fear of mispronunciation (ha, ha!). Zabierzów was replaced by Kórnik, the hometown of Wisława Szymborska! Szymborska's lyric representative is very often the poet: an ironic and tongue-in-cheek *port-parole* version of an author from the period of the Great Poetry (Romanticism or Young Poland), a litotes of a rhetoric and inspiration. "Grandma in Kórnik," understood as the center of the "small world" or poor people, in the Swedish translation must be identified as the author (the Swedish reader does not know anyone else from Kórnik), and adds a specific warmth to this ironic-playful *port-parole*. We may put it more strongly. Role poetry, eagerly used and overused in Poland, is much less popular in Sweden, and arouses suspicion; in the background of the abounding *semiosis,* the "grandma in Kórnik" brings a chance, however glimmering, for *mimesis*. Besides, in the Swedish version of Szymborska we can find much, much more *mimesis*.

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4 See: Wisława Szymborska, *Poems. New and Collected,* trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Claire Cavanagh (New York City: Hartcourt, 1998).

Let us further consider personal names. As long as Szymborska uses allusions to Thomas Mann, Polish readers understand what is at stake. But the Polish reception seems to be more semiotic than the Swedish. Firstly, most Swedish readers had visited the house where Mann lived, so they like to check if the details are correct — and this question, however naïve and irrelevant it would seem, has indeed a mimetic character. Secondly, Swedish readers are more accustomed to many personal names because they are educated in a more positivist way than Poles (I am not judging, merely stating facts). Therefore, in a way, Bodegård was forced to check every fact: Who precisely was King Harald the Butterpat (Harad Blåtand!)? Is the fighting through the sewers a reference to the Warsaw Uprising (he decided it was, so in the Swedish — as well as English — translation people go through the sewers to Warsaw's center)? Moreover, in the poem "Possibilities," he corrected "Grimm's fairy tales" to "the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm" (*bröderna Grimms sagor*).

That is not everything. Acting like a serious zoologist, Bodegård critically approached creatures, which for Polish readers have empty semantic meanings: the tarsier (in Swedish called *spökdjur* = a spirit-animal) and the holothurian (which in Swedish also gains autonomy, becoming *sjögurka* = sea cucumber). A tarsier — I have seen it myself — can be found in the Swedish terrarium. I have yet to encounter a holothurian, at least not consciously, but I can assure that most Swedish readers have met this creature, and they also understand what autonomy means. And if by chance it happens that they do not know what it is, they will surely check before they begin to read the poem. Perhaps I am putting too much emphasis on the styles of reading, but a translation is not only an interpretation of a text, it is also (or perhaps essentially) an autonomous suggestion of how to read. Bodegård is perfectly aware that for most of his readers there is no other Szymborska but the Swedish one. He also knows that the styles of reading popular in Sweden make a text more static and flat, and under the watchful eyes of a zoologist or globetrotter, Wisława Szymborska may begin to resemble a pretentious chatterbox, coquetting, and, moreover, full of pretenses. And he knows that Szymborska's favorite poetic figure, litotes, brilliantly "plays" with the key tradition of Polish poetry (Romanticism), and is brilliantly "explained" through the Polish ideological and political context (the pride of totalitarianism), which in turn is with those semantic components, which in Sweden are either forgotten (Romanticism) or just absent.

Now the hardest part is virtuosity, imaginativeness, and dance. But how to force a language even more positional than English, one that using definite and indefinite forms of nouns and adjectives, additionally holds down words, phrases, and sentences that are eager to break away! Szymborska-Bodegård's poem is full of dance, often linguistically reckless; puns appear at the right time;

phrases resembling aphorisms sound natural, delighting with their originality and poignancy. This has been noted by critics in the many, although mostly, mediocre reviews.

Reviews were enthusiastic, but enthusiasm is not the best friend of a critic. They highlighted Szymborska's simplicity (meaning: her communicative skills), as well as her favorite repertoire of poetic moves and her technical mastery. Naturally, the Polish political context was also evoked, but sadly with poor results, since — as I have already pointed out — for Swedish readers it is a "foreign" context, which does not mean anything more significant than a simple conclusion recognizing it as melancholic lyric poetry (which was indeed drawn). There were reviews, however, that signaled a deeper reading of *Utopia* that does not approach the translated text as a type of forgery, only hinting at the virtues of the original, but contrary, as an integral and autonomous text. Thanks to Bodegård's mastery, Szymborska is able to function as a Swedish poet. This means that she can and should be situated within the local context (several critics did see our poet's connections with the poetry of Werner Aspenström, which to my knowledge is still not translated into Polish), and read through one's own existential experience. As I have mentioned, in his translations, Bodegård included suggestions of how to read Szymborska. To put it simply, on the one hand, he placed the poet in the local context, reducing the gap between the lyric "I" and the imagined author — in a way he "mimeticized" her; on the other hand, he attempted to create — with great success — a more expressive, "dancing" poetry, rarely encountered in Sweden, one that plays with "other" styles, rhythms, and word games — all of which can be described as virtuosity. In a way, he was "semioticizing" her. And she will stay this way, torn between *mimesis* and *semiosis*, and awaiting to learn the cause of the split.

The Americanization of Wisława, or: How I Was Translating "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography" with One Young Californian

Stanisław Barańczak

This story involves three people and two languages: Wisława Szymborska, who writes in Polish; myself, who writes mostly in Polish, but in the last couple years has dabbled in writing in English; and Clare Cavanagh, who knows Polish, but thinks and writes in English. At the risk of being considered too casual, here in the title I have reduced the poet's full name to her first name, Wisława. This was done not only because it is quite a rare name, sufficient enough to identify her, but also — as readers accustomed to world cinematography must already know — I have done so to achieve the effect of invoking the well-known American film *The Americanization of Emily.* Also, I am going to refer to Clare Cavanaugh simply as Clare since calling people by their first name is a custom in the United States, popular even among people who have just met. In our case it is a sign of a close friendship and long-time collaboration.

Above all, we collaborate on translations. For the past seven or eight years, we have been working with Clare as a kind of tandem, bringing to American readers (again and again) new little "trailers" full of modern Polish poetry. Naturally, we have many more dignified and well-accomplished rivals in the field; nevertheless, our own work seems to have already produced specific results. Most importantly, if we exclude newspaper publications, it resulted in the publication of an anthology of contemporary Polish poetry from the 1970s, which includes authors ranging from Mieczysław Jastrun and Adam Ważyk to Jan Polkowski and Bronisław Maj. The book bearing the intriguing — I hope — title *Spoiling Cannibals' Fun* (a line taken from a poem by Jerzy Ficowski) is scheduled for publication in the Fall of 1991 by Northwestern University Press. The anthology, however, is only the finishing touch of our slow exploration of poems written by more than thirty authors. This has been a translation tourism that has been neither typical nor easy, especially in the last few years when the tandem's frame has become extremely stretched: one of the bicycle's saddles landed in Boston, on the Atlantic shore; while the other, in Madison, Wisconsin, close to the Great Lakes. I met Clare in 1981 when I was just about to begin a series of lectures in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature at Harvard while she was beginning her second year of graduate studies. In America, Slavic Studies are commonly reduced to a

specialization in Russian, with additional set of lectures on one of the “minor” Slavic literatures. This is because of the power and political set of presumptions about Eastern Europe, which, although it might harm the national pride of Poles, Czechs and Ukrainians, is unfortunately a fact, at least until recently. Clare was no exception (her brilliant PhD dissertation was dedicated to Mandelsztam’s poetry), while at the same time she was becoming one of the first representatives of a rather numerous group of my graduate students, who, after reading and discussing one of Sęp Sarzyński’s sonnets or one Gomrbowicz’s short stories, found themselves immensely taken with Polish literature. In Clare’s case the urgent, deeply felt need to read Polish literature in its original meant that even the rather intensive academic courses were not enough: in order to get better in Polish, this young Californian with Irish roots, who did not have anything to do with Polish before, began a regular cycle of private conversation classes (conducted, in fact, by my wife with whom she quickly became friends) and additional individual meetings with myself. Precisely these meetings, which at first were spent on reading and discussing, in a quite natural way transformed themselves into our first attempts at translating — since what is a translation if not the most insightful interpretation of a text, and what is an interpretation of literature if not a form of translation?

