Biography

Wisława Szymborska was born in Bnin (now Kórnik), a small town situated near Poznań in the western part of Poland. When she was eight years old, her family moved to Cracow, the city that the poet made her home for life. There, Szymborska went to a prestigious school for girls, run by nuns of the St. Ursula order. Her education was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II; she had to continue her schooling at clandestine classes, whereby she received her high school diploma. After the war, Szymborska studied sociology and Polish philology at the Jagiellonian University, but neither of those fields held enough interest for the young poet. She left the university in 1948 and embarked on a number of proofreading and editorial jobs.

In the years 1953-1981 Szymborska worked for the weekly Zycie Literackie, where she was responsible for two extremely popular columns: Poczta literacka, featuring responses to aspiring writers and Lektury nadobowiazkowe, a series of playful commentaries on all sorts of reading matter.

In the early 1950’s Szymborska became a member of Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (PZPR), the official party of the Communist regime. She gave up her membership in 1966, disillusioned by the party’s policies—a decision requiring considerable courage in the political climate of the time. Szymborska became part of the Cracow underground literary movement and cooperated with the monthly Pismo. She was one of the founding members of Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich (Polish Writers’ Association), created in 1988 and legalized in the following year.

After she left Zycie Literackie, Szymborska refused to form permanent professional ties with any institution. The poet became known for her reclusive ways; she shunned publicity, rarely appeared in the media, and would speak about herself only with the greatest reluctance. She very seldom left Cracow. When she received the Nobel Prize in Literature, she reacted with joy but also apprehension; she knew that this international honor would interfere with her fundamentally private lifestyle.

Annually, Szymborska has been known to write about four or five poems intended for publication—a slow pace fully rewarded by the quality of her poetry. The author of limericks, she has also created collages, which she produced out of newspaper scraps and mailed to her friends in the form of postcards. These pieces, reminiscent of Surrealist and Dada games, combine elements of the quotidien to give them unexpected (and often ironic) meanings—a method characteristic also of Szymborska’s poetic technique.

Biography

Wisława Szymborska (shihm-BOHR-skah) is one of the most important Polish poets of the post-World War II period. During the second half of the twentieth century, there was a renaissance in Polish poetry, with a number of poets creating work of great breadth and power. Two poets of this era, in fact, were awarded the
Wisawa Szymborska was born in 1923 in the small town of Bnin, near the larger city of Poznan. She lived in Bnin (now part of Kórnick) for her early years and moved to the city of Cracow in 1931; she has lived in Cracow ever since. She was selected for university work and graduated from the prestigious Jagellonian University, where she studied literature and languages, in the midst of World War II. She published her first poem in a Cracow newspaper in 1945. By 1948, she had a collection of twenty-six poems and attempted to have them published as a book. However, Poland was at that time a satellite of Russia, and the communist influence and ideology was very strong. Her proposed book was rejected as presenting a “morbid” rather than heroic treatment of World War II. In addition, it did not celebrate the triumph of the proletariat as communist ideology demanded. She was branded a purveyor of decadent art, and communist leaders began a campaign to undermine her work.

In 1952 Szymborska tried again to publish a book of poems. These poems, in contrast to the aborted collection of 1948, were on themes—such as the need for peace and an anti-Western stance—that the communist establishment found agreeable. However, there was a good deal of criticism of the style of the book; it was described as “agitation-propaganda in a ‘chamber music’ style.” Dlatego yjemy (that’s what we live for) was published in 1952, but Szymborska did not include any of the poems from that book in her collected works. She found a way to accommodate the authorities in this one instance, but it compromised her vision if not her literary technique.

In 1954 Szymborska published another book of poems, Pytania zadawane sobie (questions to put to myself). The poems of this collection directly reject the communist agenda and socialist poetics. The subjects of these poems include love and the consciousness of the self. Her typical wit, a quality for which communist ideology had little use, is always present.

Szymborska found her unique voice in the collection Woanie do Yeti (calling out to Yeti), published in 1957; this collection brought her great popularity in Poland, although she was not well known outside that country. The poems reflect a broad range of subjects, and wit and the use of imaginary worlds are prominent in them. For example, in “From a Himalayan Expedition Not Made,” the speaker contrasts the silence of the Himalayas to the ordinary world which has “ABC’s, bread/ and two times two is four. . . .” She calls to the Yeti to come back to a world where “tears do not freeze,” but he gives no sign of recognition. Another poem on a lost world is “Atlantis,” which is a “plus minus” world made of contradictions. In the same collection is a poem that is closer to statement and social criticism, “Still.” The poem portrays boxcars traveling across the land. They are inhabited by names, such as “The name Nathan” and “name David.” These Jews of the Holocaust are given back their names and their identities by the poem. In addition to criticizing the inhumanity of the Nazis, the poem places blame on those many eastern Europeans who were silent. “Awakened in the night I hear/ cor-rect, cor-rect, crash of silence on silence.”

Sól (salt) was published in 1962, and it continued the witty and ironic technique that Szymborska was making her own. For example, “Museum” looks at the objects in a museum and asks where the human feelings are that once made these objects valued. “Unexpected Meeting” is a love poem that deals with the loss of love. The former lovers meet, only to find that their passion, which is metaphorically represented by such wild animals as tigers and hawks, is now tame and has “nothing to say.”

The poems in Sto pociech (a million laughs, a bright hope), published in 1967, are for the most part written in free verse and deal with such social issues as the Vietnam War. There is, however, also the theme of creation in “The Joys of Writing,” and a poem on Thomas Mann sees him as an archetypal creator. Wszelki wypadek (there but for the grace) balances dreams and reality, as in “In Praise of Dreams.” The poem portrays the speaker as one who can do wonders, such as discovering Atlantis. However, the last line returns the reader to reality as she sees “the day before yesterday a penguin./ With the utmost clarity.” No matter how fanciful
Szymborska’s poems may become, there is always that “utmost clarity.”

Wielka liczba (a great number) was published in 1976, and it has poems of sharp wit, a quality central to Szymborska’s work. For example, “Review of an Unwritten Poem” has a harsh critic as a speaker. The critic condemns the “authoress” (itself an archaic and demeaning word) for the same qualities that have made Szymborska such an admired poet: The authoress is “lost in infinitude” and mixes “the lofty with the vernacular.”

Szymborska values her privacy and has never sought the spotlight, although she is far from being a recluse. The announcement that she had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996 took the literary world by surprise. The award brought her poetry greater worldwide attention. This was very apparent to English-language readers by the number of her collections that were published in English after the mid-1990’s. Most were received with almost unanimous critical acclaim. She continued to write on a variety of topics. In People on a Bridge, she addresses political questions for the first time since Woanie do Yeti, and in Koniec i pocztek her poems are often very private, even elegiac in tone. In her work, readers find a singular contemporary poet who has created some of the most elegant and witty poems of the post-World War II period.

**Critical Essays: Analysis**

The two key qualities of Wislawa Szymborska’s poetry are curiosity and a sense of wonder. She has the ability to look at things as if seeing them for the first time. In her curious eyes, nothing is ordinary; everything is part of the ongoing “Miracle Fair.” Her poetry forces the reader to abandon schematic thinking and to distrust received wisdom. On the level of language, this distrust is expressed through a constant play with fixed phrases and clichés. Both language and thought are turned upside down, revealing new and surprising meanings. Such poetry is very humorous, but it also conveys a sense of profound philosophical discomfort, prompting the reader to probe deeper and to adapt new perspectives. Szymborska’s poems skillfully combine seriousness and play, seemingly opposite categories that, in the eyes of the poet, are of equal value.

Dlatego zyjemy

The earliest poems of Wislawa Szymborska, published in newspapers in the years following World War II, dealt with experiences common to the poet’s generation: the trauma of the war, the dead child-soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising, the hope for a new, peaceful future. None of these poems found its way into Szymborska’s first two collections, Dlatego zyjemy (this is why we live) and Pytania zadawane sobie (the questions we ask ourselves). By the 1950’s the political climate in Poland had changed considerably; poetry was to become an extension of state propaganda and a reinforcement of the official ideology. For a time, Szymborska naïvely subscribed to this agenda. Her first two collections give testimony to her youthful political beliefs. Later, the poet would disown her early work; however, the brief period of idealism and the subsequent disillusionment taught her to distrust totalizing ideologies of any kind.

Although the primary theme of Szymborska’s earliest collections was the building of the perfect socialist state, some poems dealt with nonpolitical subjects such as love, intimacy, and relationships between people. Stylistically, these early poems bettered typical products of socialist propaganda and contained a promise of Szymborska’s later achievements. Nevertheless, most critics (as well as the poet herself) prefer to begin discussions of Szymborska’s œuvre with her third collection.

Wolanie do Yeti
Wolanie do Yeti (calling out to Yeti) marks a turning point in the work of Szymborska and is considered her true literary debut. The poet cuts herself away from the earlier political creed; her former assurance is replaced by a profound distrust. This change of heart is expressed in the poem “Rehabilitacja” (“Rehabilitation”) in which the speaker refers to her deluded head as “Poor Yorick.” By 1957 Szymborska had become a poet of doubtful inquiry and profound uncertainty.

Wolanie do Yeti introduces a number of themes and devices that would become permanent features of Szymborska’s poetics. The poem “Dwie malpy Brueghla” (“Brueghel’s Two Monkeys”) exemplifies both the poet’s characteristic use of the anecdote and her growing interest in looking at the human world from a nonhuman perspective. The speaker in the poem is taking a final exam in “the History of Mankind” while the two monkeys look on:

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.

Similarly, the poem “Z nieodbytej wyprawy w Himalaje” (“Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition”) portrays the achievements of humankind, as presented to a nonhuman listener. Characteristically, Szymborska creates a hypothetical, alternative world, thus making possible her imaginative investigations.

These poems mark the beginning of Szymborska’s poetic anthropology: her study of the condition of human beings in the world, as observed and analyzed from various unexpected perspectives. Wolanie do Yeti reveals another seminal feature of Szymborska’s poetics: her skillful use of irony as a cognitive and poetic category.

Sól

The publication of Sól (salt) in 1962 was pronounced a major literary event. This collection gives a taste of Szymborska’s mature style, with its brilliant paradoxes, its skillful intertextuality and allusions, and its mastery of puns, antitheses, and metonymy. The poet also develops her characteristic art of phraseological collage, playing with readers’ linguistic expectations, as in the lines: “Oh, not to be a boxer but a poet,/ one sentenced to hard shelleying for life,” or “written on waters of Babel.”

Sól contains a number of very private, intimate poems, which is quite unusual in Szymborska’s work. An important theme is communication between two people, or, rather, the impossibility or breakdown of communication, as in the poem “Wieza Babel” (“The Tower of Babel”). While this poem explores the failure of a dialogue between a man and a woman, the poem “Rozmowa z kamieniem” (“Conversation with a Stone”) reveals the futility of human attempts at communicating with nature. The speaker “knocks at the stone’s front door,” but the stone remains inscrutable:

. . . You may get to know me, but you’ll never know me through.

My whole surface is turned toward you,

all my insides turned away. . . .
Another important theme developed in Sól is the dichotomy of nature and culture, biology and art. This problem appears in poems such as “Woda” (“Water”), “Muzeum” (“Museum”), and “Kobiety Rubensa” (“Rubens Women”), a playful poetic parody of the Baroque style:

Daughters of the Baroque. Dough

thickens in troughs, baths steam, wines blush

. . . . . . . . . . . . .

O pumpkin plump!

The Baroque giantesses’ “skinny sisters woke up earlier,/ before dawn broke” and “went single file/ along the canvas’s unpainted side.” This image reveals other key features of Szymborska’s poetic imagination: her incessant search for the other side of the picture; her defense of those excluded and pushed to the margins; and her love of exceptions.

Sto pociech

In “Mozaika bizantyjska” (“A Byzantine Mosaic”), from the next collection, Sto pociech (no end of fun), the Baroque situation is reversed—here slenderness is the norm, and everyone is offended by the sight of a fat baby. Sto pociech explores a number of other cultural myths, ancient and modern. This collection also shows Szymborska’s fascination with discourses of biological sciences in general and the theory of evolution in particular. This fascination is linked to the poet’s desire to extend the language of poetry to include discursive modes commonly labeled as nonpoetic.

Another major theme in Sto pociech is time, and art’s ability to suspend it. While “Pejzaz” (“Landscape”) deals with the art of painting, “Rado´s´c pisania” (“The Joy of Writing”) is a hymn to “The joy of writing./ The power of preserving./ Revenge of a mortal hand.”

Wszelki wypadek

Szymborska’s sixth collection, Wszelki wypadek (could have), confirms her reputation as a philosophical poet. Critics point out her affinities with existentialism, Positivism, and, most important, the French Enlightenment. Moreover, Szymborska’s poetry has strong links with the rhetorical tradition. Many of her poems are structured around questions, dialogues, or theses with supporting examples. Moreover, in a typical rhetorical approach, the poet strives to make even the most difficult problems appear accessible: “Don’t bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words,/ then labor heavily so that they may seem light.”

The title poem of the 1972 collection, “Wszelki wypadek,” (“Could Have”), introduces the weighty theme of necessity and coincidence: “It could have happened./ It had to happen.” Similarly, “Pod jedna gwiazdka” (“Under one Small Star”) begins: “My apologies to chance for calling it necessity./ My apologies to necessity if I’m mistaken, after all.”

Wszelki wypadek confirms Szymborska’s distrust of fundamentalism. The poet presents the world as relative. She speaks to us from shifting and surprising perspectives. “Wrażenia z teatru” (“Theater Impressions”) describes her favorite act of a tragedy—the sixth, after the curtain has fallen. In “Prospect” (“Advertizement”) the speaker is a tranquilizer:

Sell me your soul.
There’s no other buyer likely to turn up.

There’s no other devil left. Wielka liczba

Szymborska’s next collection, opened by “Wielka liczba” (“A Large Number”) and closed by “Liczba pi” (“Pi”) juxtaposes the amazing vastness and multiplicity of the world against the limitations of human perception and cognition. The world evokes a childish delight but also despair: There are “four billion people on this earth” but the poet’s imagination is still “bad with large numbers/ . . . still taken by particularity.” Faced with excess, the poet defends the particular. Confronted with the cosmos, she rehabilitates the quotidian: for example, the soup “without ulterior motives” described in the warmly ironic portrait of her sister, or the “silver bowl” which might have caused the biblical Lot’s wife to look back, against the angel’s orders. As always, Szymborska is fascinated with particularities and complexities, with human imperfections.

People on a Bridge

In People on a Bridge, Szymborska addresses political questions for the first time since Wolanie do Yeti. The problems of human history and civilization appear next to the themes of chance, necessity, abstraction, and particularity continued from the preceding collections. “Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others” begins “Schylek wieku” (“The Century’s Decline”), while “Dzieci epoki” (“Children of Our Age”) warns: “We are children of our age./ it’s a political age.” Here, Szymborska’s irony is at its most poignant and subtle. This collection also marks the beginning of the poet’s effort to deal with death: “There’s no life/ that couldn’t be immortal/ if only for a moment.”

Koniec i poczatek

Koniec i poczatek (the end and the beginning) contains a number of very private poems, many elegiac in tone, dealing with memory and loss. In “Kot w pustym mieszkaniu” (“Cat in an Empty Apartment”) the death of a human being is shown from the perspective of a cat. “Nic darowane” (“Nothing’s a Gift”) reminds the reader that: “Nothing’s a gift, it’s all on loan” and “I’ll have to pay for myself/ with my self.” In “Moze by´c bez tytulu” (“No Title Required”), the poet poses the metaphysical questions: what is important and what is not? How can we be certain? In comparison with Szymborska’s earlier work, the poems in this collection are more direct, less dependent on masks and role-playing. However, the poet retains her propensity for unusual perspectives. In “Wielkie to szczecie´sci” (“We’re Extremely Fortunate”) she claims: “We’re extremely fortunate/ not to know precisely/ the kind of world we live in.” Such knowledge would require adopting a cosmic point of view, from which “the counting of weekdays” would seem “a senseless activity,” and “the sign ‘No Walking On The Grass’/ a symptom of lunacy.” There is irony here, but also a great tenderness toward the counting of days and the grass—a human quotidian.