We worked great together from the very beginning. Equipped not only with sharp critical edge but also literary talent, Clare was quickly able to “grasp” the specific essence of each author and text we were working on. I barely noticed when the working translations, created for educational purposes, suddenly turned into much more ambitious, literary translations intended for publication. It probably began from our work on the poetry of Ryszard Krynicki, whose short, aphoristic poems were a particularly promising, as well as demanding material. After several years, it resulted in the publication of Krynicki’s volume *Citizen R. K. Does Not Live* (which, in addition to our own translations, included those made by others) by the small publishing house Mr. Cogito Press (which was once started in the far — away state of Oregon by a group of enthusiasts of Zbigniew Herbert’s poetry). After Krynicki we worked on other poets, from those relatively easy to translate to those most difficult, as for instance Miron Białoszewski, whom we translated with great pleasure and did not even evade from reproducing his rhymes (although, as the example provided will prove, his more radical forms of approaching language were beyond our reach):

“Zwierzątko”

Na podłodze
Każdej nodze
Każę iść
Jak liść

Całe życia
Na suficie
Czyimś mieszkać
Nie dza-ć-przeszka-ć!

"Confessionette"

I force
My feet
To be
Discreet

When your flooring's
Someone's ceiling
Parquet pounding's
Unappealing

At first Szymborska was not a part of our interests for one simple reason: contrary to Białoszewski's, her poetry was already available in numerous quite decent English translations, especially those included in the volume *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems by Wisława Szymborska,* edited and published in 1981 by another tandem of translators, Magnus J. Kryński and Robert A. Maguire. The situation changed suddenly and decisively in 1986, after I had read Szymborska's recently published collection *The People on the Bridge.* It became obvious to me that each one of these twenty-two extraordinary poems must be quickly made available in English. Immediately, I telephoned Kryński, a Polish Studies scholar from Duke University in North Carolina: are they planning, together with Maguire, to translate these new poems? Kryński did not have such plans: in recent years, he had gradually focused on political activism and did not have time for translation (these would be the final years of the renowned advocate for Polish literature in the States: he died unexpectedly in the summer of 1989). Maguire, a well-known Russian language scholar from Columbia University, had never translated any Polish poetry alone. Clare and I were ready to get to work.

At that point, our tandem's activity was technically more difficult because of certain matrimonial, occupational, and geographical circumstances that were independent of us. Clare got married — and as usual in America, where the enormous distances of the continent make married life and professional career so often so hard to combine — and moved to far-away East Lansing in Michigan. Her husband, Mike, a scholar of English, one of many young PhDs fighting over a limited number of positions, miraculously got a job there at the university. As Clare was finishing her PhD in East Lansing, she simultaneously worked with me on Szymborska. After obtaining her PhD, she received a job offer from the Slavic Department at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. So, together with

Mike, Clare moved away even further to the west. In our earlier collaboration, however, we worked with a particular system: first, I prepared a working version of the translation into English; later, Clare, also on her own, made sure that it sounded like proper English, and not *translationese* — these separate efforts always culminated in us bending over a piece of paper together, discussing places on which we disagreed, and in the end arriving at the final version. Now these last steps had to be conducted in writing or over the phone. And the whole process of translating *The People on the Bridge* (it coincided with the beginning of our more or less systematic work on the previously mentioned anthology of contemporary poetry, which was to include Szymborska's twenty two poems) relied precisely on exchanging letters and talking over the phone.

Why am spending so much time writing about these ultimately trivial circumstances of our tandem's ride? For me, it is an intriguing illustration of the theoretical assumptions about the art of translation. The most intriguing was the fact that a major part of the translation was created in a situation of far-reaching physical separation and division of two roles that usually are found unified in the one job of a literary translator; not only was the job split between two persons, who collaborate as translators (which happens rather often), but there was also the geographic separation of distance. Normally, in the communication scheme, "Language A" — "the Translator" — "Language B," the intervening element — the translator's personality — resembles the two-faced god Janus: faces directed in opposite ways, yet together forming a unity that becomes both the reverse and averse of a single scull. Naturally, this is what happens especially in the very rare situation of perfect bilingualism and identical understanding of both cultures. In more typical situations, when only one of the two languages is the translator's native tongue, one of these faces can have slightly less precise and sharp features, and this unity remains a fact. In practice, this means that when analyzing the product of the work of such a translator, the translation theoretician or critic can have difficulties in isolating the ungraspable moment when "Language A" *becomes* "Language B," when the requirements of the language of the original clash with the language of the translation. The dictate of one culture with that of another one, and consequently a third element, emerge: a mistake, a compromise, or a new quality. In the case of a duo of translators, this is easier to grasp, especially if you know in detail how they managed their work because you were a part of it. Even the process of working on a translation by two people includes at least one — most often, but not always, final — moment of the work that is truly *collaborative*, which is precisely those, previously mentioned, minutes or hours spent together on discussing the poem on a piece of paper. This is the time when their brains seem to be linked together and an intuitive idea for a solution often simultaneously sparks in them. In the situation we had found ourselves with

Clare, there was a collaboration that, because of the geographical distance, did not resemble a synchronized singing of two voices, but it was rather a game of chess (via letters!), consisting of making moves myself and waiting for the partner's moves — the split went even further and the division of competences became even more clear. What would normally — in the case of a translation made by one translator — be described as (to use one more musical metaphor) the usual playing of the piano with two hands at the same time, in our case looked like a piece of music played by two separate one-handed pianists. The left-handed one would play the notes on the bass stave, while the other right-handed pianist would take care of the treble stave; moreover, in order to further emphasize the separation of both parts, both pianos would be located on two separate scenes in two opposing corners of the concert hall. This strange image of a piano recital helped me to better understand not only the inner mechanics and dynamic of the process of translating poetry, but also the poems we had been translated themselves. In any case, now I know much more about Szymborska's poetry, and I know more because the attempt to Americanize her, to bring her into the realm of a foreign culture and language, was made as precisely as this kind of playing of two separate hands on two separate keyboards.

Before I present one of Szymborska's poems as an entirety, let us have a look at one miniature illustration, fully shaped by a certain language joke. In the poem "Surplus" (from *The People on the Bridge*), we find a description of a party, organized by someone who had discovered a new star:

Wiek gwiazdy, masa gwiazdy, położenie gwiazdy,
wszystko to starczy może
na jedną pracę doktorską
i skromną lampkę wina
w kołach zbliżonych do nieba:
astronom, jego żona, krewni i koledzy,
nastrój niewymuszony, strój dowolny,
przeważają w rozmowie tematy miejscowe
i gryzie się orzeszki ziemne.

The star's age, mass, location —
all this perhaps will do
for one doctoral dissertation
and a wine-and-cheese reception
in circles close to the sky:
the astronomer, his wife, friends, and relations,
casual, congenial, come as you are
mostly chat on earthbound topics,
surrounded by cozy earthtones.

(PNC, 181)

As always, Szymborska is most effective when she grounds the poetic image or the lyric situation simultaneously in the everyday ordinariness or a worn-out norm, and in a masked linguistic pun, which in a way diffuses this ordinariness from the inside thanks to its unexpected humor. This is the case with the "peanuts" ("*orzeszki ziemne*") in the original poem. At first glance, nibbling at peanuts at a party seems nothing out of the ordinary. Yet, when contrasted with the discovery of a star, and in the context of such phrases as "*koła zbliżone do nieba*" ("circles close to the sky") or "*tematy miejscowe*" ("earthbound topics"), the used-up idiom "peanuts" becomes suddenly real, the adjective gets a literal meaning. The banality of the Earthlings' reaction to the enormity of the astronomical discovery, and the fact that "a star" remains "inconsequential" to their mundane problems, unexpectedly crystallizes in the adjective that is normally overlooked. Peanuts are "*ziemne*" (from earth), and "*ziemskie*" (from Earth). While reading the poem, the critic or interpreter must notice the peanuts' relation to "Earth," while the poem's translator must certainly retain this meaning.

Indeed the translator of "Surplus" encounters here a problem that seems easy to solve but, in fact, is much more challenging. "*Orzeszki ziemne"* are automatically translated as "peanuts." At the moment of finding this equivalent, we become aware of the absence of any relation to "earth" or "Earth." While preparing the draft of the translation that I was supposed to send to Clare, I asked myself a question, quite natural in this context: during the American "cheese and wine" reception, can you have a sort of nuts that in their name contain the allusion to "Earth," soil, ground, or anything of this sort? Cashews? No. Pecans? Almonds? Hazelnuts? None of these work. Macadamia nuts? Pointless. Perhaps — as a last resort — instead of nuts, the astronomer could serve his guests something else? Some kind of cheese? Snack sticks? Crackers? Potato chips? All of this was for nothing. My investigation of menus of possible snacks did not result in anything that would include the words "earth," or even "ground," or "soil." And then I rub my forehead and think: maybe it is only because of my imperfect knowledge of English that I can't think of any suitable equivalent of "*orzeszki ziemne*," which would be some kind of "earthnuts?" Then a miracle happens. I rush to the Webster's Dictionary and I can't believe my own eyes: the word "earthnuts" really exists. Satisfied — every dog has its day! — I add the word to the text, which after Clare's first corrections looks like this:

> The star's age, mass, location —
> all this perhaps will do
> for one doctoral dissertation
> and a wine-and-cheese reception
> in circles close to the sky:
> the astronomer, his wife, friends, and relations,
> casual, congenial, come as you are,

> mostly chat on local topics,
> while nibbling on earthnuts.

Clare suggested several fitting idiomatic expressions and confirmed the idiomatic quality of other expressions, which I came up with myself; for the time being she accepted *earthnuts,* understanding the word's necessity. There was something disturbing in the fact that — as she told me over the phone — in order to accept them, first she had to look it up in the dictionary, to make sure it was a word, just like me. This did not look too promising: the American half of our tandem isn't even sure whether a word exists in her native tongue? Indeed, she could not stop thinking about those *earthnuts*, and after some time she called me again to tell about her firm objection. The objection boiled down to a simple statement: "That is not how you say it." Perhaps the word exists in dictionaries, but it is neither common nor natural in the given context, and in no way can it be considered an equivalent of the common and fully natural "peanuts."

However, as the Polish half of the tandem, I had to defend the importance of the potential puns in the Polish original. It had to be saved in some way, even if by giving up the literal meaning and changing the contexts even more than I was ready to do before when I tried to replace "peanuts" with other types of nuts or even other food products. If inspecting menus did not give a solution, perhaps it was necessary to widen the search range to include some metonymic contexts of dishes or food in general? What would such a context be? Cutlery? Napkins? No, I will not find anything "earthy" in this domain. Dishes? After a long effort I suddenly remember the word *earthenware,* which generally means "pottery," but is also used in a more narrow meaning as a name for "stoneware" ("*wyroby kamionkowe*"). Why not stoneware bowls? The astronomer could have put his snacks there. The new version of the ending looked like this:

> …mostly chat on local topics,
> while nibbling on nuts from earthenware.

Happy with myself, I sent Clare this new version. Yet, to my final desperation, I was once again criticized: this solution also did not sound right. The line became too long, describing the dish in detail made the impression of being unnaturally pedantic. But Clare, understanding the direction my questing, in the meantime took things into her own hands. Her own research led her in a direction even further away from "peanuts." There was no trace of the nuts left, though luckily the astronomer's guest was not forced to starve: they had a dairy substitute, a component of the idiomatic phrase introduced earlier: *wine-and-cheese reception.* The *earth* part was in turn salvaged as a component of the term rather referring to interior design: *cozy earthstones.* At the same time — since there was also a threat that a reader might not notice the "earthy" allusion — Clare fortunately

came with up the idea of strengthening the effect by replacing "local topics" with "earthbound topics." This way we came up with the final version:

> …mostly chat on earthbound topics,
> Surrounded by cozy earthstones.

This one example of a language joke is probably sufficient enough to show the basic difficulty with "Americanizing Wisława." If even on one of the many levels of her poem (from the smallest molecules of language style to the entire lyric or anecdotal situation) the perfect balance is upset, either between the triviality and novelty, or the commonness and poetry of what is said and how it is said, it may result in spoiling the whole poem. The poem "Surplus" would have been spoiled precisely in this way if when translating we had not noticed or had not appreciated the ambiguity of "peanuts." But it would have been also spoiled if we had tried to salvage this ambiguity by using the word *earthnuts,* which is artificial, can be found only in dictionaries, and is not made legitimate by common speech.

Naturally, we can realize how much Szymborska's art is in fact the art of preserving this type of balance even more clearly when we analyze any of her poems — together with its translation — in its entirety. The famous poem "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography," and the difficulties we experienced with its translation were an especially illuminating example for me:

> Nie ma rozpusty gorszej niż myślenie.
> Pleni się ta swawola jak wiatropylny chwast
> na grządce wytyczonej pod stokrotki.
>
> Dla takich, którzy myślą, święte nie jest nic.
> Zuchwałe nazywanie rzeczy po imieniu,
> rozwiązłe analizy, wszeteczne syntezy,
> pogoń za nagim faktem dzika i hulaszcza,
> lubieżne obmacywanie drażliwych tematów,
> tarło poglądów — w to im właśnie graj.
>
> W dzień jasny albo pod osłoną nocy
> łączą się w pary, trójkąty i koła.
> Dowolna jest tu płeć i wiek partnerów.
> Oczy im błyszczą, policzki pałają.
> Przyjaciel wykoleja przyjaciela.
> Wyrodne córki deprawują ojca.
> Brat młodszą siostrę stręczy od nierządu.
>
> Inne im w smak owoce
> z zakazanego drzewa wiadomości
> niż różowe pośladki z pism ilustrowanych,
> cała ta prostoduszna w gruncie pornografia.

Książki, które ich bawią, nie mają obrazków.
Jedyna rozmaitość to specjalne zdania
paznokciem zakreślone albo kredką.

Zgroza, w jakich pozycjach,
z jak wyuzdana prostotą
umysłowi udaje się zapłodnić umysł!
Nie zna takich pozycji nawet Kamasutra.

W czasie tych schadzek parzy się ledwie herbata.
Ludzie siedzą na krzesłach, poruszają ustami.
Nogę na nogę każdy sam sobie zakłada.
Jedna stopa w ten sposób dotyka podłogi,
druga swobodnie kiwa się w powietrzu.
Czasem tylko ktoś wstanie,
zbliży się do okna
i przez szparę w firankach
podgląda ulicę.

Even before I sat down to work on the first version of the translation, I already felt that translating this poem will especially require breaking numerous barriers between the two languages, social contexts, cultures, and types of civilization. It is sufficient to consider the title and the starting point of the poem. If we consider that what we hear in the poem — at least on the first level of understanding — is a condemnation of pornography (for the time being I am ignoring the fact that for the speaker much more damnable is the worst of debaucheries — thinking), then we are faced with the first problem: the quite essential difference between the position occupied by pornography in the system of notions characterizing collective mentality in America, on the one hand, and in Poland, on the other. I do not wish to simplify the matter by saying that unlike Catholic Poland, under the rule of communists (in the end it is the Poland Szymborska is writing about in this poem, before 1986), the American permissive society completely accepts and allows for pornography. Things look that simple neither in Poland nor in the US where recently, a couple of years after our translation of Szymborska's poem, several nationwide disputes flared up at once on pornography and obscenity in art (I am thinking especially about the simultaneously ongoing conversations surrounding the exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography, and the album recorded by the band 2 Live Crew). During this time, the figure of a self-styled defender of morality, Senator Jesse Helms, gained popularity; though, in the past, there were always plenty of conservative adversaries of debauchery and indecency. And so in America the opposition to pornography exists as a social phenomenon. This is also found in the apparently prudish Poland, where a faction calling for the legalization of pornography similarly exists as a social phenomenon. The difference lies in the fact that in the US pornography has *already,* and for a long

time, been a fact of everyday life, while in Poland in the year 1986, it was still generally regarded as a forbidden fruit.