Szymborska, Wislawa: Introduction

Wislawa Szymborska 1923-

(Has also written under the pseudonym Stanczykowna) Polish poet and critic.

Szymborska is considered one of the outstanding poets of the second half of the twentieth century. Her unsurpassed popularity in her native Poland became international recognition in 1996 with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature. While her literary output is small, including somewhat more than 200 poems published during more than five decades, Szymborska is nevertheless recognized as a leading figure of contemporary European literature. In her elegant verse, Szymborska celebrates the miraculous qualities of the ordinary and seemingly insignificant. Offering concrete images that suggest their own universality,
Szymborska's poems evince her skeptical philosophy, often aided by her surprising humor and Socratic pose of the naïve questioner who strips away cliché to discover a hidden, ironic truth. Szymborska's poems reflect her celebration of human dignity amid suffering and despair, and signal her efforts to conceive in verse a world she acknowledges can at best only be incompletely represented or understood.

Biographical Information

Szymborska was born in Prowent-Bnin, near Poznań, Poland, in 1923. Her family moved to Kraków when she was eight years old, and Szymborska lived there through the remainder of the twentieth century. During the Nazi occupation of Poland, she defied official sanctions in order to attend a banned Polish secondary school. After World War II, she entered Jagellonian University, studying literature and sociology. In 1952, Szymborska joined the editorial staff of the cultural periodical Życie literackie, devoting most of her attention to book reviews. Selections of her criticism were subsequently collected in Lektury nadobowiązkowe (1973), which shares its title with the column she continued to write up to 1981, “Recommended Reading.” Approximately thirty of Szymborska's earliest poems appeared in the Kraków newspaper Dziennik Polski in 1945, but her initial attempts to publish a collection in 1949 met with the disapproval of Communist censors. Her first poetic collection, Dlatego zyjemy (which can be translated as That's Why We're Alive), did not appear until 1952. It was followed by Pytania zadawane sobie (1954; which can be translated as Questioning Oneself). Marked by a strong socialist realism, both works were later rejected by Szymborska in the post-Stalinist era. In the ensuing decades, Szymborska achieved an unparalleled level of popularity for a woman poet in Poland. A reclusive and exacting writer, she published a small volume of some two or three dozen verses every three to five years for the remainder of the century. Her first major collection to appear in English, Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems, translated by Magnus J. Kryński and Robert A. Maguire, was published in 1981. By the early 1980s, however, Poland was a nation under martial law and Szymborska was forced to assume the pseudonym “Stanczykowna,” and to print her poetry in dissident and exile publications, such as the Polish Arka and Parisian Kultura Paryska. A change in the Polish situation by the end of the decade openly demonstrated that Szymborska's popularity was unaffected. Indeed, the lines of her poem “Nothing Twice” were transformed into a hit Polish rock song in 1995. The following year, the intensely private poet, largely unrecognized outside of Poland, achieved near instantaneous international recognition by being named the recipient of that year's Nobel Prize for Literature. Worldwide critical acclaim followed in the next half decade, as Szymborska's poetic works were translated into English and a number of other major world languages. Meanwhile, the much-praised Szymborska expressed her hope that she would be able to return to her quiet life in Kraków and continue to write.

Major Works

Excluding only Szymborska's self-renounced, pre-1957 poems and her work from the late 1990s and beyond, View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems (1995), translated by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, contains verses from Szymborska's seven major volumes published prior to her Nobel award: works ranging from Wolanie do yeti (1957) to Koniec i poczatek (1993). The speaker of the poem “Calling Out to Yeti,” from the early collection, stands in the icy Himalayas addressing the abominable snowman and, critics add, metaphorically speaks to the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, saying “Yeti, not only crimes / are possible among us. / Yeti, not all words / are death sentences.” Another well-known piece originally from Wolanie do yeti, “Bruegel's Two Monkeys” begins with an image from a famous painting in order to question the relationship between language and reality. Commentators observe that personal memory is a significant thematic and structural principal of the collection Koniec i poczatek (which can be translated as End and Beginning). The volume features one of Szymborska's most famous and oft-cited poems, “Cat in an Empty Apartment.” In it, Szymborska displaces her narrative perspective on the death of a loved one to the mind of the deceased's household pet, following the thoughts of the perplexed creature as it vows to teach its master a lesson when he returns; but of course, he never will. Another poem from the collection, “We're Extremely Fortunate,” wryly celebrates the limitations of human knowledge. “A Great Number,” the English rendering of the title poem...
from Szymborska's collection *Wielka liczba* (1976), is thought to illustrate several of her underlying poetic themes, including the relationship between the individual and the universal, an apprehension of the essential randomness of the universe, and a belief in the humble potential of poetry to offer some understanding and consolation. In such pieces as “Children of Our Age” and “The Century’s Decline,” Szymborska turns her ironist's view to the hollow rhetoric of a political era and to the unfulfilled promises of Marxism in the modern age. Other poems by Szymborska are even more direct in their attacks—as in “Starvation Camp Near Jaslo,” which concerns a southern Polish death camp of the Nazi era, or “Reality Demands,” a poetic tour of notorious battlefields—yet she invariably treats her themes with a subtle, ironic inversion of reader expectations, critics acknowledge. *Miracle Fair: Selected Poems of Wislawa Szymborska* (2001; translated by Joanna Trzeciak) is a retrospective collection of Szymborska's poetry in English that includes selections from her first two volumes, many of them previously untranslated. In its title poem, “Miracle Fair,” Szymborska thrills in the small wonders that occur every day, but which escape our distracted attention. Offering a near comprehensive selection of Szymborska's poetic oeuvre, *Poems New and Collected, 1957-1997* (1998; translated by Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh) includes the poem, “Under a Single Star,” a work that captures the humble stance of her poetry as she apologizes to language itself for her clumsy attempts to achieve understanding through words.

**Critical Reception**

Although her earliest poems were heavily influenced by the dominant socialist realism of the early Stalinist era in Poland, the pieces that make up Szymborska's first two collections where later rejected by the author, who commented on the ‘mistake’ of loving humankind rather than human beings in her work. For her poetry written in 1957 through to the end of the twentieth century, however, Szymborska has earned nearly uninterrupted praise, culminating in her 1996 selection by the Nobel Academy in Sweden for the world’s most prestigious literary award. Many of her peers have since been equally forthcoming in their esteem. Fellow Polish Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, who has nevertheless expressed a more reserved estimation of her writing, has observed, “Szymborska's poems are built through juggling … the components of our common knowledge; they surprise us with its paradoxes and show the human world as tragicomic.” Other critics have expressed similar estimations. Acknowledging that Szymborska's poetry is very much focused on the everyday and commonplace with subject matter that is manifestly realistic, they have argued that her works offer a universal appeal that demonstrates her poetic joy in life's miraculous potential, tempered by her strong skepticism of easy solutions and acute awareness of suffering. Indeed, scholars have acknowledged that Szymborska summed up her dualistic approach to poetry quite accurately in her lyric “Sky,” which states, “My identifying features / are rapture and despair.” These qualities, coupled with wit, wisdom, and an ironic use of language, are thought to mark Szymborska as one of the twentieth century's finest and most insightful poets. English criticism on Szymborska's early poetic work, prior to her Nobel prize, has been sparse due to translation difficulties.

**Szymborska, Wislawa: Principal Works**

*Dlatego zyjemy* 1952

*Pytania zadawane sobie* 1954

*Wolanie do Yeti* 1957

*Sól* 1962

*Wiersze wybrane* 1964
Poezje wybrane 1967
Sto pociech 1967
Poezje 1970
Wybór poezje 1970
Wszełki wypadek 1972
Wybór wierszy 1973
Tarsjusz i inne wiersze 1976
Wielka liczba 1976
Poezje wybrane (II) 1983
Ludzie na moscie [People on a Bridge: Poems] 1986
Poezje/Poems 1989
Wieczor autorski: wiersze 1992
Koniec i poczatek 1993
Widok z ziarnkiem piasku: 102 wiersze 1996
O asmierci bez przesady [De la mort sans exagérer] 1997
Lektury nadobowiązkowe (reviews) 1973

**Criticism: Magnus J. Kry´nski and Robert A. Maguire (essay date 1979)**


[In the following excerpt, Kry´nski and Maguire acknowledge Szymborska's popularity in Poland and her significance to world literature despite being relatively unknown outside her homeland.]
Wislawa Szymborska is a contemporary of such important Polish poets as Tadeusz Rózewicz, Zbigniew Herbert, and Miron Bialoszewski. She was born in 1923 in Kórnik (the Poznań region), but moved to Cracow at the age of eight and has lived there to this day. Her first published poem dates from 1945. As with most Polish writers who made their debuts after World War II, much of her early work was infused with the ideology of socialist realism as then forcefully propagated by the Communist Party. These poems were collected in the volumes Dlatego zyjemy (That's What We Live For, Warsaw, Czytelnik, 1952), and Pytania zadawane sobie (Questions Put to Myself, Cracow, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1954). In retrospect, the best that can be said about them is that they are not so strident in tone as similar exercises produced at the time, and that they do contain a few personal lyrics. It was in 1957, with the volume Wolanie do Yeti (Calling Out to Yeti, Cracow, Wydawnictwo Literackie), that Szymborska abandoned overtly political themes, found her true voice, and began to build the enormous reputation she enjoys in Poland today.

A painstaking craftsman, she has published a volume of twenty-five to thirty-five poems every five years or so since 1957. They are: Sól (Salt, Warsaw, PIW, 1962); Sto pociech (A Million Laughs, Warsaw, PIW, 1967); Wszelki wypadek (There But for the Grace, Warsaw, Czytelnik, 1972); Wielka liczba (A Great Number, Warsaw, Czytelnik, 1976). Though slim, each volume has been hailed as a major event in Polish literature. The most recent of them, Wielka liczba, appeared in a printing of 10,000 copies and was sold out within a week. Szymborska is that rare phenomenon which has not been seen in Poland since the days of “Skamander”: a serious poet who enjoys a large audience. Perhaps even rarer, she scarcely ever gets a bad review. All the important critics of poetry in Poland—Artur Sandauer, Ryszard Matuszewski, Jerzy Kwiatkowski—are consistently enthusiastic about her work. Her readers are attracted by the unusually wide range of themes; by her skill at blending the traditional and the avant-garde; by the innovative uses of lexicon and syntax; by the balance struck between skepticism and love in her view of the human condition; by the combination of high seriousness, gentle humor, and indulgent irony. Better than any other contemporary Polish poet, her work exemplifies the ideal of poetry put forth by Pushkin in Eugene Onegin: “ishchu soiuza / Volshebnykh zvukov, chuvstv i dum” (I seek the union / Of magic sounds, feelings, and thoughts).

As is true of all great poets, Szymborska’s importance transcends national boundaries. Yet she is virtually unknown in the English-speaking world. Only fifteen poems have so far been translated, by five different hands. Some have been done more than once; some are scattered in small journals that are hard to come by. Excellent though some of these translations may be, they do, by and large, take poems which, in the language of the theater, “play themselves,” that is, poems which make an immediate appeal to the emotions, whether through the themes of love or wartime atrocities. Altogether they convey only a faint impression of Szymborska’s scope, versatility, and power. The situation is roughly the same in other European languages. So far there has been only one translator who has seen fit to devote an entire volume to Szymborska’s work. That is Karl Dedecius, the talented and dedicated West German specialist in Polish literature, who has published a selection of forty-one poems: Salz. Gedichte (Frankfurt a/M, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973).

Note

1. There are also three volumes which contain previously published poems: Wiersze wybrane (Selected Poems, Warsaw, PIW, 1964); Poezje wybrane (Selected Poetry, Warsaw, LSW, 1967); Poezje (Poetry, Warsaw, PIW, 1970); and Wybór wierszy (A Selection of Poems, Warsaw, PIW, 1973). Poezje also has ten previously unpublished poems included in a section entitled “Z nowych wierszy”; four are translated in the group offered here, and are indicated accordingly. Szymborska has written very little prose. The one published instance is a collection of reviews entitled Lektury nadobowiązkowe (Recommended Reading, Cracow, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972): these are not only brilliant pieces in their own right, but to a perceptive reader, they may well shed new light on many of the themes that are explored in the poetry.
Criticism: John Freedman (essay date 1986)


*In the following essay, Freedman interprets the title poem of Szymborska's collection Wielka liczba—translated as “A Great Number”—as a work representative of the poet's principal themes and techniques.*

Wislawa Szymborska's poetry is—above all—marked by a striking universality which allows for widely variant readings. In his review of Szymborska's 1976 collection, *A Great Number (Wielka liczba)*, Stanislaw Barańczak primarily stressed the sociological aspect of her poetry as it is revealed in her use of language. Her language and images, he argues, are nearly always concrete and situational. In his introduction to her 1977 *Poetry (Poezje)*, a retrospective collection, Jerzy Kwiatkowski, relying heavily on a vocabulary sprinkled with philosophical terminology, presents her primarily as an existentialist poet, though he does admit, “… that doesn't mean at all that Szymborska's poetry is some kind of theoretical treatise on the various possibilities of the means of being laid out in verse.”

Czeslaw Milosz, who once wondered whether she might be a poet of limited range, now also ranks her as a philosophical poet whose “conciseness is matched only by Zbigniew Herbert.” Szymborska maintains a much more modest appraisal of her own works. When asked in a 1975 interview to comment on the critics' naming of her as an existential poet, she replied, “The label is flattering, but also disconcerting. I do not engage in great philosophy, only modest poetry.” In fact, poetry itself—or to be more exact, the paradox of poetry’s possibilities and limitations—is frequently the focus of Szymborska's work. She stated her creative approach to this in the same interview. After concurring with a dialog from Tacitus in which he claims that poetry has exhausted itself and its further development is impossible, she indicates—one detects an ironic glint of a smile in the corner of her eye—that much poetry is now being written on this very subject. She goes on to say, “When I hear about a crisis in art or music or the theater, I am inclined to believe it. But in poetry, where I myself endeavor to do something, there is still a great deal to be said.”

We will see that Szymborska has a great ability to create something of substance out of what seems to be nothing. Additionally, at least in her early work, she can also be a very personal poet. Such poems as “I Am Too Near” (“Jestem za blisko”), “Returns” (“Powroty”), and especially “Unexpected Meeting” (“Niespodziane spotkanie”), and “Born of Woman” (“Urodzony”) are examples of her lyrical poetry at its best, yet other such poems which are presumably “personal” in nature such as “Family Album” (“Album”) and “Laughter” (“´Smiech”) reach beyond the boundaries of the personal and acquire a universal significance.

The title poem from Szymborska's *A Great Number* is a central work in her oeuvre for in it she combines many of the elements which characterize her poetic output as a whole. Despite Szymborska's own concerns that the themes of her poetry may be too diverse, there are certain poetic concerns which recur in most of her best work. A close reading of her poem “A Great Number” will illuminate some of the most important of these.

The primary theme which we will focus on is the role of poetry itself, that is, on its capabilities and limitations. The poet selects isolated elements of reality for poetic illumination, discovering fresh perceptions of the world, in essence, giving meaning to the world by recreating it in verse. Her limitations consist primarily in the fact that the nature of poetry requires that it be selective in its choices of subject, thereby condemning to oblivion all that the poet either refuses or is unable to see. The poet's power, then, is also her major weakness.