All of this influences the strategy adopted by Szymborska's translator. In a paradoxical way, the fundamental difference for him is the fact that in case of the poem's titular subject, there is indeed not too few, but precisely too many expressions to choose from; the translator does not have to deal, as usually, with limitations, but admittedly, with a surplus. What I mean by this, is that the Polish language, for historically moral reasons, is not particularly specialized in talking about pornography, debauchery or sexual matters in general; American English, abundantly drawing from the reservoirs of traditional Latinisms, the vocabulary of Elizabethan and later England, and the richness of contemporary dictionaries in this particular sphere, indeed suggests at any given moment at least several different possibilities of varying provenance and diverse stylistic coloring. The mere "pornography" ("*pornografia*" in Polish), a neutral and descriptive term, has a moralizing and condemning equivalent *smut,* in addition to a couple of other more colloquial versions such as *filth* or *dirt* (and I do not even mention the synonymous words that describe the more general category of "indecency" or "lewdness," rather than the product of a pornographer's work, such as *obscenity, ribaldry, grossness* etc.)

The Polish word "*rozpusta*," which sounds a bit old-fashioned, can be translated in many possible ways, from the traditional and pejorative *debauchery,* to the modern and indulgent *promiscuity.* The word "*stręczyć*" can similarly oscillate between the bookish *to pander* and the street-talk and slang-like *to pimp*, "*lubieżne*" — between the literary *lustful, lewd* or *lecherous,* and the common and unambiguous *filthy,* and so on. Even when Szymborska mentions "*pisma ilustrowane"* ["illustrated magazines"], the translator automatically thinks about the more specialized term *glossy magazine,* in which *glossy* is a technical description of a "glossy" photo, but through semantic transfer in colloquial speech the whole expression refers to a certain category of illustrated magazines.

This richness — resulting from the differences of the social and moral context — bestowed on the translator causes a specific threat. Having so many possibilities, one wishes to adopt a consistent method of choosing among them, e.g. exclusively old-fashioned and conservative vocabulary, condemning pornography as from a priest's pulpit, or, a conversely exclusively modern and colloquial vocabulary; if it is pejorative, then it is rather in a style characterizing today's TV viewer that protests against the flood of *sex and violence.* Yet such a consistence, in other cases perhaps worthy of praise, would be a mistake in the case of Szymborska's translations. As it is always in her case, a balance of contrast should also dominate in this instance. Let us note that the language of the original uses, with equal ease, archaic adjectives like "salacious" (*"wszeteczne"*),

or as with the more modern sounding “touchy subjects” (“*drażliwe tematy*”), the literary “corrupt” (“*deprawują*”), as well as the common “music to their ears” (“*w to im właśnie graj*”). In its directly given outline (in the thesis “There’s nothing more debauched than thinking”) the poem is an utterance deliberately located outside the categories of historical or social identification, which could have been delivered by a defender of order, decency, and civil obedience at any time and to any social stratum. This provides appropriate clues for a translator, who should not excessively disambiguate or precisely describe — at least on the plane of language — anything under this historical or social context.

The second difficulty, however, appears at the moment when we realize that the given plane is not, as we must understand, the poem’s only plane. Much more important than the thesis it presents is a question: who is speaking and what is the relationship of the author’s authority, present in the text, to the speaker and his/her views. Well, it is a critical and ironic relationship — as every reader of Szymborska, used to the model of persona poem often present in her work, must know. The speaker is allowed to speak only because s/he is to be shamed; furthermore, since s/he does it to himself or herself, the embarrassment is even more severe. It is partly possible because every reader is, *eo ipso*, a thinking person. Therefore, s/he will consider the identification of thinking with pornography as an attack on himself/herself and his/her system of values. Also this is because (as if to compensate for the vocabulary that is differentiated in its historical and social aspects) some of the poem’s realities specify the represented world with acute precision. The monologue is, indeed, a timeless apology of “law and order,” which could be delivered by anyone at anytime and anywhere, but this sort of apology would be especially compromising when the speaker replaces “law and order” with a police system of a totalitarian state, suppressing every instance of free thought. And it is this kind of replacement and substantiation that takes place in Szymborska’s poem, if not earlier, then most certainly at the end where the paradoxically sounding “take a peep out at the street” (“*podglądanie ulicy*”). It makes sense only when we assume that it is a participant in an illegal discussion or lecture at a private home where the inhabitants routinely check if there are not any sad-looking men sitting in a car in front of the house.

It is precisely this ending that forms the second essential difficulty for someone who is translating Szymborska’s poem with an American reader in mind. How to explain to such a reader the meaning of the situation presented at the end? In contrast to a Polish reader in the 1980s, who simply had to know such a situation from his or her own experience, or even from everyday conversations, a typical American reader could have lived his or her whole life without even for once having to fear that s/he might get arrested just for *thinking.* For someone entirely unfamiliar with this kind of fear, the ending of Szymborska’s poem — and,

consequently, the entire poem — is impossible to understand. So how does one save the meaning of the ending? Unfortunately, in this case, the translator does not have many options. You cannot explain everything stridently, pushing those meanings that the poet knowingly left subtle, leaving them to the reader's guess or logic. We can only have faith in his or her sharpness or logical thinking. And — at most — emphasize a bit stronger in the translation some characteristics of the style of the monologue, such as the self-confidence, or the authoritativeness of the condemnations, which can help the reader to feel more strongly the firmness of the concrete feeling inside the protagonist's head.

The third premise of the translator's strategy, finally, will serve the same purpose: to make visible the self-embarrassment of the speaker. This premise is also the third basic difficulty that has to be overcome during the process of translation. It has to do with the importance of linguistic games, namely, all of those sexual ambiguities that the monologue abounds in and that embarrass the translator with a particular mischievousness. In the poem they function almost as Freudian slips, signaling — indirectly, but very clearly — that the speaker, regardless of his or her defined, ostentatious Puritanism, is in fact, as if often happens with suppressors of immorality and debauchery, overcome by repressed impulses and obsessions. Since the exposing function of these word games is so essential in achieving the whole picture of the poem's protagonist, in no way can the translator consider them as disobliging jokes, frivolous trinkets that can be detached from the poem without any harm.

At the first glance the translator's attempts at finding the equivalents for all of Szymborska's word and idiomatic games may seem like a pipe dream! Indeed, as it happens happily "nagie fakty" are *bare facts* in English, and the surprising "podgląda ulicę" has a similarly ambiguous effect in the form of *take[s] a peep out at the street,* or that "lubieżne obmacywanie drażliwych tematów" sounds even better — enhanced by the relation of the adjective *touchy* with *to touch* — as *the filthy fingering of touchy subjects.* But what does one do with the wonderful line: "W czasie tych schadzek parzy się ledwie herbata?" Can the two meanings of the Polish "parzenie się" — one connected with tea, and the second with sex — fit together into any English equivalent? It turned out, to our astonishment, that even this difficult sentence can be translated, providing that the Polish-American tandem works on it separately and thinks about it with sufficient intensity. While working on the first draft of the translation, my search for an analogically ambiguous phrase, one which in English would have something in common with both making tea and making love, followed the previous search for a food product that would have a semantic relation with "earth," and at the same time could be served to guests invited for a glass of wine. Gladly, in contemporary colloquial American English the adjective *steamy* has gained an additional metaphoric sense

that comes down to the attribute of "sensuality" or "lustfulness," and for instance, a *steamy movie* is a film in which, as it was once characterized in the Polish program "60 minut na godzinę," "has its moments," and quite many of them. The line that we are both very proud of, therefore, after Clare's final polishing, is as follows: *During these trysts of theirs the only thing that's steamy is the tea.*

There is one more argument against the popular thesis that "the better the poetry, the more untranslatable." In essence, it indeed seems to be this way, but not entirely. Yes, a truly excellent poetry is generally possible only in the poet's own language; at the same time, however, a great poem can be compared to something like a jungle, luring the translator into its depths with a force that is difficult to resist. It is this luring force that results in the translator arduously fighting his way, just like through fallen trunks, through the differences in culture, tradition, social experiences and languages. Only sometimes does the translator state, at the end of the road, that he got lost completely, and at other times, that ultimately the expedition made sense. Despite everything, I believe that our two-person expedition into the depths of Szymborska's poem made sense. It was hopefully helpful for the American reader in his future endeavors through the poet's excellent work. It was an expedition whose journal and map became the translation below:

"An Opinion on the Question of Pornography"

There's nothing more debauched than thinking.
This sort of wantonness runs wild like a wind-born weed
on a plot laid out for daisies.

Nothing's sacred for those who think.
Calling things brazenly by name,
risqué analyses, salacious syntheses,
frenzied, rakish chases after the bare facts,
the filthy fingering of touchy subjects,
discussion in heat — it's music to their ears.

In broad daylight or under cover of night
they form circles, triangles, or pairs.
The partners' age or sex are unimportant.
Their eyes glitter, their cheeks are flushed.
Friend leads friend astray.
Degenerate daughters corrupt their fathers.
A brother pimps for his little sister.

They prefer the fruits
from the forbidden tree of knowledge
to the pink buttocks found in glossy magazines —
all that ultimately simple-hearted smut.
The books they relish have no pictures.

What variety they have lies in certain phrases
marked with a thumbnail or a crayon.

It's shocking, the positions,
the unchecked simplicity with which
one mind contrives to fertilize another!
Such positions the Kama Sutra itself doesn't know.

During these trysts of theirs, the only thing that's steamy is the tea.
People sit on their chairs and move their lips.

Everyone crosses only his own legs
so chat one foot is resting on the floor
while the other dangles freely in midair.
Only now and then does somebody get up,
go to the window,
and through a crack in the curtains
take a peep out at the street.

(PNC, 208-209)

An Opinion on the Question of Pornography

Tadeusz Nyczek

There's nothing more debauched than thinking.
This sort of wantonness runs wild like a wind-born weed
on a plot laid out for daisies.

Nothing's sacred for those who think.
Calling things brazenly by name,
risqué analyses, salacious syntheses,
frenzied, rakish chases after the bare facts,
the filthy fingering of touchy subjects,
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go to the window,
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take a peep out at the street.

(PNC, 208)

When I decided to include “An Opinion on the Question of Pornography” in this book, as it is an important poem that says a lot about certain important matters, I thought that writing about it will be an easy and enjoyable task. It may turn out to be enjoyable, but will it be easy?

I suddenly realized that since the time it was written, which probably must have been somewhere in the beginning of the 1980s, not only has the political era changed (the poem deals mostly with political matters), but so has the readers’ mentality. What is more, there are now many others — a whole generation coming to age in the 1990s — who do not even remember the characteristics of the language in which “An Opinion…” was written! For instance, they are not familiar with the concepts of allusion, code, all of which distinguishes “aesopic language,” if we want to use the term employed in literary theory. I am not even thinking here about the readers from other countries who were spared the experience of living under the caring and iron wings of censorship.

Aesopic language can also be described as allusive language. When you are unable to say something because censorship guards the righteousness of words, sooner or later a dodging, bypassing language is born. Implication replaces precise information, and a wink directs attention to a different content than this that lies on the surface. It can be tiresome for both the authors and readers since it constantly forces one to doublethink: one layer of the message — the deceptive one — is intended for the “enemy,” and the other, subcutaneous — for “us.” We had lived with it for many years, and had become so accustomed to the presence of allusions in literature, theatre, film, and sometimes appearing even in more intelligent newspapers, that we had been deciphering everything on cue, whether necessary or not. It had been a habit, nothing more.

With time some have began to struggle with aesopic language, arguing that it destroys the healthy tissue of connection and limits interpersonal contacts only to a group of the initiated few. There was some truth to it. Others who really care about literature as verbal art were even ready to defend allusiveness — as something that favors linguistic inventiveness. It is hard to say who was right. Most certainly, in the nation’s public sphere, aesopic language — as the effect of censoring information, from labels on jars up to newspaper articles — was something generally harmful since it did not aid the natural exchange of thoughts. Except that in socialism nothing was natural in case of the functioning of the state, so it is hardly surprising that language also had its part in this shared fiction.

In short, at that time a poem such as “An Opinion on the Question of Pornography” was something completely obvious and understandable on every level of allusiveness. When we add its highly sophisticated form — mocking, funny, and as thumbing its nose at various censors — it becomes clear why we had enjoyed it as a precious and effective toy. It was also a poem that expressed certain important truths about our intellectual life back then and the perturbations connected with it.

And now is it necessary to translate “An Opinion…” from Szymborska’s language into the contemporary language? This would be helpful for at least some, for doesn’t the rank of those who would benefit from such a translation grow in number every year? So it seems. Those who are able to count off hand all the codes hidden in “An Opinion…,” please forgive me. What follows is not intended for them.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to start from another angle. As readers of these stories about poems have already noted, as a political poet, Szymborska became silent in the mid-1950s. The collection *Salt* did not include any direct references to the so-called reality: no socialism, no anti-socialism, and no thing that was ideological. And this had remained the case for circa next twenty-something years. However, the disappearance of ideology did not translate itself into the disappearance of a *sense of reality.* I am not thinking only about such poems as “Vietnam” from *No End of Fun,* a short and terrifying conversation with a mother who has became devoid of all human reflexes, except for the instinct of fighting for a child. I am thinking rather about all of these poems in which the world as it is, at your fingertips, comes to the fore. This is because Szymborska, although abandoning temporariness, never in fact betrayed our common fate. She only began to speak in a different language.

With the passing of time, transient reality indeed stood up for its rights. It simply became more and more upsetting. The decade spanning from 1957 to 1967 came to an end and was a time that was crude, poor, and rather peaceful. For Szymborska, as well as for a part of the intellectual milieu, an important event in terms of politics was the “Letter of 34,” which was signed by top writers and scholars in 1946 and addressed to the leaders of the People’s Republic of Poland; the topic of the letter was the widespread censorship occurring in Poland. It was the first act of rebellion after the war by Polish intellectuals, to which the authorities reacted immediately and brutally by organizing collective protests of other writers, condemning publicly in the media those who signed the letter, and finally making it harder for them to continue their professional activity (e.g. printing ban).

And yet, who once attempts to assert his or her rights, never forgets the taste of courage. Two years later Leszek Kołakowski, today the most important Polish philosopher, had a lecture at the university in which he stated that if those in

power treat any critique of socialism as an attempt to reinstitute capitalism, then they think in a rather absurd way. As a reward, he was dismissed from the party. Other writers belonging to the party, e.g. Tadeusz Konwicki, were also thrown out as a result of their public support for Kołakowski's thesis. Others decided to dismiss themselves. Among them was Wisława Szymborska.