The first eight lines of “A Great Number” serve in one way or another to reveal the fundamental dichotomy which exists between masses and individuals. Such a contrast, as we will see, can be understood to exist on
several levels. As Barańczak has shown, this may be seen as a discussion of the individual's struggle to protect his or her individuality against the deadening effects of society. From a different point of view it may be seen to be the poet's appraisal of her own artistic powers, limitations, and the very nature of what her art can do. Or it may be seen on a more abstract philosophical level where uniqueness and individuality are shown to be the only things which can stimulate imagination and intellect. Szymborska creates repeated images, both linguistic and imagistic (“[imagination] flitting through darkness like a flashlight beam” “[moja wyobraźnia] Fruwa w ciemnościach jak świetlo latahari”), or conceptual (“[my imagination] does not do well with great numbers” “’zle sobie radzi z wielkimi liczbami”), which deepen the perception of duality and contrast between the disparate elements. 1.1 and 1.2 establish this opposition immediately by contrasting the four billion inhabitants of the earth with the individuality of the lyrical “I’s” imagination. 1.3 and 1.4 further develop the gulf between them by indicating the inscrutability of great numbers and the fact that uniqueness or particularity is the only thing capable of moving the poet's imagination. Her use of the word “touch” to indicate the effect that uniqueness has on imagination implies a two-fold significance. Not only does uniqueness have the ability to intellectually touch imagination, but it also has the capability to “touch” it emotionally. Thus, while imagination “does badly with great numbers,” it may become intimately involved with individual elements which are isolated and extracted out of them.

While this ability of imagination to comprehend uniqueness and individuality at least to some degree is perceived to be “positive” (i.e., productive), it is also greatly limited. Of all the potential “particularities” which exist unilluminated in the darkness, the imagination, like a flashlight, is capable of illuminating only the first face it comes upon at the edge of the crowd. A random choice, as it were. Many of Szymborska's poems deal with the nature of random selection as a concept important not only in poetry, but in every day life as well. Such poems as “The Terrorist, He Watches” (“Terorysta, on patrzy”), “Wonderment” (“Zdumienie”), and “There But for the Grace” (“Wszelki wypadek”) all focus on this problem.8 As 1.7 and 1.8 indicate, the remaining “faces” in the crowd must remain in total obscurity. The poet's flashlight, her ability to illuminate, is weak (“fruwa”) and can neither bring life to, nor give meaning to all those faces which remain somehow incomplete and unrealized since they cannot be incorporated into the poet’s recreated world. By repeating the basic theme of these eight lines in different circumstances, the poet creates an organic set of correspondences which imbue certain words with added meaning within the framework of the poem. The world is divided into two disparate parts: the one vs. the many, and individual areas of illumination vs. darkness. Using the images which have been employed to this point, we can draw up the following correspondences:

| mass | individual |
| dark | light |
| oblivion, non-thought, unregret | illumination |

Each of these words carries a metaphorical meaning over and above its common lexical meaning. Thus, as we will see subsequently, poetry and memory will take their places in the second set of correspondences.

These first eight lines set the stage for a sort of internal polemic which will be waged within the poet's consciousness. Despite the fact that the poet's imagination “does badly with great numbers” and has the capability to “illuminate” individual manifestations of those great numbers, there has, as yet, been no judgemental implication on her part. However, the final three lines of the first stanza indicate that there is a dilemma in this dichotomous relationship which, if it does not go as far as a genuine moral struggle, at least takes on the character of mild regret.

In 1.9 the poet invokes the memory of Dante, telling us that even that poet was unable to do more than be selective. This is a sort of apology from the lyrical “I” which supports the idea that there is no intent to imply good or bad to what is written, but that such a break-down begins to force itself on the poet and reader alike. Included in this apology is the poet's regret—and self-justification—that imagination is unable to illuminate more, that it can only rely on happenstance and its own weak powers to bring to light what little it can. The
invocation of Dante serves a two-fold purpose: First, that even a poet of Dante's supreme stature was subject

to this law of randomness and limitation (i.e., so the present poet cannot be held morally or artistically

responsible for this same insufficiency); and second, it is, of course, a thematic reference to Dante's Divine

Comedy, in which throughout Hell, Purgatory and Paradise the medieval poet literally selects at random the

faces which he will illuminate in poetic form, while leaving the vast majority of the rest to continue

wandering lost in oblivion. He too, after all, occasionally apologizes to those souls he must pass over,

knowing that each in his own way is worthy of poetic attention.

1.10 and 1.11 address this inadequacy with a rhetorical question. If even Dante was powerless before this

illumination of poetry, and if one (presumably the poet) is not a Dante, what more can be expected even if one

has the support of all the muses? The lines serve to heighten the sense of precariousness of the poet's role and

the powers of imagination, which we may now begin to understand as a metonymical replacement for poetry.

There is, then, a sense of powerlessness on the part of the poet which co-exists with the very real power of

being able to recreated the world by perceiving it anew.

The first lines of the second stanza are an indirect and inconclusive reply to the rhetorical question which has

preceded. 2.1 implies that the self-comparison with Dante is not of primary importance. The poet's aspirations

to literary immortality through poetic recreation of the world is a premature concern, for, as she asks in 2.2, a

more pressing matter is first to determine whether she is fully participating in life, and if so, is that itself

sufficient. She does not define what she means by “sufficient,” but it seems clear enough that the question

posed here is whether living a full life is enough to give life meaning. 2.3 responds immediately: It has never

been enough and it is even less so in the context of the modern world (Szymborska more laconically says

“now”). Poetry, then, is not written to achieve immortality for the author, but is written to flesh out and give

meaning to the life that the poet and her readers lead. Poetry is an integral part of life, for without it, life is

impoverished of meaning. Szymborska has spoken of this in part in “Travel Elegy” (“Elegia podróżna”). Here

the exotic wonders of the world encountered by a traveler are nearly inscrutable because the viewer has no

way of preserving the experience. She writes:

All is mine but nothing owned,
nothing owned for memory,
and mine only while I look.

No sooner remembered than uncertain
are the goddesses of their heads.

(Wszystko moje, nic własności,
nic własności dla pamięci,
a moje, dopóki patrze.

Ledwie wspomniane, juz niepewne
bożnienie swoich głów.)

Memory alone, then, is not enough. As we see in “A Great Number,” it is poetry—a form of creatively

organized memory—which serves to preserve these elements of reality by recreating them in a new context, in

a poem.

After establishing the primary function of poetry, the poet returns to her original theme of poetry's selective

nature. 2.4-2.6 continue the poet's recognition of her limitation and echo her “apology” in the Dante line

above. Although “choosing by rejecting” is the only possible way in which a poet can observe life, and thus

hope to give it meaning, that does not absolve her of the “guilt” of omission forced upon her by random

selection of subjects and objects for description which are far too great in number to all be included in her

work. Ironically, by openly stating this limitation, and by mentioning the density, numerousness and

insistancy of that which is omitted, she does succeed to a certain degree in including that which she claims is
beyond her powers to include.\textsuperscript{9}

The overall implication of these lines is that life cannot become fully realized until it has been perceived by an artistic eye. This is the cause of the poet's remorse, since she realizes she is able only to give meaning to very small, randomly selected elements of the world. All that she is unable to incorporate into her poetic vision remains in a Dantean Limbo of unrealized being. Whether she means that all these “black masses” do not exist for her personally, but may exist for themselves, or whether she means that anything she cannot incorporate into her poetic vision does not exist at all is not clear. Presumably she intends to say that she is incapable of speaking for anyone but herself—her extreme subjectivity has already been well-established—and therefore her concern is with the world as it exists (or does not) in her own perceptions.

2.7 echoes 2.4, where the poet indicated that “there is no other way” to write verse but to select by rejecting. Here she recognizes the undesirability of her limitations (“losses indescribable” [“neopisanych strat”]) but still, these indescribable losses bring her a “little verse, a sigh” (“wierszyk, westchnienie”). Her use of the diminutive for “verse” has a possible two-fold interpretation. If we are to keep in mind the apologetic vision she has sometimes expressed to this point, her use of “wierszyk” here may be intended to minimize the importance of her poetic work in relation to all that she must leave unsaid. On the other hand, if we are to keep in mind that only through poetry is the poet able to attribute meaning to her world, the diminutive could be interpreted here as an endearing term. Similar is the case of “a sigh,” which may be seen as a spontaneous expression on one hand of sorrow or regret, or on the other of relief. It would seem that both interpretations are not only possible, but necessary within the framework of the poem.

2.8 and 2.9 continue the same ambiguity since both contain equally possible variant readings. In 2.8 the poet tells us that her response to a “clamorous calling” is a whisper. The Polish “gromkie powolanie” may mean “calling” both in the sense of vocation, or in the sense of a “call to arms.” Once again, in reference to the Dante lines, the former possibility is perfectly permissible. In terms of the second possibility, this line would seem to contain a rather overt sociological statement that the poet will not heed boisterous demands to choose as subjects for her poetry that which is demanded by fashion, culture, ideology, etc. Her insistence on answering in a whisper would seem to be her refusal to join Majakovskij's intemperate oath to “shout at the top of my voice” about subjects which have been chosen for her. This line may be read in still a third way on the more abstract level which has been noted previously: Against the thunderous call of seemingly endless reality which remains hidden in oblivion, the poet's response is barely but a whisper. This may be the poet's further recognition that she is unable to do anything but resurrect infinitesimally small amounts of that reality from oblivion, and must leave the vast majority to wallow in unknowing. In 2.9 the poet maintains a characteristic ambiguity about whether she is unwilling or unable to give expression to everything she must pass over in silence: “tego nie wypowiem” may be translated as “I will not say” (cf. Krynski/Maguire) or “I cannot say.”

2.10 invokes the Polish proverb of the mountain which gives birth to a mouse. Once again the poet repeats the major visual and conceptual image of the poem: the great and the small. But for the first time she recognizes the positive, or at least necessary, qualities of the “great.” That is, while only in the miniscule, the separate elements, chipped off from the enormous block of “mass” (oblivion) is life comprehended and given meaning, its existence in turn is unthinkable and even impossible apart from the massive, overwhelming whole.

2.11 continues, but transforms, the image which is created in the previous line. Sand, here has three functions: 1) an endless, unbroken expanse; 2) the enormity of numbers of grains of sand in comparison to the size of a paw's scratch in them; 3) the impermanence of sand, it's changeability. For the first time the poet introduces the word “life” into the poem. Significantly, rather than compare it with something great and exalted, she equates it with the miniscule, temporary, incomplete images which have predominated in the poem to this point.
There now arises another paradox in the images and concepts of the poem, the two sides of which do not necessarily cancel each other out. Earlier, smallness and individuality were portrayed as “positive” in relation to enormity and mass. Here, however, one tends to see the image of life as merely a scratch or two in sand as a “negative” quality which is characterized by insignificance, temporality and impermanence. It would seem that both elements are present and intended by the poet. In other words, it is just that very smallness and temporality of life which allows it to become a subject of art, thereby achieving for it an “immortality” or “permanence” which is not naturally a part of it. Meaning can be imparted to this wistful thing (life) because of its very smallness, isolatedness, individuality, since it is capable of being isolated from the ungraspable mass of which it is a part. Nonetheless, the primary impression left by this line is a sense of frustration and perhaps loss, brought on by a realization of the smallness of life.

Until this point in the poem all images with the exception of the reference to Dante have been either strictly poetic or abstract. In the third stanza, however, the first “realistic” or tangible images are introduced. But they are not presented in a realistic manner, for they are introduced by means of a dream-state.

Once again, 3.1 repeats the basic theme of isolation/individuality. The poet's dreams—like her imagination, and thus her poetry—are not peopled “as they should be.” (Compare the “lack of population” in her dreams with the four billion people on the earth in 1.1). Again the poet has created a poetic image which may justifiably be interpreted in more than one way. This confusion is caused by her use of “as they should be.” It is conceivable that this is a reference to 2.8 where she insisted that she is not susceptible to the pressures of a “great call” or “calling.” If this is so, 3.1 is a further statement of rebelliousness on the poet's part. But the “should be” may also be interpreted as an expression that even that level of poet's “creativity” (dreams), which one might expect to be free from the selectivity of her “waking” talent, is subordinate to that primary principle. That even her subconscious and unconscious thoughts must be selective implies that the necessity of limitation in any sort of perceptive process is fundamental. The concept of dreams certainly is a reference to the idea of imagination in the first lines of the poem, and now by extension and allegory, to poetry.

3.2 repeats the main theme in different terms and also furthers the possible sociological reference, which has been noted above, by pitting the masses against individuality.

The remainder of stanza three (3.3-3.7) examines the poet's dreamworld and relates the primary elements of a single dream, all the while continuing the themes that have been established in the first two-thirds of the poem. 3.3 not only begins the “narration” of the dream, but is also a reference to the powers of dream (and thus as we have noted, of poetry as well) to overcome reality. That is, dream, memory, poetry and imagination all have the power to reverse or overcome the logical demands of life as we know it. They have the power to violate natural laws, thus creating their own new natural laws and a universe unto themselves.10

3.4-3.5 continue the theme of isolation and individuality in the images of the single hand and the empty house. The hand is even further isolated in that the poet does not give us the slightest clue as to whom it belongs. This hand has been severed from the whole organism, so to speak, just as the poet must always perceive only incomplete elements of reality broken off from the whole. Whether this is a hand of the long dead visitors trying to enter the empty house or the hand of the poet who will exit that house two lines later is unclear and probably beside the point. What is important is that the “handle” signifies a door handle which allows access to this “empty house, overgrown with the attachments of an echo” (“Obrasta pusty dom przybudówkami echa”). Echo here is certainly a metonymical replacement for memory and in turn, we can probably say, for poetry.

3.6-3.7 continue the dream image and make a final statement of the poet's freedom and independence. The valley into which she runs in “no one’s” because it is empty, unpopulated, unlike the modern world in which she must live (a reference again to the poem's first line). And being quiet and unpopulated as it is, it is anachronistic because its emptiness has an almost primordial quality to it. One senses that the poet runs into
this quiet, empty valley with a sense of joy if not even relief. The valley seems to symbolize for her escape even from her own past (the long dead visitors of 3.3) and her own poetic work (assuming we are correct in calling “echo” of 3.5 a replacement for poetry). On one level, this quiet empty valley, then, is for her the clean slate on which she has the opportunity to create a new poetic universe. On a more realistic level it is a place where she can go to be away from expectation, prejudice and the cumbrances of her past and the modern populated world.

The final two lines transfer us back to the poet's waking state. Now, instead of subjectively perceiving the dream-state, she objectively views it from the outside. The quiet valley into which she ran while in the dream-state is reflected in the expanse (“przestrzeń”) of 4.1. This idea of reflection is even graphically illustrated in the final words of the poem which are phonological mirror-images of each other: “we mnie—nie wiem.” Both the expanse of the waking state and the valley of the dream-state are reminiscent of the darkness of 1.5 which is vast, amorphous and unformed until its minute component parts are illuminated by the poet's meager flashlight. Thus, the darkness which existed outside the poet earlier, now exists within. There has occurred a rapprochement between the outer and inner universes. But, as she states in the poem's final words, she does not know where this inner space comes from. The mystery of her raw creative material remains, despite the fact that she has succeeded earlier in giving it at least a certain meaning through selective perception of it through poetry.

We have seen that “A Great Number,” representative of much of Szymborska's work, touches upon several of her common themes: 1) The element of chance or fate, that is, the random quality of the universe, and, more importantly, the random quality of the poet's perception of it; 2) The potential endlessness of the universe, it's vastness which cannot be comprehended in its entirety, but can only be comprehended by perceiving selected minor elements of it; 3) As a corollary, the importance that microscopic elements of the universe play in making up reality: Thus, at least on perceptual grounds, meaning is possible only because of smallness, individuality and solitude; 4) Poetry as a means to achieving what understanding is possible. Poetry is a repository for and preserver of life's individual elements. Consequently, poetry is the surest element for giving meaning to the things and experiences of life, at least insofar as meaning can be found to exist at all, and insofar as it can be grasped by the poet.