Our contemporary history had many more twists and turns later, beginning with March 1968, and ending with the Martial Law in Poland. "Ending," since even if the 1980s certainly were not a calm period, then the year 1989, when socialism became a relic of the past, was a peaceful act of transition between eras. Szymborska, however, having previously refused to deal with the events unfolding in the *Polish People's Republic*, had long endured in her decision. Four of her poetry collections — from "Salt" to *A Large Number* — did not include anything that would directly address our Polish socio-political condition, including "Psalm," which I wrote about previously. It did not give into the allusiveness either. Even if it did refer to the dreams of certain half-prisoners of a certain invisible, yet palpable prison, then only metaphorically. And only if we take into account that such a reading was not obligatory for anybody; without it the poem did not lose anything.

It was not until I read *The People on the Bridge* that I had began to challenge this view. The collection appeared in 1986, and the poems included were written during the troublesome period between 1976 and 1985. Those were the years of the decisive collapse of the socialist economic model and propaganda, and at the same time they were the years of growing social resistance, up to the martial law, and the practical collapse of the system.

From the start, Szymborska sympathized with the dissident movement, but it was a twofold involvement: different in personal matters, and slightly different in the literary ones. There were no contradictions, only two different languages of participation. The language of literature was simply much less literal and direct. Once in her youth, both she and her poetry had taken the risk. Now she could only take the risk herself. For a long time, poetry was its own autonomous domain. It was evident that the poetry did much better when she used her own words and not those that could be used on leaflets or barricades.

And yet, it was not entirely possible to evade the more and more crazy times. Most of the poems from *The People on the Bridge* demonstrate at least a partial submission to reality's will; they wanted to give a name, finally, to some of its most annoying misfortunes. One of the best-known poems of that time, "Children of Our Age," was a symbolic sign acknowledging the terrors of politics:

> We are children of our age,
> it's a political age.
>
> All day long, all through the night,
> all affairs — yours, ours, theirs —

> are political affairs.
> …
> Whatever you say reverberates,
> whatever you don't say speaks for itself.
> So either way you're talking politics.

Please note the penultimate verse of the fragment. Political dependence reached the point when even what is *not done* in the name of politics is also a political choice. "Apolitical poems are also political," writes Szymborska several lines later.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1957, Albert Camus spoke about certain entanglements of the contemporary artist (writer); we are all sailing on the "galley of our age," and there is no escape from this collective rowing if we do not want to sink; you can, he said, praise constellations of stars, looking at them from the officer's cabin while on the lower deck galley slaves get weary and die, but this luxury will be attained with a lie. Camus was thinking about the whole world, especially that only twelve years had passed since the Second World War and many wounds were still left open; it is, however, easy to notice that his diagnosis perfectly fits the most distinct, in its black-and-white cruelty, form of modern statehood, totalitarianism.

Although "Children of Our Age," similarly to Camus's speech, seems to be addressed to the entire crazed population of this century, a closer reading helps us to realize that the poem speaks primarily about the specific condition of people living under totalitarianism. Somehow it happens that in democracy it is possible to write a thousand poems about planting peas, and only graphomania can make a text fail. In a totalitarian state, it was, however, possible to be called a moral traitor exactly for a poem about planting peas. This is the difference.

Let us return to "An Opinion on the State of Pornography." Actually, it is not significant whether it refers to the 1970s when the Polish resistance movement grew and solidified, to the martial law, or finally to the years later when the decaying system (but still refusing to accept this fact) was forcing the country into chaos and stasis. The poem describes a certain conspiracy situation that could happen everywhere and to anyone; as usual, Szymborska had universalized the problem. Most of the explanations that I am presenting here, partly in the name of the poem, relate to the fact that as a way of "political" being, conspiracy — at least in the form it was presented in "An Opinion…" — luckily belongs to the past. The future — knock on wood! — will prove whether it remains in the irrevocable past.

Intellectuals are those people that conspire. Let us be precise, they are those who think ("There's nothing more debauched than thinking," states the first verse). As we know, thinking is not something restricted only to intellectuals. How do they conspire? Indeed, with their thoughts! The simple fact that they think is the

starting point of the poem, which in its overall construction resembles another poem mentioned earlier — “Psalm.”

This opinion on the state of pornography could as well be the opinion of a censor? A special forces agent? A guardian of socialist morality? In any case, it was someone who, in those times, specialized in prosecuting the so-called free and independent thought. If we assume that this particular narrator was written into the poem, it is undoubtedly an ironic narrator that is subjected to irony, mockery, and ridicule. This is all because of the seemingly innocent decision to identify the conspiracy of “thought” with the secrecy of pornography.

Naturally, these are not thoughts for thoughts’ sake, or just any thoughts. The clues that appear here and there in the text clearly define what kind they are: they are dissident thoughts, those that “run wild like a wind-born weed.” Their opposite, right-minded thoughts, politely grow “on a plot laid out for daisies.”

What was considered dissident thought in socialism? On instance was “calling things brazenly by name.” The favorite language of that ideological formation was the so-called newspeak, a style of writing and speaking that perfectly blurred any clear sense and simple meaning. By speaking in this way was as if to say nothing — that was the model for newspeak. And here conspirators propose to call things by their names! That is the offence number one.

The offence number two belongs to the same family as “chases after the bare facts.” Let us note the adjective “bare” since it serves as an additional language pun, which we will address later. For the time being, we will focus on the noun, “facts,” and the “chase after” them. A fact, in addition, a bare one, as to say beyond dispute, a natural and evident fact, was also something that the communist propaganda did not like. To use facts meant to search, for instance, for an inconvenient fact, unjust, or, God forbid, anti-socialist. For example, the fact that stores are embarrassingly empty, the economy is embarrassingly helpless, nature and people are embarrassingly poisoned, those in power are embarrassingly deceitful, and, in result, that the political system is embarrassingly incapable of granting people a chance for a decent life.

This was often called “touchy subjects” — and the next line of the poem deals with them. What about “discussion in heat” [orig. “*tarło poglądów*” — literally “the breeding of opinions”]? What does it mean? Why the plural [“*poglądów*” — opinions]? Under socialism, there was only one righteous and just existing political system: you were supposed to have only one opinion! The right one! One was to believe that everything is great and will be even better in a moment. Well, maybe not so quickly. But certainly at some point it would be greater at the right time.

The beginning of the fourth stanza openly talks about fruits “from *the forbidden* tree of knowledge” [emphasis — T.N.]. Everything is clear. Also, “certain phrases / marked with a thumbnail” does not leave any doubt that we are faced with deeply suspicious dealings, most certainly politically criminal.

One more, extremely serious, injustice of the conspiracy of unjust thoughts is worth mentioning: their dissemination, infecting others with certain views; simply put, *popularizing* spiteful opinions. The worst thing in this whole conspiratorial structure of thinking is that it spreads like gangrene. That it is a collective act; that if a conspiracy is to make sense, more than one person has to participate in it. Precisely this irrevocable need for collaboration served Wisława Szymborska to dress the whole anecdote in a perverse and amusing costume of eroticism and pornography. "The partners' age or sex are unimportant. … / Friend leads friend astray. / Degenerate daughters corrupt their fathers. / A brother pimps for his little sister." And the result? "The unchecked simplicity with which / one mind contrives to fertilize another."

The second common feature of both a conspiracy of thoughts and pornography is secrecy.

In both cases, forbidden fruits are consumed off the beaten track, best in a secluded place. Prostitution is often practiced in secrecy — as well as "thought." Secrecy is present while one takes a peep out at the street through a crack in the curtains. Secrecy is a popular gesture among conspirators: it is good to check, from time to time, whether a strange looking fellow is not standing outside the window, pretending he is reading a newspaper, or if a car is not parked nearby, from which strangely no one has got out, although it looks like there are at least three men inside.

As for the secrecy of pornography, it may seem a bit incomprehensible in today's world since you can buy every pornographic magazine at any newsstand, rent any porn film at video rental place, or buy any imaginable accessory — which by no means serves procreation — at the more and more numerous sex-shops. Yet, in terms of eroticism, socialism was a highly puritan system. One of the main occupations of customs officials was, for example, inspecting citizens returning from the West, in case they were planning to smuggle some porn mag. Any glossy magazine containing, in the words of censorship, "content generally considered indecent" was called "*świerszczyk*" [literally "grasshopper"].

These strange, and in a way moving, similarities resulted in a flood of language puns so humorous that citing or analyzing them here would be pointless since it would require quoting the poem almost in its entirety. Perhaps this would not be pointless since even transcribing Szymborska's poem is a pleasure, but let us spare publishers the costs of paper, and readers the cost of the book. These "risqué analyses"! This "filthy fingering of touchy subjects"! This "steamy tea"! This "unchecked simplicity" — what an extraordinary oxymoron — "with which / one mind contrives to fertilize another"… all are true masterpieces of poetic imagination.

The funniest thing is that the similarities between shameless thoughts and lascivious pornography are similarly accurate in the sphere of human emotions! Conspiracies are accompanied by a shiver of excitement — and so is erotic voyeurism; how the heart grows stronger when one gets his or her hands on some forbidden piece of paper — and a forbidden "porn mag." And then the loving, tender touch of the paper on which Orwell's essay was printed — or a photo of two naked people doing an erotic pirouette……

Are these similarities sufficient enough for us — changing the tone a bit — to jauntily, poetically, and rollickingly compare the risky activities of the political opposition with the debauchery as straightforward as "the pink buttocks found in glossy magazines"? Does the different import allow for such comparisons? Are we not out of line here to some extent?

Naturally, this involves individual sensitivity. Yet, only someone tragically humorless might have felt hurt. The poetic mastery of this extremely funny grotesque (with a subtext) is overpowering and completely devoid of satirical malice. It would seem, however, that Szymborska, indeed, does risk something by writing a poem on this subject in such a form. Never mind that at the same time she was able to make fun of censorship, and dumb propaganda in general, nobody will regret it here. What about the not-so-funny, in the end, need to meet in secret in order to borrow a book, read a poem together with someone else, or listen to a lecture on history?

It seems as though there is nothing so serious as not to contain at least a little bit of ridiculousness. Well, to be frank, I can think of a few things, but the previously mentioned poem most certainly is not one of them. What if we were to reverse the conclusions presented in the last sentence of the previous paragraph? It could, then, sound as follows: how ridiculous is a situation in which people in order to borrow a book, read a poem together, or listen to a lecture on history, were forced to meet in secret? They would have to peek through the window to make sure that no one is following them while they are doing all of these awful things? Without doubt, the idiocy of the disparity of actions and possible consequences, among which the least threatening was personal search and confiscation of books by the political police, would deserve a good laugh, were it not for these consequences.

Naturally, Szymborska is satirizing a police state, or rather its opposite, which is a free and independent citizens' initiative. She is not making fun of these secret meetings, but rather she is humorously grasping the *situational comedy* while using *verbal comedy.* Indeed, this excessive enthusiasm that follows simple actions of collective thinking could at least bring to mind erotic associations…… And, taking advantage of the opportunity, puncturing the balloon of principled dignity, which frequently accompanies conspiracy work, certainly did no harm to neither the conspirators, nor the poet, who, as it was commonly known, willingly participated in these conspiracies.

Afterword

Szymborska’s World. Closing Remarques

Anna Nasiłowska

The world of Szymborska’s poetry is a world of a modern rationalist: one amazed by the rules of existence that are not entirely rational, accustomed to classical logic, but perfectly aware that it is not possible to program a better order without making tragic mistakes, since it seems that the mind does not cover everything. The subject matter of Szymborska’s poetry is indeed very broad and often not poetic, but scientific. She wrote about the theory of evolution, the circulation of matter, the rotation of the planet Earth, the intelligence of animals and about wandering clouds. She was also interested in natural history and the history of humanity seen in a nutshell, as a synthesis. Her conclusions were not optimistic, so Szymborska, while never abandoning poetry, would sometimes dabble in futurology. She wrote about death from the point of view of a cat, or about a stone that could not be persuaded to have a conversation. She was also interested in the topics that could have been easily overlooked, as well as in the dates that had been recorded neither in history, nor in personal memory, in the role of coincidence in peoples’ lives, and in what happens behind the scenes and after the end of great conflicts.

She also wrote short treaties on hate and tortures. She was never fooled by arguments forbidding poetry to take on journalistic topics. Throughout her entire life, beginning with the short period in the 1950s when she was a poet “involved” in the new political system, she would return from time to time to the issues such as peace, the injustice of war, violence, and the heroism of ordinary people. The retreat from Stalinism, the change in political sympathies toward democracy, was experienced by many Polish poets during the critical period between 1955 and 1956, a time when even recent doctrinaires distanced themselves from the doctrine. They would, however, often also turn away from social poetry, treating it as contaminated, lesser poetry, unlike the dominions of imagination and metaphor. Who could become the guardian of freedom if poets rejected this role? Szymborska was able to free social commentary from banality.

It is hard to write about Szymborska’s poetry. The critic cannot show off his/her own theories. There is a noble simplicity in her poetry, a movement of thoughts instead of metaphorical acrobatics. Her poems are open to so many fields that it is difficult to point to a main trajectory. Moreover, we are all her contemporaries: this poetry draws from the intellectual background of its time.

The urgent need for studies of Szymborska's poetry became even more necessary after she was awarded in 1996 with the Nobel Prize in Literature. This role was often taken by her friends and colleagues from Kraków: Stanisław Balbus, the author of *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata* (1996); Tadeusz Nyczek, the author of the anthology *Tyle naraz świata* (1997, revised in 2005); and Wojciech Ligęza, who even served as an inspiration for one of her poems, and is the author of *Wisławy Szymborskiej świat w stanie korekty* (2001).

I am also thinking about Małgorzata Baranowska, a poet and researcher, who for many years had been associated with the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Science. She shared Szymborska's passion for collecting old postcards, and both authors had their significant collections from the 19th century and they would often share their experiences. Baranowska wrote the book *Posłaniec uczuć* based on her collections. She worked out her own, highly personal style of writing about poets and poetry, since she believed that it is a subject that should not be limited only to specialists. She also used it in her book: an introduction to Szymborska's poetry, entitled *Tak lekko było nic o tym nie wiedzieć* (1996). Critical publications written by friends often deviate from the model of impersonal academic critique worked out by structuralists and dominant in Poland. It must be noted that not only friends have written about Szymborska. In 1996 Stanisław Balbus and Dorota Wojda published the anthology *Radość czytania Szymborskiej* (several essays from the volume are presented in this book). There was also the issue of *Teksty Drugie* dedicated to her poetry (4/1991), published as a separate book in 1996. This collection does not present an exhaustive panorama of Polish critical thought devoted to the poet; it rather tries to present the range of problems associated with her work and the translations of her poetry into foreign languages and it still has turned out to be a rather extensive publication. In spite of the many difficulties facing anyone writing about Szymborska, the range of the various currents of criticism on her poetry proves to be very broad. All of them manage to deal with the "I don't know" program that the poet spoke about in her Noble Prize lecture.

An even harder task has awaited her biographers. As often poets do, Szymborska did not believe in the continuity of a story. One of her poem exposes the genre of curriculum vitae: writing a CV is reduced to selecting facts from one point of view, and finally, leads to falseness, to pretending to be someone else. She was reluctant to share information about her own life, doubting that you can be the same person throughout your entire life, or that the events from your life can be a helpful key for interpreting poetry. The book about the poet's private life is entitled *Pamiątkowe rupiecie, przyjaciele i sny,* written by Anna Bikont and Joanna Szczęsna, journalists from "Gazeta Wyborcza." It is in fact a series of footnotes to life, a collection of anecdotes and pieces of information. The

publication had taken the form of a sketchbook, in addition to text also consisting of photographs and collages created by the poet.