Such qualities make Szymborska in many ways an heir to the tradition of Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, both in terms of his concept of “the concrete entity” (“istnienie poszczególne”) and his attitude toward the illuminating capabilities of art. The opening lines from her “Wonderment” are a striking rephrasal of Witkacy's own wonderment as to “Why am I this and not another being, why am I in this time and not another?”

Why to excess then in one single person?
This one not that? And why am I here?
On a day that's a Tuesday? In a house not a nest?
In skin not in scales? With a face not a leaf?

(Czemu w zanadto jednej osobie?
Tej a nie innej? I co tu robie?
W dzień co jest wtorkiem? W domu nie gnieździe?
W skórze nie lusce? Z twarza nie li´sciem?)

Szymborska, however, is content to ask the questions alone, content to phrase them in such a way that they take on a significance of their own, content to make of them art and poetry. As Witkacy perceived art to be the final means to self-understanding after the collapse of religion and philosophy, Szymborska seems to say in her poetry that only the artist's eye has the capability to make sense of the world construct. While there may be no hidden a priori meaning to be discovered in the phenomena that surround us, meaning can be attributed to the things and experiences of the world by questioning and rephrasing them in a clever and “beautiful”
way. It is at this point that Szymborska's poetry achieves a certain affinity with that of her contemporaries, Tadeusz Różewicz and Miron Bialoszewski, perhaps even more so than with Zbigniew Herbert and the other “moralists.” Like Różewicz, she is skeptical of her powers at the very same time that she recognizes their importance. Echoing the same apology which she expresses in the Dante lines of “A Great Number” she writes in “Under a Certain Little Star” (“Pod jedna gwiazdka”):

I apologize to coincidence for calling it necessity.
I apologize to necessity just in case I'm mistaken.
Let happiness be not angry that I take it as my own.
Let the dead not remember they scarcely smoulder in my memory.
I apologize to time for the muchness of the world overlooked per second.

(Przepraszam przypadek, ze nazywam go koniecznością.
Przepraszam konieczność, jeśli jednak się myle.
Niech sie nie gniewa szczęście, ze biore je jak swoje.
Niech mi zapomna umarli, że ledwie tla sie w pamięci.
Przepraszam czas za mnogość przeoczonego świata na sekundę).

Like Różewicz, she both affirms and negates at the same time: negates by what she says, and affirms by the fact that she says it. But in such lines she goes beyond Różewicz's minimalism and achieves something akin to Bialoszewski's latent spiritualism, wherein the bare-bones images of stoves reduced to “grey naked holes” seem to grow out of Różewicz's bankrupt world of ruin, somehow renewed and imbued with a new significance. Szymborska's is a poetry of healing which, while understanding the unpleasant nature of the disease, nevertheless finds reason to rejoice.

Notes

5. “Kiedy wiec słysze o kryzysie w malarstwie czy muzyce lub teatrze, skłonna nawet jestem w to uwierzyć, ale w poezji, w której sama usiłuje coś robić, jest jeszcze bardzo wiele do powiedzenia.” See note 4, page 301.
6. All of these poems can be found in Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems by Wisława Szymborska, tr. Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire (Princeton University, 1981), with the exception of “I Am Too Near," which can be found in Postwar Polish Poetry, ed. Czeslaw Milosz (Berkeley: University of California, 1983). All translations of and references to other poems are from the Krynski/Maguire edition, unless otherwise noted.
7. “You spoke of the varied content of my poems—indeed, they are perhaps too varied. […] It is simply that a great many things interest me.” (“Mówiła Pani o różnorodnej zawartości moich wierszy—isotnie sa one chyba dość różnorodne. […] Po prostu bardzo wiele rzeczy mnie interesuje”). See note 4, page 302.
8. This concern of Szymborska's is not limited to her poetic work alone. She is also the author of numerous reviews of books on widely varying themes, and when asked whether she approaches her critical reading according to any organized plan, she replied, “No. Sometimes I select a book about butterflies or dragonflies, sometimes a brochure about renovating the home, while still other times I might pick up a school textbook.” (“Nie. Czasem biore książki o motylach czy wąskach, innym razem broszure o odnawianiu mieszkania, a jeszcze kiedy indziej siegam po podręcznik szkolny”).
See note 4, page 304.

9. Artur Sandauer has touched on this in his article, “Reconciled with History” (“Pogodzona z historią”) in Poeci czterech pokoleń (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977): “Affirming that a subject doesn't exist, we give it an imaginary existence and reveal the process of its manifestation in imagination. […] Even her individual sentences are so constructed that they negate, while simultaneously affirming,” and, “A real entity may become literature, just as a literary entity may materialize in reality.” (“Twierdząc, że przedmiot nie istnieje, powołujemy go do istnienia imaginacyjnego i ukazujemy proces jego powstawania w wyobraźni. […] Nawet poszczególne jej zdania są tak skonstruowane, że negują, jednocześnie afirmują [295],” and, “Postać rzeczywista może wkraczać do literatury albo też — literacka materializować się w rzeczywistości [297]”).

Szymborska herself has eloquently elaborated on the theme in other of her poems. “Gratitude” (“Podziekowanie”) is a poem of “love” for those whom the poet does not love; “Atlantis” (“Atlantyda”) describes a place of which the author knows nothing, but which through poetry, acquires a perceptible existence; “Station” (Dworzec) (see The New Polish Poetry, ed. Milne Holton and Paul Vangelisti [University of Pittsburgh 1978]) recounts everything that “happened” at a meeting which never took place.

10. Szymborska elaborated on this idea in an earlier poem, “Memory at Last” (“Pamieć nareszcie”), in which she wrote: “Memory at last has what it sought. / My mother has been found, my father glimpsed. / I dreamed up for them a table, two chairs. They sat down. / Once more they seemed close, and once more living for me.” (“Pamieć nareszcie ma, czego szukała. / Znalazła mi się matka, ujrzał mi się ojciec. / Wyśnilam dla nich stół, dwa krzesła. Siedli. / Byli mi znów swoi i snowu mi zyli”). Memory and dream, then, have the power to create, or at least recreate, life. To bring into being a new world, a new reality. Not only are memory and dream related to art in that the poem itself serves as the medium for expressing the dream memory, but the final two lines of the poem draw a direct correlation with the art of painting: “I woke up. I opened my eyes. / I touched the world as if it were a carved frame.” (“Zbudzilam się. Otworąm oczy. / Dotknęłam „świata jak rzeźbionej ramy”). The “real” world, then, is only the frame which holds within it the greater reality of dream, memory, art and poetry.

Criticism: Felicity Rosslyn (essay date May–June 1994)


[In the following essay, Rosslyn describes Szymborska's apparent indifference to feminism, her fundamental skepticism, her rejection of cliché, and her discovery of the miraculous in the everyday.]

As the Polish literary world also adjusts to free market conditions and old reputations are revalued, one thing is becoming clear: the importance of Wislawa Szymborska. She has always been respected, but now she is hugely so, and in the new atmosphere it seems obvious that she stands alongside Herbert as the second great poet of that generation. If critics in the west have been slow to follow this assumption, they have the excuse that she has not always been well translated. The witty tension of her lines hangs rather loose in Czerniawski's recent collection People on a Bridge; her precision is better caught by Krynski and Maguire in their major collection Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts of 1981. (The other place to find her well translated is in Baranczak and Cavanagh's 1991 anthology, Spoiling Cannibals' Fun.) But there is also a problem with the poems themselves. Can anything this light and graceful, one might genuinely ask, be important?

One sign that Szymborska deserves her Polish reputation is that her grace emerges under evident pressure. From the first line of a poem we sense that we are in professional hands and the trajectory of the poem has
been calculated in advance. The force of her clarity is in direct proportion to all the poems on this subject she
has not written, or has put in the bin, and the discipline she is guided by is an ardent desire to communicate:
she says, with a simplicity hard to credit in the present climate, ‘I would like everything I write to be clear,
intelligible, and I worry a lot if something proves incomprehensible to the reader.’ And the poems testify to
the aim: it is only by calculating all the vanities she has renounced that one can guess at the dedication they
took. Ballet dancers famously have blood in their shoes, and the accuracy of Szymborska's balletic landings
comes expensive too.

It might be worth dwelling for a moment on where the pressure comes from that energises Szymborska's
elegance, because it does not seem to come from the usual sources for a poet of her generation. She is, at
seventy, a contemporary of Milosz and Herbert, yet no-one has ever found it natural to bracket her with either.
She has not shouldered their political and historical burdens, and she has played no national role. It would be
impossible to trace East European history through her poetry, save perhaps in the forced orthodoxy of her first
volume in 1952; the pressure behind the poems has never been political pressure, in the obvious sense of the
term. But in case this begins to sound like a career of dilettantism, it is also remarkable that no-one found it
easy to reproach her for this, even in the dark days of martial law. Indeed, the novelist Tadeusz Konwicki saw
her refusal of the trench mentality as proof of her quality. ‘She's the only one of us who writes wholly freely!
Not even Herbert can do that!’ he exclaimed in the mid-eighties, at a time when the public pressure on writers
to be saints and martyrs was almost unbearable.

But if the pressure behind her poems is not political pressure in the obvious sense of the term, her deliberate
disengagement is also a kind of stand. As she recognises in her poem ‘Children of Our Age’, ‘apolitical poems
are also political’, and she has never supposed that she could escape the consequences of being born in her
time. As the poem begins by saying,

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.
Whether you like it or not,
your genes have a political past,
your skin—a political cast,
your eyes—a political slant.

Whatever you say reverberates,
whatever you don't say speaks for itself—
so either way you're talking politics …

(trans. Baranczak and Cavanagh)

If she is apolitical, then, it is in the paradoxical and special sense that she reserves the right to define politics
herself. And she defines the term here much more widely than we might have expected: for instance, racial
division was the one problem Marxist Poland didn't have (‘your genes have a political past’), but the assertion
is stubbornly true of the world at large. In the context of the mayhem in former Yugoslavia, where states are
being wrenched onto a purely ethnic basis, Szymborska sounds almost prophetic—and this poem is
characteristic of her work, in that it is not easily undermined by events. The remark, then, that she does not
write under political pressure needs some qualification. It would be truer to say that one form of pressure she
accepts is to define politics and what politics does to human beings. But her acceptance of this subject is free,
in a sense that it is not for Herbert and Milosz.
Perhaps, in the current explosion of gender studies, it is worth asking how far Szymborska writes under the pressure of being female. The eminence she now enjoys in Poland is extraordinary—no woman poet in the English-speaking world has a comparable audience—and it would be strange if she wrote without at least some consciousness of prejudice overcome or patronage rejected. There certainly has been patronage. In Milosz’s *Postwar Polish Poetry* of 1965 she was represented by only one poem, and his praise of her was carefully qualified. She was ‘witty, daring, resourceful, but too fond of conceits’, and Milosz went on to say,

I suspect that the attitudes of the sophisticated progressive intelligentsia encourage preciousness and are too dependent on fashions to be good for poetry. Yet Szymborska’s poems are often very authentic. They speak of the passions and miseries of the flesh with melancholy bluntness. Her sharp, crystalline bitterness is symbolized by the title of her most significant volume: *Salt.*

The praise and the criticism here seem equally misdirected. The charge that Szymborska’s poetry is precious suggests that Milosz did not register the toughness inherent in the charm, while the loaded phrase ‘sophisticated progressive intelligentsia’ sounds like a class animosity unworthy of the author of *The Captive Mind* at his best. But his admission that Szymborska is nonetheless ‘often very authentic’ and his transition from authenticity to ‘the passions and miseries of the flesh’, about which she writes with ‘melancholy bluntness’, are very thought-provoking. Search as one may through her various volumes, one does not find such poems. Szymborska’s concern with the flesh is altogether different. But Milosz’s annoyance with what he finds precious in her poetry seems to be all of a piece with his need to praise her for fleshly knowledge, and bestow on her the bluntness and melancholy he thinks she should feel. The male poet responds to the shock of the encounter with a female poet by hastily constructing another to whom he can relate more easily: on the flimsy side, intellectually, but full of appropriately female knowledge about passion and pain.

Szymborska seems to have induced in Milosz something more like alarm than resentment, as can be seen from his closing remark about her ‘sharp, crystalline bitterness’, like ‘salt.’ This is so inappropriate to her poised urbanity that it can only be understood as a sort of muddled transference—a way of saying that if he, Milosz, were to enter her state of mind, he would find it bitter, since he does entirely without the support of value systems that he (one-time Catholic, one-time Marxist) cannot. In this sense, he is almost certainly right: there is an intense purity in her world view which could well be found alarming. Where this comprehensive scepticism comes from is worth returning to, but the point that emerges here is that not the least of the trials a woman poet may face is the ready assumption that she is a woman poet—female in her manner, subject and aims. There are such woman poets, of course, but Szymborska is not among them, and just as she reserved the right to define politics in her own way in the midst of fierce political tensions, so she reserves the right to fulfil herself as a female artist without reference to patriarchal males on the one hand, or feminist activists on the other. She has never breathed a word of irritation with Milosz (who, in all justice, printed seven more of her poems when he revised the anthology), or attempted to define her position vis-à-vis such a rival as Anna Swir, whom Milosz included with markedly greater enthusiasm. Swir is the womanly poet *par excellence*: the author, as Milosz says, of ‘violently feministic poems as well as of brutal erotic poems of a rare concision … She is fierce, lucid, ecstatic, terrifying.’ Typical titles of her poems are ‘A Woman Talks to Her Thigh’, ‘Song of Plenitude’ or ‘Twenty of My Sons.’

Szymborska’s indifference to feminism seems wise, in view of the way that patriarchal males and feminist females easily play into each other’s hands. Milosz has translated a whole volume of Anna Swir (*Happy as a Dog’s Tail*, 1985), because he felt comfortable with her mixture of fleshly realism and ecstasy. As a result, we have poems in which this most complex and reserved of male poets goes up in a balloon of Dionysiac rapture, like the ‘Song of Plenitude’:

*Plenitude, oh what a plenitude,*
*Strength, oh what a strength.*
I am as full as if I were a pregnant star,  
I am strong as if I could exist  
all alone in space …

My skin disappears,  
I fuse with things that are not me,  
I dissolve in everything.  
Once dissolved in anything  
I don't exist,  
that is, I exist in a way indescribably powerful.

This is death and immortality,  
that is, maybe, Nirvana.  
I apologise for that word but really this is it.

(trans. Milosz)

What makes me, even as a woman, physically uncomfortable about such writing, is the lack of complexity (unless the shade of irony in ‘really this is it’ counts as such). This is the true Dionysiac experience, exactly as described by Euripides in The Bacchae, but there is no attempt to bring the balloon back to earth. What Swir is describing is the polar opposite of individuation and all that civilisation has tried to attach to it: responsibility, consciousness, memory. The price the bacchants pay for being ‘dissolved in everything’ is that they only exist as a crowd force, and one so strong and blind that it tears apart a human body without recognising what it is. Certainly these women ‘exist in a way indescribably powerful’, but they are on their way to a dreadful moral hangover: a mother wakes from her trance to find it is her son’s head she is holding in her hands.