It would seem that as a result of the numerous post-Nobel publications, critics have written so much about her poetry that it is difficult to expect any surprises. Meanwhile, in the recent years two surprising facts have seen the light of day that force us to perfect her portrait: the first was the publication of her ludic poetry, Szymborska's feast poems less important from the perspective of the international audience, and the second – in my opinion much more significant – the public presentation of her visual art. The exhibition *Kolaże (Collages*) was presented in the Małopolskie Centrum Kultury MOCAK, beginning February 2, 2014. Maria Anna Potocka, the director of the institution, wrote: "Collages are full-fledged works of art. Some people may criticize them for modesty and excessive lightness not worthy of true art. Nowadays this kind of approach is meaningless. Today no one knows exactly how a work of art should look like."

Wisława Szymborska's collages were created as postcards with various information or holiday wishes, which she has sent to her friends. They had a personal character, and never existed in the wider public sphere, although after 1996 many of their recipients decided to share them publically. They had been regarded partially as curiosities, evidence of friendly bonds, or as something playful. In this function, Szymborska's collages were shown in Ryszard Matuszewski's sketchbook *Wisławy Szymborskiej dary przyjaźni i dowcipu* (2008). Only recently, after Szymborska passed away in 2011, have these collages been perceived as a separate branch of her work. Even if originally this work was more of a sociable game, currently it is regarded with a much greater esteem.

Her collages were created using old newspapers from the turn of the 19th and 20th century, as well as the contemporary ones. In Szymborska's visual world, we meet the gentlemen in bowlers, athletes and fin-de-siècle ladies in corsets (or without them), animals, illustrations that are the examples of typical kitsch: little angels, sprites, and kittens. The illustrations are accompanied by texts cut out from newspapers, and thus pre-existing, although susceptible to significant shifts. Her bouquets of roses can have shapely female legs and may be able to walk; a male figure can have a sheep's head, or a face replaced by a mask, which can be taken off, revealing the emptiness underneath the hat. Mona Lisa does not have the mustaches drawn by Duchamp, nevertheless she grins showing her teeth, or her face can float freely in the landscape, and a cat can have teeth (as well as a mouth covered in lipstick). An opulent body may be joined by a text suggesting home delivery. It is the work of a surrealist, close not to the work of Salvador Dali, but for instance to René Magritte. The figures in bowlers are also characteristic of Magritte, as well as the humor and striking irony connected with a conceptual juxtaposition of unrelated elements. Naturally, there are no rich

colors, no sky. Szymborska's entire art repertoire is limited to scissors, glue and skillful juxtapositions.

This is important because Szymborska's poetic work has never been linked with surrealism, which indeed was never particularly significant in Polish poetry. Surrealism was both an artistic and poetic movement, possessing a conceptual character. This mechanism of poetic thinking was accurately described by Aredt van Nieukerken's formula of "ironic conceptism," used by him not only in reference to Szymborska's poetry, but to the main current of Polish poetry after 1956. Szymborska's visual art brings to light the features present in her poetry: unpredictability, a feeling that a distant meaning and irony meet in a great melting-pot. This is only multiplied in her collages. As far as her poetic rationalism can be characterized as skepticism, her visual surrealism remains liberating and ludic.

Bibliographical Note

The following abbreviations are used throughout his book:

PNC: Wisława Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected 1957-1997,* trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Claire Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt, 1998).

Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Polish, including literary and critical works as well as their titles, have been rendered by the translators of this book. Titles of untranslated works are provided both in Polish and English on their first occurrence in a given essay, whereas poems and works that appear only with the English title are available in the English translation.

List of Contributors

Notes

Baranowska, Małgorzata (1945 - 2012): she is an associate at the Institute of Literary Research. In addition to being a poet and critic, she is also the author of poetry collections, works about Warsaw, a book on postcards, and an essay on contemporary Polish poetry. She was Wisława Szymborska's friend.

Barańczak, Stanisław (1946): he is a poet associated with the generation of ‚68, literary scholar, and translator. He collaborated with the political opposition since the 1970s. In 1981 he moved to the United States to teach Polish literature at Harvard University. In the late 1990s the development of Parkinson's disease prevented him to continue his creative work and translating. His translations include works by Shakespeare, 17th-century metaphysical poets, W.H. Auden, Cummings, and Joseph Brodsky.

Borkowska, Grażyna (1956): she is a professor at the Institute of Literary Research in Warsaw. She is a literary scholar specializing in 19th-century and contemporary literature, and was a pioneer in feminist literary research in Poland.

Cavanagh, Claire: she is an American scholar and translator of Polish poetry who is a professor at Northwestern University. During her studies at the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature she met Stanisław Barańczak, professor of Polish literature, poet, and translator. They later worked together on the translations of Polish poetry.

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Michałowski, Piotr (1955): he is a professor, poet, and critic who studied at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. He is currently an employee of the University of Szczecin.

Miłosz, Czesław (1911 - 2004): he is a poet, essayist, and winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize in Literature. He belonged to a generation of poets that had their debut in the 1930s. He was born in Lithuania to a noble family that had been speaking Polish for centuries. He studied in Vilnius at its Polish university, and later lived in Warsaw. There, he spent the war, engaging in conspiratorial cultural activities. After the war, he was employed in diplomacy in the agency of Washington. In 1951 he decided to break with the regime and immigrate. At first, he moved to France, and later, in the beginning of the 1960s, he settled in the United States. Here, he became a Professor of Slavic Literature at University of California, Berkeley. Initially his work was only known to a narrow circle of Polish readers, but after Miłosz received the Nobel Prize, his work became generally popular, although the essays that were critical towards communism (including the most known *The Captive Mind*) were at first only printed by the underground press. Following the political transformations in Poland, he returned to his home country in the 1990s, and (similarly to Wisława Szymborska) settled in Kraków.

Nasiłowska, Anna (1958): she is a poet, writer, critic, and professor at the Institute of Literary Research in Warsaw. She is the author of poetry, novels, and works pertaining to scholarship on contemporary Polish literature.

Nieukerken, Arent van (1957): he works at the University of Amsterdam and the University of Warsaw. He is a Dutch slavist, scholar of 19th and 20th-century Polish poetry, and the creator of the notion of "ironic conceptism" — which describes the work of Szymborska, as well as mainstream Polish contemporary poetry.

Nyczek, Tadeusz (1946): he is a critic, associated with the generation of ,68. He also wrote about Polish theatre and the work of the contemporary painters, Zdzisław Beksiński and Jerzy Nowosielski.

Rodowska, Krystyna: she is a poet, translator of French and Spanish language poetry and prose. She is the translator and editor of anthologies of contemporary French and Latin American poetry.

Szymborska, Wisława (1923 - 2012): she is a Polish poet. Her work was awarded the Goethe Prize (1991), Herder Prize (1995), and Nobel Prize in Literature (1996). She belonged to a generation that partly, having been involved in the resistance, perished during World War II and partly began their active life only after the war. Similarly to many Polish intellectuals in the late 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, Szymborska attempted to find her place in the reality of the new regime. Later her poetry was characterized by a critical consciousness, irony, a feeling of responsibility for the fate of the planet (both ecological and historical), and a realistic assessment of the negligible effect that an individual has on the world. Her poetry is dominated by irony. Her body of work also includes a rich collection of humoristic writing, known in the circle of her friends, published in the final years of her life, as well as humoristic essays on books. In the late 1960s, Szymborka also worked in visual art, using the technique of collage to create postcards addressed to her friends. In 2014 the MOCAK Gallery in Kraków presented an exhibition of her visual art, closely related to surrealism.

Tabakowska, Elżbieta (1942): she is a professor of English at Jagiellonian University, translator, linguist, and cognitivist that specializes in the theory of literary translation.

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Zarzycka Anna (1979): she graduated from Polish Studies at the University of Łódź where she also defended a PhD dissertation on Wisława Szymborska's poetry, which was published in 2010 as *Rewolucja Szymborskiej 1945-1957. O wczesnej twórczości poetki na tle epoki*. She lives and works in Łódź.

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