It is surely not accidental that art has always conjured up the Dionysiac experience with a mixture of awe and terror: we are born into our individual skins which do not dissolve, and the fusion with life as a whole that we enjoyed inside our mothers can never be experienced again, save at the cost of regression. What is awesomely desirable must be hedged about with terror to keep us fully human—that is, fully individual; and what is disturbing about such poetry as Swir’s, which sweeps the old taboos away, is that it is much clearer about the ecstasy than the terror. She is deeply comfortable with the idea that female power is to do with self-loss (‘fusing with things that are not me’) and childbirth itself, the central moment when one becomes two, is for her a kind of mutual engulfment. Her poem ‘Maternity’ begins,

I gave birth to life.  
It went out of my entrails  
and asks for the sacrifice of my life  
as does an Aztec deity.  
I lean over a little puppet,  
we look at each other  
with four eyes …

Do I thus adore myself  
in the fruit of my flesh  
do I offer myself for a sacrifice  
to a cannibal god of instinct?  
Where will I get the strength to resist  
what is so weak?

Necessary for the little puppet as air,  
I let myself unresisting be swallowed by love  
as the air lets itself be swallowed  
by these tiny life-starved lungs.
This is a wonderful account of the feelings of new motherhood, and Swir is too intelligent not to be aware of the awkward questions raised—as she says, ‘Do I thus adore myself / in the fruit of my flesh?’ But the poem does not linger on the moral awkwardness of being two-in-one. ‘I let myself unresisting be swallowed by love’, she says, and it is the absolute irreplaceability of the mother (‘Necessary for the little puppet as air’) that is offered for our wonder.

The central difficulty with this kind of writing is that it cannot be read in the same way by men and women, since it turns on the great distinction between the sexes, the ability to give birth. As with anything which puts half the audience in a false position, it seems to be a kind of bad manners. The ‘necessity’ that Swir is so tenderly glorying in is the baby’s life-problem, and the child’s sanity will depend on its developing ability to supersede its mother. And if the child is a boy, the extent to which his mother ‘is swallowed by love’ is the extent to which he will be defeated in his struggle to be free. From Oedipus to Sons and Lovers, literature testifies that to be ‘of woman born’ is the central dilemma of masculine existence—and that the great temptation of maternal power is its abuse.

We have wandered some way from Szymborska, but the contrast with Swir helps define what is distinguished about her poetry. No-one could mistake it for anything other than the poetry of a woman, but it seems to be necessarily tactful, as Swir is not, in its handling of those areas of experience where men and women may differ. ‘Returns’ is a good example:

He came home. Said nothing.
Though it was clear something unpleasant had happened.

He lay down in his suit.
Put his head under the blanket.
Drew up his knees.
He’s about forty, but not at this moment.
He exists—but only as in his mother's belly
seven layers deep, in protective darkness.
Tomorrow he will give a lecture on homeostasis
in megagalactic cosmonautics.
For now he's curled up, fallen asleep.

(Trans. Krynski and Maguire)

There is nothing in this poem, to my eye at least, to make a man feel that a female poet is taking advantage. Szymborska has taken on board the famous cry of Strindberg's Captain, ‘Can you explain to me how it is that you women can treat an old man as though he was a child?’—and his Nurse's reply: ‘I suppose it's because, whether you're little boys or grown men, you're all born of woman.' She knows that dirty wars have been fought on just this ground. But she frames her subject in terms of a thought about which both sexes may agree: that given a sharp rebuff the ‘self’ can temporarily disintegrate, and lying in the foetal position in the dark is the best medicine. Tomorrow this character will give a lecture on homeostasis; but just now he is in retreat from time and individuation. ‘He exists—but only as in his mother's belly / seven layers deep, in protective darkness.’ Doubtless there is a certain feminine irony to the fact that his subject is megagalactic cosmonautics—this is a measure of how far the male intellect will travel to get away from Mother—but the poem resists making a feminist case out of a human being. Szymborska ends with the watcher simply watching: ‘For now he's curled up, fallen asleep’. That does not sound like maternal complacency (‘So they're all little boys’), but the truth: the man is taking his cure.

If Szymborska does not write under political pressure or feminist pressure, what pressure is it that convinces us that her lightness is authentically serious? Perhaps the best explanation is the pressure of her scepticism,
which is so fundamental it plays the role that for other poets is played by commitment. The truth does not wear seven veils for Szymborska, but seven hundred. In poem after poem she strips off veils the reader might have found perfectly acceptable: cliché, tradition, even civilisation itself. It is relevant to her outlook that she studied sociology at university and is a frequent reviewer of books of popular science, particularly about animals. She writes from a position wide of the literary mainstream, which means she almost never comments on fellow authors, and from a stance one might almost call zoological. This may be the sense in which Milosz found her indescribably ‘bitter’, implying perhaps that he would be bitter himself, if he saw what she saw. But it would be more accurate to say that she writes in the sceptical humanist tradition of Montaigne and Pope, in that she attempts to define what makes human beings unique, while always being aware that we are animals that have got above ourselves in the scheme of things. Man is ‘the glory, jest and riddle of the world’, Pope concludes, and Szymborska tries not to stress any one of the three at the expense of the others. Here is a typical ‘glory, jest and riddle’ assessment of hers, rather oddly titled by Krynski and Maguire (a better translation would be ‘Doing Well’):

“A MILLION LAUGHS, A BRIGHT HOPE”

So he wants happiness,  
so he wants truth,  
so he wants eternity,  
just where does he get off!

Barely has he distinguished dreams from reality,  
barely figured out that he is he,  
barely fashioned, with hand once flipper,  
a flint and a rocket,  
easy to drown in a teaspoon of ocean  
not even laughable enough to give the void a laugh,  
with his eyes he merely sees,  
with his ears he merely hears,  
his formulations never lack hesitations,  
he pits argument against argument,  
in a word: he's almost nobody,  
but his head's filled with freedom, omniscience, transcendence  
beyond his foolish flesh,  
just where does he get off!

Because it seems he does exist,  
and really came to be  
under one of the provincial stars.  
In his own way he's vital, quite dynamic.  
Considering he's a crystal's sorry spawn—  
he's rather solemnly astonished.  
Considering his hard childhood in the herd,  
he's now fairly well differentiated.  
Just where does he get off!

Keep up the good work, if only for a while,  
if only for the twinkling of a tiny galaxy.  
Let us finally have some rough idea  
of what he will be, now that he is.  
And he is—persistent.  
Very, it cannot be denied, persistent.  
With that ring in his nose, that toga, that sweater.  
A million laughs, a bright hope, whatever you may say,  
God's poor little creature.  
A veritable man.
The reason this poem comes over as wittily poised rather than scathing, is that the argument takes such unexpected turns. No sooner is it established that man is only an animal than it is made clear that he is the animal: he is ‘almost nobody’, a foolish creature of flesh dreaming of transcendence—but to the best of our knowledge, he is the only miracle of this kind in the universe, and if the location of this experiment is a tiny planet called Earth ‘under one of the provincial stars’, so much the more wonderful. If man is only a mutant from crystal he has come a long way; if he spent a hard childhood in the herd, he is ‘fairly well differentiated’. That ‘fairly’ carries the characteristic stamp of Szymborska's sceptical intelligence. She cannot say ‘very’ after a lifetime's observation of how many human ills stem from a failure to individuate—not least under Marxism, with its declared value for the ‘mass’. But in the long view, the very long view that she is most comfortable with, she considers we have undone a surprising number of the habits we acquired in the herd.

Scepticism, however, is a rather stony-sounding virtue to praise in an author who gives so much unalloyed pleasure—whose joy in the the world-as-it-is is so unconditional. Perhaps the better way of putting it would be that her scepticism and her rejection, not only of cliché, but the very possibility of cliché, leave Szymborska housetoom for a thousand things poetry normally considers beneath its notice. Through the vitality of her attention she renovates the obvious and lends the normal radiance. Far from being ‘precious’ as Milosz feared, she is without snobbery, even about hierarchies of knowledge. As the critic Bienkowski has said,

“This poetry with its wise naiveté or naive wisdom, which is precisely a poetry open to a world of thought, is a poetry which is most profoundly anti-intellectual. Szymborska neither feels nor thinks in terms of schemas, she employs no categories … she is always herself.

(quoted by Czerniawski)

It is so rare to meet anyone so entirely open to the world as Szymborska that it is almost shocking. To read a volume of new poetry is often to feel one has stumbled into a hospital, or if the level of egotism is high enough, into a prison. With a volume of hers the effect is of a free plane ticket: typical Szymborska subjects are an onion, a dress in a museum, writing a CV, a dead beetle, the mathematical term pi, water or the effect of the discovery of a new star. By the time Szymborska has explored it, the world is much larger than we thought and the joy of using our intelligence much keener. She has twice as many subjects for poetry as normal because she can make poetry out of the picture on the back of the tapestry as well as the front. Indeed, her wit takes particular pleasure in conjuring up what doesn't exist—missing persons, feelings, quantities: and as she elaborates these negatives with composed irony, she lays bare the habits of the mind in constructing its meanings of every kind.

A good example of how naturally she finds a subject on the back of the tapestry is her poem on the ending of a stage performance, ‘Theater Impressions’. It is not the five acts of the tragedy that interest Szymborska, but the moments after, when art and reality come together in a mixture entirely new:

For me a tragedy's most important act is the sixth:
the resurrecting from the stage's battlegrounds,
the adjusting of wigs, of robes,
the wrenching of knife from breast,
the removing of noose from neck,
the lining up among the living
to face the audience.

Bows solo and ensemble:
the white hand on the heart's wound,
the curtsey of the lady suicide,
the nodding of the lopped-off head.
Bows in pairs:
fury extends an arm to meekness,
the victim looks blissfully into the hangman's eyes,
the rebel bears no grudge as he walks beside the tyrant.

The trampling of eternity with the tip of a golden slipper.
The sweeping of morals away with the brim of a hat.
The incorrigible readiness to start afresh tomorrow.

The entry in single file of those who died much earlier,
in the third, the fourth, or between the acts.
The miraculous return of those lost without trace.
The thought that they've been waiting patiently backstage,
not taking off costumes,
not washing off makeup,
moves me more than the tragedy's tirades.

But truly elevating is the lowering of the curtain,
and that which can still be glimpsed beneath it:
here one hand hastily reaches for a flower,
there a second snatches up a dropped sword.
Only then does a third, invisible,
perform its duty:
it clutches at my throat.

(trans. Krynski and Maguire)

This is classic Szymborska, in the way she unearths a subject from a non-subject and insists on the validity of a familiar experience. We all feel abashed at the end of a play by the discovery that it was only a play, and all the play's enemies are holding hands and bowing to us. It is both uncomfortable (the illusion is wrecked) and celebratory (it supplies an astonishing image of reconciliation: ‘fury extends an arm to meekness’, as she says). There is also a poignant irony in the fact that the cast is certain to go through it all again, in spite of all they have learnt by act five: ‘The incorrigible readiness to start afresh tomorrow’. But the real reason we sit motionless through these moments is surely that we are adjusting our notion of what constitutes reality at the most basic level; and Szymborska deftly uncoveres the central paradox for the final flourish of her poem. It is when the last dropped sword is cleared away that the meaning of the play penetrates—and the real world is temporarily annihilated by it.

Perhaps it is her willingness to start from such normal experiences that accounts for Szymborska's wide and affectionate readership. She convinces us that there is a poem lurking inside every commonplace—and therefore there is no such thing as a commonplace, only a truth wearing too many veils. Another good example is her poem ‘Letters of the Dead’, which starts from the thought that everyone reads old letters with the same faint but immovable feeling of superiority. Why do we feel superior to the dead? And why is the present always understood to be ‘better’ than the past—however we train ourselves to disguise our smugness? The result is an elegy with bite:

We read the letters of the dead like helpless gods,
yet gods for all that, since we know the dates to come.
We know which debts were not paid back.
Which men the widows were quick to marry.
Poor dead, the dead of narrow vision,
deceived, fallible, ineptly provident.
We see the faces, gestures made behind their backs.
Our ears pick up the ripping of last wills.
They sit before us comical as if on buttered rolls,
or dash to capture hats blown off their heads.
Their bad taste, Napoleon, steam and electricity,
their lethal cures for curable diseases,
the foolish apocalypse according to Saint John,  
the delusive earthly paradise according to Jean-Jacques …
We silently observe their pawns on the chessboard,  
except they're now moved three squares further.
Everything they foresaw came out quite different,  
or somewhat different, which also means quite different.
The most eager of them gaze with trust into our eyes,  
they've figured out they'll find perfection there.

(trans. Krynski and Maguire)

As so often with Szymborska, the final turn of the poem is particularly graceful, and sharply intelligent. The idealists of the past gaze with trust into our eyes, because we are the future that validates their optimism. But their future is our present: we look back at the past with detached contempt and treat the future with the same presumption they did. Our inability to learn any lessons save those that no longer apply could hardly be more neatly exposed.

Another reason why Szymborska is widely enjoyed may be the form of her poems. They characteristically take us on a mental journey at the end of which, in the last line or two, we collect a substantial reward for having travelled. The length and manner of her poems can be misunderstood—the notice of People on a Bridge in Poetry Review expressed annoyance at her apparent wordiness—but if she is precisely enough translated, it should appear how deliberately each line marks an advance on another, and how the elaborations widen out her meaning. A striking example of the risks Szymborska will run to enable the reader to experience her meaning, rather than simply be told it, is her poem ‘Voices’. This makes a proposition about the relation of the Roman Empire to its subject peoples (and all empires to their subjects) which could have been stated in a few lines. But Szymborska takes the reader on a journey through the actual experience. We too feel the bewilderment and mental fatigue of realising how many tribes there are to subjugate, and how unfamiliar and unsympathetic are these other forms of life; and when we have felt this to the hilt, she makes us feel it again: this is the true weariness of imperial power. There is of course a danger in mimicking mental exhaustion in a poem, the danger that it will convert to the real thing. But Szymborska's bounding irony prevents us from getting mired in the Roman attitude, and her close reading of Livy is applied to spectacular effect:

You scarcely move your foot when out of nowhere spring the Aborigines, O Marcus Aemilius.

Your heel's mired in the very midst of Rutulians.  
In Sabines and Latins you're sinking up to your knees.  
You're up to your waist, your neck, your nostrils  
In Aequians and Volscians, O Lucius Fabius.

These small peoples are thick as flies, to the point of irritation, satiation and nausea, O Quintus Decius.

One town, another, the hundred seventieth.  
The stubbornness of the Fidenates. The ill-will of the Faliscans.  
The blindness of the Ectetrans. The vacillation of the Antemnates.  
The studied animosity of the Lavicanians, the Pelignians.  
That's what drives us benevolent men to harshness beyond each new hill, O Gaius Cloelius.

If only they weren't in our way, but they are,  
the Auruncians, the Marsians, O Spurius Manlius.

The Tarquinians from here and there, the Etruscans from everywhere.  
The Volscinians besides. The Veientians to boot.  
Beyond all reason the Aulercians. Ditto the Sapinians.
beyond all human patience, O Sextus Oppius.

Small peoples have small understanding. 
Stupidity surrounds us in an ever-widening circle. 
Objectionable customs. Benighted laws. 
Ineffactual gods, O Titus Vilius.

Mounds of Hernicians. Swarms of Marrucinians. 
An insect-like multitude of Vestians, of Samnites. 
The farther you go the more there are, O Servius Pollius.

Deplorable are small peoples. 
Their irresponsibility bears close watching 
beyond each new river, O Aulus Junius.

I feel threatened by every new horizon. 
That's how I see the problem, O Hostius Melius.

To that I, Hostius Melius, reply to you, 
O Appius Pappius: Forward. Somewhere out there the world must have an end.

(trans. Krynski and Maguire)

The point of this mounting acrimony is revealed by the close: despair is precisely the mechanism that goads Rome forward, to greater violence and, presumably, greater despair. The natural limits of empire are the limits of the world itself, and Hostius Melius gives voice to the only consolation: ‘Somewhere out there the world must have an end’. What could more elegantly sum up the natural imbalance of great power, or the anguish it brings to the possessor as well as the victim? And as she sketches the imperial state of mind, Szymborska allows us to glimpse something rarely acknowledged: that the normal condition of imperial powers is deep self-pity. Why are the natives so ungrateful? It is their ‘stubbornness, ill-will and animosity’ that ‘drives us benevolent men to harshness’ says the pained Roman: and there one catches the note of Franz Josef holding together his empire to the last, the USSR crushing its fraternal satellites with tanks—and even the boyish rage of President Clinton discovering his helplessness in the Bosnian war. ‘The stubbornness of the Fidenates’ and the ‘vacillation of the Antemnates’ are perfectly recognisable in the behaviour of the Serbs, Croats and Moslems—and the French, Germans and British too; all of us, in a transatlantic perspective, ‘deplorable small peoples’ trailing too much history and too vivid a sense of our uniqueness.

If there is one aspect of Szymborska that justifies her Polish reputation and will finally gain her a European one, it is the way she requires no special materials for her poetry, but takes everyday life as a good enough subject. Strange as it may seem, there are not many writers who love life and can convincingly invite us to love it too. But Szymborska does, and she makes the distinction between the everyday and the miraculous almost disappear. Perhaps the right note to end on is her poem ‘Miracle Fair’:

The commonplace miracle: 
that so many common miracles take place.

The usual miracle: 
invisible dogs barking 
in the dead of night.

One of many miracles: 
a small and airy cloud 
is able to upstage the massive moon.

Several miracles in one:
an alder is reflected in the water
and is reversed from left to right
and grows from crown to root
and never hits the bottom
though the water isn't deep.

A run-of-the-mill miracle:
    winds mild to moderate
    turning gusty in storms.

A miracle in the first place:
cows will be cows.

Next but not least:
    just this cherry orchard
    from just this cherry pit.

A miracle minus top hat and tails:
    fluttering white doves.

A miracle (what else can you call it):
    the sun rose today at three fourteen A.M.
    and will set tonight at one past eight.

A miracle that's lost on us:
    the hand actually has fewer than six fingers
    but still it's got more than four.

A miracle, just take a look around:
    the inescapable earth.

An extra miracle, extra and ordinary:
    the unthinkable
    can be thought.

(trans. Baranczak and Cavanagh)

Here she strips the concept of miracle of the clichés normally associated with it. Christianity monopolised the word for centuries, and the secular religiosity of Romanticism took over where the church left off, but neither view of miracle can withstand her opening: ‘The commonplace miracle: / that so many common miracles take place’. Szymborska is looking for the most radical perspective of all, in which it is a miracle that ‘cows will be cows’ yet the ‘extra’ is ‘ordinary’; and her poems are an education in seeing that way. To return to the ecstasy of Anna Swir, here is ecstasy without the balloon: the ecstasy of a female poet standing on the common ground where male and female meet, and earthing her experience of the miraculous in the normal.

**Criticism: Helen Vendler (review date 1 January 1996)**


*[In the following review of View with a Grain of Sand, Vendler observes Szymborska's capacity to universalize as she details life's perplexing balance of joy and suffering.]*

“Again, and as ever, … the most pressing questions / are naïve ones.” The remarkable poet Wislawa Szymborska closes, with this remark, a late poem, “The Century's Decline,” on the collapse of Marxist
utopian hopes, after uttering one of her deliberately “naïve” questions: “How should we live?” Szymborska, one of a generation of notable Polish poets (she was born in 1923), was brought to American attention by Czeslaw Milosz in his history of Polish poetry, by two slim collections of translations, and by Stanislaw Baranczak in Spoiling Cannibals’ Fun, his recent anthology of Polish poetry of the last two decades of Communist rule. Now Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, his collaborator in that anthology, have brought out the largest selection of Szymborska—100 poems—in English.

They draw from seven of Szymborska's volumes, ranging from Calling Out to Yeti, her third collection, which appeared in 1957, through The End and the Beginning, which appeared in 1993. Their admirable versions, most of them readable as English poems owing to the exceptional gifts of the translators, make it possible to follow Szymborska's career, as she evolves from the high-spirited young poet—inspired equally by Marxist aspirations and by an antic sense of words—through the mature poet asking, in her “naïve” way, embarrassing political questions, to the older poet grieving for companions lost and hopes betrayed.

In spite of the translators' inventive substitutions, Szymborska's language-play as rendered in English is probably only a shadow of the felicitous original. Szymborska “translates well” because her poems, with all their local linguistic liveliness, adhere to a determined simplicity of narration. They are also resolutely “anonymous”: their speaker is identified only rarely by gender, and never by age or nationality or ethnicity or local habitation. No lyric writer has ever been more confident of the universality of human response. Szymborska writes not for Poles alone, nor for women alone, nor for the twentieth century alone: she believes fiercely in a common epistemology and a common ethic, at least within the Western culture she writes from and to.

This new collection, regrettably, lacks an introduction that would set Szymborska in context for English-speaking readers. In a brief essay on the poet published in 1994 in Salmagundi, Baranczak recalls her beginnings:

Under the circumstances of Poland's own version of Stalinist culture, any literary work that dared be either innovative or candid was doomed. Even though she was a sincere believer in Communism at this point, Szymborska was also too good a poet not to have sinned on both these accounts at once. The first collection that she prepared for publication was initially accepted but later scrapped, as aesthetically and ideologically not orthodox enough. Her debut, a heavily re-worked collection titled, with characteristically Socialist-Realist self-assertion, That's What We Live For, came out at last in 1952, much later than the first books of most of her coevals. Symbolically enough, Szymborska's second collection, published in 1954, was titled Questions Put to Myself. … [In a recent interview], she sums up the “mistake” underlying her early writing by saying that she tried then “to love humankind instead of loving human beings.”

The difficulty in writing anonymously and generally—allegorically, almost—is that one will distance oneself from the personal, the local, the intimate. Szymborska feared, early on, her own tendency toward the overview, and the lofty aloofness it fostered. As she (in an early poem) ascends to the chilly Himalayas, she addresses the Yeti who is thinking of visiting the earth:

Yeti, we've got Shakespeare there.
Yeti, we play solitaire
and violin. At nightfall,
we turn lights on, Yeti.

Up here it's neither moon nor earth.
Tears freeze.
Oh Yeti, semi-moonman,
turn back, think again!

The still void of the Himalayas appeals to her, yet she half-ironically defends the earth's virtue and its “sentences,” even as she flees its crime and its unjust “justice”:

Yeti, crime is not all
we're up to down there.
Yeti, not every sentence there
means death.

Later, speaking through the voice of Cassandra, Szymborska admits the prophetess's distance in relation to her countrymen, a distance she fears in herself:

I loved them.
But I loved them haughtily.
From heights beyond life.

Despite her aesthetic fastidiousness, and the intellectual haughtiness that is natural to her, Szymborska reluctantly admits, in her most famous early poem, that her “final exam” will be a historical and ethical one: as long as there is cruelty, her voice must be at the service of suffering. Here is the poem entire, which includes (as a simpler protest poem would not) the recurrent temptation to a skeptical impatience with ethical imperatives. The poem incorporates, besides its moral import, that necessary component to art, imagination's dream (here stimulated by the Brueghel painting described in the first stanza):

**“BREUGHEL'S TWO MONKEYS”**

This is what I see in my dreams about final exams:
two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill,
the sky behind them flutters,
the sea is taking its bath.

The exam is History of Mankind.
I stammer and hedge.

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.

Szymborska's narrative manner will not change notably over her writing life, but her rendition of suffering will enlarge as she sees the full brutality of life in Poland from the '40s through the '80s. A poem of 1985 called “Tortures” begins each of its five stanzas with the sentence, “Nothing has changed.” The first stanza remarks on the unchangingness of the body over the centuries: “it has a good supply of teeth and fingernails; / its bones can be broken; its joints can be stretched.” The second concerns the body's responsiveness: “The body still trembles as it trembled / before Rome was founded and after, / in the twentieth century before and after Christ.” The third notes the contemporary multiplication of offenses “requiring” torture—“new offenses have sprung up beside the old ones— / real, makebelieve, short-lived, and nonexistent”—yet the body's cry “was, is, and will be a cry of innocence.” The poem rises to a climax in its fourth stanza:

Nothing has changed.
Except perhaps the manners, ceremonies,
dances.
The gesture of the hands shielding the head
has nonetheless remained the same.
The body writhes, jerks, and tugs,
falls to the ground when shoved, pulls up its knees,
bruises, swells, drools, and bleeds.

The universality of suffering is Szymborska's chief lifetheme, and reiterative narration (interspersed with epigram) is her usual rhetorical mode. Of course, neither theme nor mode, nor both together, would suffice to make a poem. Every lyric poem is the trace left by an emotion; and the entire trace (not merely the thematic or narrative content of the poem) defines the emotion, as a footprint defines a foot. Szymborska is a most ingenious constructor of traces. And her ingenuity, is not factitious; it is, rather, philosophical. Each line in a poem—and each white space in a poem—must be weighed for the new imaginative information they bring.

Consider “Utopia,” surely one of the classic treatments of the Soviet utopia as it was consolidated in Poland. The poem begins with the promise and desirability of utopia, both moral and intellectual, but sees that each promise has left suffering in its wake. Szymborska does justice both to the initial suffering under the ancien régime that provoked a hope for a new system, and to the later suffering caused by that system's betrayal of its utopian promises. Each successive line bears meditation, as—in the fiction of the poem—a populace, wrung by their destructive experience in the (politically irrational) ocean, at last comes ashore on a (Marxist) island:

Island where all becomes clear.
Solid ground beneath your feet.
The only roads are those that offer access.
Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs ...
If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly. ...
Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

And then, after twelve such dawning statements about utopia, the poem makes its bleak sardonic turn:

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited, and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

Utopia is uninhabitable. It will always lose to unfathomable, dangerous, and chaotic life. Szymborska's poem enacts both the conviction of the early Marxists and their gradual disillusion, step by step, space by space, thought by thought.
Since Szymborska's sibylline and oracular sentences—formed in that same apodictic mode so congenial to universal system—risk being themselves examples of Unshakable Confidence, her admission that life is always unfathomable means that her sentences must also consider themselves provisional. An unexpected energy, often reactive (as in the case of her plunge into the ocean, away from the totalization of utopia) upsets and revivifies her lines. We deduce the extent of the anterior suffering by the energy needed to counteract it. Plunging into the sea—“never to return”—is usually a figure for suicide: Szymborska, writing “Utopia” in the ’70s, is in a Poland where self-liberation and suicide are hardly distinguishable.

For intellectuals—and Szymborska is one—epistemological perplexity is also a form of suffering. The clean and perpendicular lines of her poetry reflect her wish to be absolutely exact, even transparent. “Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words, / then labor heavily so that they may seem light.” And yet language is heavy with anthropocentric perspectives. Thus the simplest sentence—“The window has a wonderful view of a lake”—immediately sets up Szymborska's rigorous denials:

but the view doesn't view itself.
It exists in this world
colorless, shapeless,
soundless, odorless, and painless.

The lake's floor exists floorlessly,
and its shore exists shorelessly.
Its water feels itself neither wet nor dry
and its waves to themselves are neither
singular nor plural.

How, then, can one speak of the view, the floor of the lake, the shore, the waves? Is it possible to de-anthropomorphize language, and not say “the sun sets,” or “time passes”? 

Time has passed like a courier with urgent news.
But that's just our simile.
The character is invented, his haste is
make-believe,
his news inhuman.

Every poem by Szymborska is a struggle against taking common ways of expression for granted, or thinking that a single phrase can cover all the possibilities. In a revolt against her own genre—the generalizing poem—she multiples instances in order to cover all bases, certain that any one example will be humanly insufficient. Her poem “Clothes,” about medical suspicion and relief, wittily offers a multiple-choice checklist which will certainly, she intimates, cover your apprehensive visit to the doctor as well as hers:

You take off, we take off, they take off
coats, jackets, blouses, double-breasted suits,
made of wool, cotton, cotton-polyester ...
for now, the doctor says, it's not too bad,
you may get dressed, get rested up, get out of town,
take one in case, at bedtime, after lunch ...
you see, and you thought, and we were afraid that,
and he imagined, and you all believed;
it's time to tie, to fasten with shaking hands
shoelaces, buckles, velcro, zippers, snaps,
belts, buttons, cuff links, collars, neckties, clasps
and to pull out of handbags, pockets, sleeves
a crumpled, dotted, flowered, checkered scarf
whose usefulness has suddenly been prolonged.

It is the awful normalcy and generality of the dreaded verdict-visit that comes through in Szymborska’s rendition: all over the world people are stripping in doctor’s offices and expecting the worst. For Szymborska, the awful is, all too often, the normal, and her even tone embraces, in one of her most accomplished poems, the act of terrorism itself—which is, of course, entirely normal to its perpetrator:

“THE TERRORIST, HE’S WATCHING”

The bomb in the bar will explode at thirteen twenty.
Now it’s just thirteen sixteen.
There’s still time for some to go in, and some to come out.

The terrorist has already crossed the street.
The distance keeps him out of danger, and what a view—just like the movies:

A woman in a yellow jacket, she’s going in.
A man in dark glasses, he’s coming out.
Teenagers in jeans, they’re talking.
Thirteen seventeen and four seconds.
The short one, he’s lucky, he’s getting on a scooter,
but the tall one, he’s going in.

Thirteen seventeen and forty seconds.
That girl, she’s walking along with a green ribbon in her hair.
But then a bus suddenly pulls in front of her.
Thirteen eighteen.
The girl’s gone.
Was she that dumb, did she go in or not, We’ll see when they carry them out.

Thirteen nineteen.
Somehow no one’s going in.
Another guy, fat, bald, is leaving, though.
Wait a second, looks like he’s looking for something in his pockets and at thirteen twenty minus ten seconds he goes back in for his crummy gloves.

Thirteen twenty exactly.
This waiting, it’s taking forever.
Any second now.
No, not yet.
Yes, now.
The bomb, it explodes.

A poem such as this one was inconceivable, stylistically, before the twentieth century; it defines an epoch, a type, an ethic. It stands for Lockerbie and Belfast, Jerusalem and Oklahoma. It was, one could say, hanging in
the air waiting to be written, one of those poems that inscribes itself without effort on the mind receiving it.

Though Szymborska excels in such grim impersonal narratives, she is equally able to evoke—always obliquely, always originally—intense tenderness. The death of someone beloved, for example, is narrated from the point of view of his “Cat in an Empty Apartment”:

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. …

Someone was always, always here,  
then suddenly disappeared 
and stubbornly stays disappeared. …

Just wait till he turns up,  
just let him show his face.  
Will he ever get a lesson  
on what not to do to a cat.  
Sidle toward him  
as if unwilling  
and ever so slow  
on visibly offended paws,  
and no leaps or squeals at least to start.

The equally wrenching elegy for Krzysztof Baczynski, a poet who died at 23 in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, exhibits another of Szymborska's characteristically unexpected angles of approach. She heartbreakingly creates the poet as he would be had he continued to live till now, imagining him “Goateed, balding, / gray-haired,” eating his lunch:

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, straight- 
ening his sweater,  
and slowly moving toward the door.

Syzborska is not sentimental. She sees that the 65-year-old man would have coarsened “as if clay had covered up the angelic marble” of his exalted youth: “The price, after all, for not having died already / goes up not in leaps but step by step, and he would / pay that price, too.” She speaks from the knowledge of the price that she has herself paid for aging. But the ethical observation would be inert were it not for the poet's initial leap of imagination extending Baczynski's short life—a human wish so powerful it creates a full-scale scenario, down to the yearning phone call.

It would be wrong to consider Szymborska without asking whether, the anonymity of her stance notwithstanding, she does not sometimes write “as a woman.” The answer is yes and no. Yes, she writes as Cassandra and as Lot's wife, she writes on Isadora Duncan, on a prehistoric figure of the Great Mother, and on Rubens's women; and all of these could legitimately be taken as reflections on femaleness. Yet the poem on Cassandra is chiefly a meditation on how prophets, any prophets, are hated; and Lot's wife accounts for her halt by citing her “age … Distance. … / The futility of wandering. Torpor. / … in desolation. / In shame”—all of them gender-neutral factors. It seems to me that Szymborska writes most “as a woman” when she chooses a “humble” subject such as an onion (as a symbol of a non-dualist conception of nature); or when her imagination darts to a fantasy on Hitler's actual baby-photograph:
And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?
That's tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers' little boy! ...
Whose teensy hand is this, whose little ear and eye and nose? ...

A little pacifier, diaper, rattle, bib, our bouncing boy, thank God and knock on wood, is well, looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket, like the tots in every other family album. Sh-h-h, let's not start crying, sugar. The camera will click from under that black hood.

The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunen.
And Braunen is a small but worthy town—honest businesses, obliging neighbors, smell of yeast dough, of gray soap. No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps. A history teacher loosens his collar and yawns over homework.

“Hitler's First Photograph” is not Szymborska's best poem, but its opening is startling and daring, its black humor confronting—as only a woman might think to do—the mystery of how babies turn out. Szymborska often approaches ethical issues from just such an odd (and perhaps implicitly female) vantage; her poem “Voices,” about what we now call ethnic cleansing, simply lets us in on conversations between Roman governors:

You can't move an inch, my dear Marcus Emilius, without Aborigines sprouting up as if from the earth itself. ...

These irksome little nations, thick as flies. It's enough to make you sick, dear Quintus Decius. ...

They drive us mild-mannered sorts to sterner measures with every new mountain we cross, dear Gaius Cloelius.

If only they weren't always in the way, the Auruncians, the Marsians, but they always do get in the way, dear Spurius Manlius. ...

Little nations do have little minds. The circle of thick skulls expands around us. Reprehensible customs, Backward laws. Ineffectual gods, my dear Titus Vilius. ...
This seditious little poem of communications among the Spurious and the Vile was probably protected from the censors in 1972 only by its historical setting. It may be that Szymborska's resolute impersonality, anonymity and allegorical stance were forced into being by Polish censorship; but it is equally possible that her view of lyric as that which describes the irreducible human invariables evoked her geometrical abstraction of voice and her aloof narrations “from above.”

In a time when it is being metaphysically denied that any human universals exist, it is salutary to read Szymborska on the ancientness of human evil. Mercifully, Szymborska also notes the perpetual resurgence of hope and the deep rewards of human attachment. “My identifying features,” she says in the poem “Sky,” “are rapture and despair.” Both are found here, but perhaps more despair than rapture, in Szymborska's stern and unforgiving scan of the savage world that she has learned to understand.

**Criticism: Carlin Romano (essay date 3 October 1996)**


Wislawa Szymborska, a 73-year-old Polish poet whose bittersweet lines have inspired punk-rock lyrics and an enigmatic movie, was awarded the 1996 Nobel Prize for Literature on Thursday in Stockholm.

Called the “Mozart of Polish poetry,” Szymborska is perhaps Poland's most famous female writer, but before now had been relatively unknown outside her homeland.

In awarding the prize to the shy and reclusive widow, the Swedish Academy in Stockholm praised the “ease with which her words seem to fall into place.”

They are words that the late director Krzysztof Kieslowski drew upon when he made *Red*, his mysterious film about a judge, a model and two young lovers, based on the poem “Love At First Sight.”

Polish rock singer Cora put another of Szymborska's poems, “Nothing Twice,” to music last year.

In its proclamation, the Academy alluded to the “Mozartian” character of Szymborska' poetry, adding that it also found, amid the “ironic precision” of her poems, “something of the fury of Beethoven.”

Speaking from Zakopane, the tiny Polish mountain resort where she was staying at a writers' hotel, the shy, frail but intense Szymborska, expressed her surprise and gratitude.

“I am very happy, I am honored, but at the same time stunned and a little bit frightened with what awaits me,” she told Poland's Radio Zet. “I'm afraid I will not have a quiet life for some time now, and this is what I prize the most.”

Asked whether she would appear more in public and give lectures abroad, the gray-haired poet said she did not yet know, but commented: “No, I never give lectures.”

For her literary colleagues in Poland, where Wislawa Szymborska (pronounced veez-WAH-wah sheem-BOR-skah) is a revered figure, the selection brought immediate joy.
“She is Poland's best female poet since the war,” Tadeusz Nyczek, a writer and literary critic, told the Zycie newspaper.

“Wiska simply deserved it,” commented Stanislaw Lem, the Polish science fiction writer who is far better known in the West than Szymborska.

Writer Andrzej Szczypiorski expressed his pleasure that “this great poet from Krakow becomes more important to the whole world than all these (Polish businessmen) who run around making more and more dollars.”

Praise also poured in from non-literary figures.

“(She is) so modest as a person and so great in spirit and in writing,” said former Polish President Lech Walesa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983. “This is a great distinction for the whole nation.” In a burst of patriotic fever, Polish Finance Minister Grzegorz Kolodko said he'll exempt Szymborska from tax on the prize money.

Szymborska becomes the fourth Polish writer to win the Nobel prize for Literature. The others were Henryk Sienkiewicz in 1905, Wladyslaw Reymont in 1924 and the 1980 Laureate Czeslaw Milosz, a naturalized U.S. citizen who said Thursday that Szymborska's selection “is a great triumph for 20th-century Polish poetry.”

Szymborska was born in the tiny town of Bnin in Western Poland in 1923. Virtually all of her literary career, however, has taken place in Krakow, where she studied Polish philology and sociology at the university and joined the poetry staff of the newspaper Zycie Literackie (Literary Life) in 1952.

Her first poems, some 30 of which were published immediately after World War II in the Krakow newspaper Dziennik Polski (Polish Daily), dealt with survivor guilt amid the aftermath of the war and the German occupation.

Although some news services on Thursday reported that her earliest work “glorified Communism,” her propagandistic poetry—roughly from 1950 to the so-called “Polish Thaw” that commenced in 1956—came only after Szymborska saw a collection of her work cancelled in 1949 when Communist literary apparatchiks judged it cryptic, overly pessimistic and too obsessed with the war.

Unlike such Polish poets as Zbigniew Herbert, who responded to Stalinist demands on literature by engaging in so-called “internal emigration” (writing but not publishing), Szymborska responded by turning out politically correct poems that she later disavowed. Subsequently, she became a severe critic of Stalin, comparing him to the Abominable Snowman in a famous poem, “Calling Out to Yeti.”

In that poem, Szymborska expresses what came to be her signature theme: pride in humankind's determination to stay civilized amid savagery, joined to grim appreciation of poetry's limited power. In that respect, she is the living answer to philosopher Theodor Adorno's famous doubt over whether there can be poetry after Auschwitz. In the poem, Szymborska tries to explain mankind to the isolated mountain creature:

Yeti, not only crimes
are possible among us.
Yeti, not all words
are death sentences.

We inherit hope—at
the gift of forgetfulness.
You notice how we give birth
to children among the ruins.
Yes, we have Shakespeares.
Yes, we play violins.
Yes, when darkness falls
we turn on lights.

In her many poems about love, Szymborska often permits herself a sarcastic, ironic or teasing voice, though she has also been criticized for poems suggesting a woman's fulfillment can only come through the love of a man.

In “I am too close,” a woman lying in bed next to her sleeping lover muses on the costs of their intimacy:

I am too close to appear in his dreams.
I do not flutter over him, nor evade him
beneath the roots of trees. I am too close.

... He is sleeping,
much more accessible at this moment to the cashier of
a wandering one-lion circus
whom he saw once in his life
than to me who am lying beside him.

Raised as a Catholic in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, Szymborska also routinely indulges, according to Slavic scholar Madeline Levine, in the “device of encapsulating a philosophical proposition in a wittily narrated anecdote.”

One example is her poem, “Two Monkeys By Bruegel,” in which the narrator dreams of taking a final exam in front of the painter's two monkeys, who are chained to a window that opens onto the sea:

One monkey, staring at me, listens ironically
the other appears to be dozing—
but when silence descends after a question
he coaches me
with the soft rattling of his chain.

Szymborska's most recent book is The End and the Beginning (1993), not yet available in English. Works available in English include View With a Grain of Sand, translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh (Harcourt Brace, 1995). Thursday, Harcourt Brace said it was ordering an immediate new printing of 12,000 copies of View.

In “Under a Single Star,” a poem Szymborska twice used to close a published collection, she expresses her amalgam of feisty hope and bitter constraint, a mantra that will perhaps serve her well as she prepares to face the world—no longer just a poet, but an icon of great poetry:

I apologize to everything that I cannot be everywhere.
I apologize to everyone that I cannot be every man and woman.
I know that so long as I live nothing can justify me because I am an obstacle to myself.
Don't be angry with me, language, because I use pathetic words and labor at making them seem light.

Criticism: Wislawa Szymborska and Dean E. Murphy
(interview date 13 October 1996)
Three weeks ago, poet Wislawa Szymborska left her modest two-room apartment in the southern Polish city of Krakow to escape the noise and confusion of remodeling. She slipped away to this pristine mountain resort, a favorite of Polish artists and writers, and took a small room—no bathroom and no telephone—on the second floor of a clubhouse reserved for authors. Szymborska, a retiring woman with wispy gray hair who cherishes her solitude, passed the days quietly, working on her latest poem. Everything was going according to plan, she says, until Oct. 3, when the world “came crashing down on me.” It was on that day that the Swedish Academy in Stockholm announced that the relatively unknown Szymborska had won the 1996 Nobel Prize for Literature. The award came as a surprise to Szymborska—and most everyone else in Poland—not because she is considered unworthy, but because her poetry speaks mostly to universal themes rather than the parochial political subjects that have distinguished Eastern European verse since World War II. Unlike the last Polish poet to win the prize—Czeslaw Milosz in 1980—Szymborska was not a bold, Communist-era dissident; nor did the timing of the honor coincide with a seminal event in Polish history—1980 was the year of the Gdansk shipyard uprising. And unlike the presumed Polish front-runner for this year's prize, poet Zbigniew Herbert, Szymborska's verse is most admired for its “finely chiseled diction,” as the Swedish Academy noted, not its ponderous political metaphors. That is not to say Szymborska, 73, has escaped the clutch of politics during her 50-year career. In fact, politics provided an immovable backdrop to her work from the very beginning. Several of her early poems glorified communism—a dark period that she now disavows—and she spent most of her later career working for publications that firmly placed her in the anti-communist camp of liberal thinkers. Under martial-law in the early 1980s, she published poems under a pseudonym in Polish underground and exile publications. But since breaking with Stalinism in the early 1950s, Szymborska has steadfastly resisted ideology-driven verse, instead using her own powers of observation to tackle subjects one by one. A widow with no children, Szymborska despises crowds and public appearances, and refuses to give readings of her poems. Her main contact with the outside world is through a longtime newspaper column, “Non-Compulsory Reading.” But, last week, in the sanctity of this favorite creative retreat, she spoke openly and endearingly about her life's work and the burden of instant fame.

[Murphy]: Why is your privacy so important to you?

[Szymborska]: Otherwise, I couldn't write. I cannot imagine any writer who would not fight for his peace and quiet. Unfortunately, poetry is not born in noise, in crowds, or on a bus. There have to be four walls and the certainty that the telephone will not ring. That's what writing is all about.

Some of your poems are introspective, others present broad political manifestoes. Do you write with a mission?

I don't believe I have a mission. Sometimes I really have a spiritual need to say something more general about the world, and sometimes something personal. I usually write for the individual reader—though I would like to have many such readers. There are some poets who write for people assembled in big rooms, so they can live through something collectively. I prefer my reader to take my poem and have a one-on-one relationship with it.

Is your poetry an expression of vanity?

If you mean, is it a form of exhibitionism, probably it is. I have never really thought about it seriously, but telling one's feelings to unknown people is a little bit like selling one's soul. On the other hand, it brings great happiness. All of us have sad things happen to us in our lifetimes. In spite of everything, when those terribly
horrible things happen to a poet, he or she can at least describe them. There are other people who, in a way, are sentenced to live through such experiences in silence.

Some critics describe your poetry as detached and aloof, yet you consider it private and personal. Can it be both?

Each of us has a very rich nature and can look at things objectively, from a distance, and at the same time can have something more personal to say about them. I am trying to look at the world, and at myself, from many different points of view. I think many poets have this duality.

Is there something uniquely Polish about your work? Would your poetry be the same if you came from a different country?

I have no idea. But I would really like it if I could live the lives of many other people, and then compare them.

Which of your poems do you like most?

My favorite is the one that I am planning at that moment. I have to like this poem to even start writing it. When it goes into the world, and is already in a book, then I let the poem manage on its own.

Why did you start writing poetry?

It just happened. Maybe it was the atmosphere in my home. It was an intellectual kind of house, where we talked a lot about books. We read a lot. Especially my father. I started writing poems when I was five years old. If I wrote a poem—it was children's poetry—that my father liked, then he reached into his pocket, and gave me [some money]. I can't remember exactly how much, but it was a lot to me.

In your early years, you wrote in the social-realist style, praising communism. Why?

It is very difficult to explain. Now people don't understand the situation then. I really wanted to save humanity, but I chose the worst possible way. I did it out of love for mankind. Then I came to understand that you should not love mankind, but rather like people. Like, but not love. I don't love humanity; I like individuals. I try to understand people, but I cannot offer salvation to them. That was a very hard lesson for me. It was a mistake of my youth. It was made in good faith, and, unfortunately, a lot of poets have done the same. Later they would sit in prison for changing their ideology. I was fortunately spared that fate, because I never had the nature of a real political activist.

How has the Solidarity revolution changed your poetry?

It hasn't influenced my writing. Beginning in 1954-55 [following the death of Joseph Stalin], I already started thinking differently—the same way I think now. Since then, I haven't changed the way I look at the world. After all of those mistakes, after all that I lived through in the early '50s, my thinking was altered for good. My life as a citizen of this country has changed dramatically since Solidarity, but my life as a poet has not.

Some critics have noted that totalitarianism inspired great literature in Eastern Europe, but democracy has not. You have published only one book since the changes of 1989. Is there a connection?

Definitely not. I simply publish one collection every six or seven years. I have always worked that way. And I still write about all different kinds of things—the same way it has been since the 1950s.
Your friends say you have a great sense of humor, which is often reflected in your poetry. How important is humor in your work?

I don't want to brag here, but it seems to me, I have a bit of talent when it comes to friendship. Of course, I am talking about being friends with individual people. I cannot really imagine a friendship that is totally cerebral—I think that friendship, from the beginning, means you are not only going to worry together, but you are also going to laugh together.

Do you strive to inject this laughter in your poetry?

It just comes naturally. I don't do it intentionally. Sometimes, though, I do write poems just to make others laugh. For example, I write letters using English-style limericks, which I like very much, and my correspondents write back in limericks.

You value humor, but you also write very sad poetry. Which suits you more?

The two things are easily reconciled. You cannot have just one feeling toward the world. Going through this adventure, which I call life, sometimes you think about it with despair, and sometimes with a sense of enchantment. Sometimes the motivation for poetry is being awed by things. As a child I was never surprised by anything; now I am surprised about everything. Every little thing I look at, a leaf or a flower, I say, “Why this? What is this?” There is also another motivation: Curiosity. I am curious about people, their feelings, what they live through, their fate, what this life means. So this wonderment, curiosity and sadness, all of that comes together for me.

Some of your poems are pessimistic about the state of the world. You have no children: Is the future too gloomy for children?

Actually I would like to know how many people there were in the world when I was born, and how many there are now. I suspect the number has doubled. This is something of great concern for me. A small example. I was born in a little town close to Poznan and there was a big lake there. People went fishing, you could take a boat and sail. Now this lake is tiny. Weeds grow in it. It is going to dry up. And if you think about how many such lakes dry up in the world—and there are always more and more people—then you start having thoughts that aren't very pleasant. There are people who say, “Let more people be born, because the earth can sustain them all.” I don't agree with that. We all know how many people die of malnutrition and diseases that should be extinct. I cannot talk about these things with a sense of humor.

Will you emphasize such concerns as a Nobel laureate?

I don't know yet. I haven't had time to ponder what I want to say. I simply have not had one moment of time to think. I need about four days of absolute peace and quiet to gather my thoughts.

Perhaps you will draw upon a personal creed? Do you have a philosophy of life?

No. I think it comes instinctively. I know, more or less, what is right and what is wrong. I never say that everything I do is right, but I know when I do something wrong. I am aware of it. I have a conscience.

You have a remarkable sense of observation. Where does it come from?

I couldn't ask a painter why he paints in this way and not another. I couldn't ask a composer how his music suddenly comes to life. I know they couldn't really explain it. Neither can I. Maybe I was born with it. But of course, you then have to work on it a bit.
How do you write your poems? On a computer?

Never on a computer. I need to have a direct connection between my head and my hand. I am not a modern person. I cross things out. I am very old fashioned—I write with a pen.

The Swedish Academy noted that your volume of work is rather modest. Why do you not write more?

Sometimes I put something aside, and start on something new. Sometimes I think of a couple poems at once. They say I have written about 200 poems. I have actually written much more than that. I write more than I publish. You see, I also have this wastebasket. If I write something in the evening, and I read it the next day, sometimes it ends up in the wastebasket. And sometimes it doesn't.

Would you encourage a young person today to take up poetry writing?

Everyone has to take that risk on his own. During a certain point in your life, when you come out of childhood, you enter this world of risk and personal responsibility, and there is nothing you can do to avoid it. Write poems and we will see. You have to consider that they may be bad poems, and people will reject them. Or maybe they will be successful.

Criticism: Michael Glover (review date 8 November 1996)


[In the following review of View with a Grain of Sand, Glover notes Szymborska's relative obscurity in the English-speaking world prior to her 1996 Nobel award.]

There were two kinds of response to the news that the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska had won this year's Nobel Prize for Literature. One was outrage, ably expressed by the Swedish literary agent who said that the whole notion of the prize had by now been debased if it could be awarded to so “insular” and obscure a figure. The other was an audible gulp on the part of literary editors, followed, half an hour's meagre research later, by obsequious endorsement expressed in suitably opaque mumbo-jumbo—opacity was, of course, necessary because very few of them had ever read a word written by the woman.

If the charge of obscurity means that Szymborska is a difficult poet to understand, that would be quite the opposite of the truth—as anyone will discover who reads this excellent Harper and Row edition of her selected poems, now published here by Faber. Szymborska is enlightened, humorous, sceptical, humanistic—but never hermetic (which is at least one of the meanings of obscure).

Another meaning is just as pertinent: that we've never heard of her. The edition of her work that appeared in the UK six years ago came from Forest Books, one of those small poetry presses that get so little national coverage. What other way, unless one happens to be a devoted reader of poetry magazines, is there of finding out what is being published? But Szymborska is much less “obscure” a figure in America. There have been at least three different English-language translations of her poetry in print over there.

Why, given her evident stature as a poet, has she had so little attention here? Al Alvarez has much to answer for. From the late 1960s Alvarez edited the influential Penguin European Poets series. Its Polish poets in that series—names fairly well-known in this country—including Tadeusz Rozewicz and Zbigniew Herbert. These poets were lucky—if that is the apposite word. Their work proves them to have been “covert witnesses” to the horrors of the neo-Stalinist regime, beneath whose boot they struggled to survive. Alvarez said recently how
much he envied them their “relevance” to the societies in which they fought so heroically.

Szymborska wasn’t much of a heroine of that kind. She was one of those quiet people who probably loathed the government but got on with her life, perhaps seeing its behaviour as rather typical of rulers down the ages (see, for example, that marvellous poem “Voices”).

Alvarez edited The Faber Book of European Poetry in 1992, long after Szymborska had written her best work. She wasn’t in that book either. She has still not mounted the barricades. The Nobel judges had to push her into the limelight—and my guess is that she is hating it.

**Criticism: Czeslaw Milosz (essay date 14 November 1996)**


*I have been saying that Polish poetry is strong and distinguished upon the background of world poetry by certain traits. Those traits can be found in the poems of a few eminent Polish poets, including Wislawa Szymborska. Her Nobel Prize is her personal triumph but at the same time it confirms the place of the “Polish school of poetry.” Perhaps it is not necessary to recall that the language of that poetry is the language of a country where the crime of genocide was perpetrated on a mass scale. Links between the word and historical experiences can be of various kinds, and there is no simple relationship of cause and effect. And yet a certain fact is not without significance: Szymborska, like Tadeusz Rozewicz and Zbigniew Herbert, writes in the place of the generation of poets who made their debut during the war and did not survive.

What does the poetry of Szymborska, marked as it is by such a lightness of touch, skeptically smiling, playful, have to do with the history of the twentieth, or any other, century? In its beginnings, it had much to do with it, but its mature phase moves away from images of linear time rushing toward utopia or an apocalyptic catastrophe, as the just-ending century liked to believe. Her dimension is personal, of one person who reflects on the human condition. It is true that her reflection goes together with a remarkable reticence, as if the poet found herself on a stage with the decor for a preceding play, a play which changed the individual into nothing, an anonymous cipher, and in such circumstances to talk about oneself is not indicated.

Szymborska's poems explore private situations, yet they are sufficiently generalized, so that she is able to avoid confessions. In her well-known poem about a cat in an empty apartment, instead of complaint about the loss of the husband of a friend, we hear: “To die / one does not do that to a cat.” Reticence and an ironic distance toward herself may testify to special predilections of the poet; nevertheless, since in this she resembles some of her Polish contemporaries, one could successfully defend the thesis that their common feature is their attempt to exorcise the past. In this task they practice a peculiar distillation, and the raw materials they use are often difficult to detect.

For me, Szymborska is first of all a poet of consciousness. This means that she speaks to us, living at the same time, as one of us, reserving her private matters for herself, operating at a certain remove, but also referring to what everybody knows from one's own life. For do we not remember our undressing before a medical examination, or our wondering at coincidences, or reading letters of people who are no more? Hence, as if in drawings that capture scenes of familiar everyday events, we recognize ourselves in these poems as beings kindred to each other, with a subjectivity which is different in each person and which exists, as it were, between parentheses. We are related also because we are contemporaries, thus submitted to the same circuit of
information. Words—orientation signals—mean more or less the same to us: the theory of evolution, spaceships, Hiroshima, but also Homer, Vermeer, or the uncertainty principle, namely, a whole repertory of notions we receive at home, at school, in the mass media.

Szymborska's poems are built through juggling, as if with colored balls, the components of our common knowledge; they surprise us with its paradoxes and show the human world as tragicomic. The consciousness that finds its expression in them is a consciousness after—after Darwin, after Einstein, after many others—for, after all, the civilization in which we live submerged preserves their traces. Confronted with poetry so insouciantly dancing, as if written effortlessly, we hesitate to mention the landmarks of science, yet because they have existed, Szymborska's thought and our thought, whether we wish it or not, is complex and devious. Nowhere is this better seen than where she questions the place of man in the chain of evolution. Thus, for instance, the poem “Four in the Morning” opposes our anxiety, not allowing us to sleep, to the automatic busying of ants.

No one feels good at four in the morning.  
If ants feel good at four in the morning  
—three cheers for the ants. And let five o'clock come  
if we're to go on living.(1)

Another poem, “In Praise of Self-Deprecation,” draws a line between the clear conscience characterizing all live nature and the moral torments which are our part:

The self-critical jackal does not exist.  
The locust, alligator, trichina, horsefly  
live as they live and are glad of it.

The poem “Antonomy” begins:

When in danger the sea-cucumber divides itself in two

and the argument that follows revindicates the human privilege, that of creating art—in spite of and against death:

We know how to divide ourselves, how true, we too.  
But only into a body and an interrupted whisper.  
Into body and poetry.

Symborska would not have been a poet of the period of great doubts had she not invoked salvation through art. “The revenge of a mortal hand” appears in her poems in various forms, including fun at her own expense.

A couple of years ago, reading her poems in public in English translation, I found out that their intellectual brilliance hiding serious content was well understood, and applauded by, a mostly young audience. I should reveal what it was they liked the most. The listeners of both sexes laughed a lot (and I with them) hearing the poem “In Praise of My Sister”:

My sister does not write poems,  
and it's unlikely she'll suddenly start writing poems.

I thought that at least half of those present must have had writing poems on their conscience, and that is why they found the poem so funny.

Note
Wislawa Szymborska (speech date 30 December 1996)


[In the following speech of acceptance for the 1996 Nobel Prize for Literature, Szymborska contemplates the centrality of the thought “I don't know” to poets and other individuals who live and work by inspiration.]

They say that the first sentence in any speech is always the hardest. Well, that one's behind me. 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. Imperfection is easier to tolerate in small doses.

Contemporary poets are skeptical and suspicious even, or perhaps especially about themselves. They 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 merits, since these are hidden deeper and you never quite believe in them yourself. When they fill out questionnaires or chat with strangers—that is, when they can't avoid revealing their profession—poets prefer to use the general term “writer,” or to 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 discover that they're dealing with a poet. I suppose philosophers meet with a similar reaction. Still, they are 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. That 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,” since he lacked official certification granting him the right to be a poet.

Several years ago, I had the honor and the 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. This must have been, it seems to me, because he recalled the brutal humiliations that he 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. It wasn't so long ago, in this century's first decades, that poets strove to shock us with their extravagant dress and their 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 finally this is 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 to the emergence of masterpieces. And one can depict certain kinds of scientific labor with some success. Laboratories, sundry instruments, elaborate machinery brought to life: such scenes may hold an 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. And 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 to 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 several 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 to someone else what you don't understand yourself. When I'm asked about this on occasion, I hedge, too. But my answer is this: inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists. There is, there has been, there 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—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 that 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 even got that much—this is one of the harshest human miseries. And there's no sign that the coming centuries will produce any changes for the better as far as this goes.

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

By this point, though, certain doubts may arise in my audience. All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics and demagogues struggling for power with a few loudly shouted slogans also enjoy their jobs. They, too, perform their duties with inventive fervor. Well, yes; but they “know,” and what they know is enough for them once and for all. They don't want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish the force of their arguments. But 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, 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 spaces within us as well as the 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 Sklodowska-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 have ended her days performing that 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, absolutely inadequate. So poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paper clip by literary historians and called their “œuvres.”

I sometimes dream of a situation that can't possibly come true. I audaciously imagine that I have a chance to chat with Ecclesiastes, the author of that moving lament on the vanity of all human endeavors. I bow very deeply before him, because he is one of the greatest poets, for me at least. Then I grab his hand. “There's nothing new under the sun”: that's what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were 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 under which you're sitting 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: What new thing under the sun are you planning to work on now? A further supplement to thoughts that you've already expressed? Or maybe you're tempted to contradict some of them? 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 that 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 we're terrified by its vastness and our impotence, embittered by its indifference to the 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 that 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 to which we've grown accustomed. But the point is, there is no such obvious world. Our astonishment exists per se and it isn't based on a comparison with something else.

Granted, in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases such as “the ordinary world,” “ordinary life,” “the ordinary course of events.” But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighted, 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.

**Criticism: Ewa Gajer (essay date May 1997)**


*[In the following essay, Gajer offers a concise overview of Szymborska's poetic career, culminating in her 1996 Nobel Prize.]*
On October 30 1996, 73-year-old Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska won the Nobel Prize for Literature ‘for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality.’

Szymborska is the fifth Pole to win the prize. In 1905, the novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz won it for the book *Quo Vadis* which depicted the persecution of Christians in ancient Rome. Wladyslaw Stainslaw Reymont (who influenced some of Katharine Susannah Prichard's writing) got the prize in 1924 for *The Peasants*, an epic description of Polish country life. Fifty-four years later, Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Polish-Jewish writer living in the US, won the prize for his portrayal of the Jewish community in Poland. The poet Czeslaw Milosz, also living in the US, became the laureate in 1980.

Wislawa Szymborska was born on 2 July 1923 in Bnin near Poznan. She studied Polish literature and sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow where she now lives. She published her first poem ‘I Seek the Word’ in 1945 while still a student. In her first two collections of poetry, published in the early 1950s, she succumbed to the officially propagated stalinist line. However, she strongly renounced these beliefs in the next collection, *Calling Out to Yeti*, which came out in 1957. The Abominable Snowman from the title poem is commonly believed to represent Joseph Stalin.

Since then, Szymborska has clearly moved away from politics. She does not avoid ‘big issues’ confronting the world, such as war or racism, and her 1993 collection *The End and the Beginning* is proof of this, but overall her poetry is not political. She writes about everyday matters, feelings and frustrations with subtlety, sensitivity and reflectiveness. Although famous for her artistic detachment, she is never cold. That is probably why her poetry is perceived by many critics as very personal, while to others it is not personal at all. The Swedish Academy praised her writing for a ‘striking combination of esprit, inventiveness and empathy, which calls to mind both the Renaissance and the Baroque.’

Szymborska loves playing with words, using old metaphors and fixed phrases in new contexts, giving them a humorous and surprising meaning. She often analyses ideas from an unexpected perspective. In the poem ‘Some Like Poetry,’ for example, she concentrates on the word ‘like’ and questions its use when describing one's attitude to poetry [the text of the poem reads]:

Like—but one also likes chicken soup with noodles, one also likes compliments and the colour blue, one likes an old scarf, one likes to prove oneself right, one likes to pet a dog.

Such an ironic attitude is typical of many of Szymborska's poems, which try to provide new answers to old questions. The Academy described her as a poet who believes that ‘no questions are of such significance as those that are naive.’

During martial law in Poland in the 1980s, Szymborska published in the exile periodical *Kultura Paryska* in Paris and in the underground *Arka* in Poland under the pen-name Stanczykowna. The name itself is quite significant. Stanczyk, the prototype of the pseudonym, was the most famous Polish jester. He made history as the person who, while playing the clown, could deliver the most bitter truth and whose political wisdom was highly valued by the king, Zygmunt Stary. There is certainly enough irony, sadness and truth about life in Szymborska's writing to indicate why she chose Stanczyk as her master.

Szymborska's name is often mentioned alongside the poets Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Rozewicz whom, she believes, deserve recognition as much as she does. Neither of these two poets, however, (even though Rozewicz seems to be better known outside Poland than Szymborska) has managed to appeal to such a wide reading public. Szymborska's poetry, while often elusive, psychological, and metaphorical, remains surprisingly clear and has a strong general appeal.
Szymborska's popularity equals that of the late Polish poet Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska. Szymborska, like Jasnorzewska, has always been a household name. Her poems are on school curricula, they are written on birthday cards, and are sung by rock stars. Kora, a lead singer from the group Manam, turned Szymborska's 1980 poem ‘Nothing Twice’ into a hit. The same poem, translated into English by the Polish poet Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, was the one most often quoted in press releases after Szymborska's award had been announced [the text reads]:

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.

Szymborska's selected poems were translated into Swedish by Per Arne Bodin and Roger Fjelstrom in 1980. It was, however, Anders Bodeglrd's 1989 translation of her selected poems, released under the title *Utopia* which swung the vote in her favour. Bodeglrd's effort was highly praised both by the Academy and by Szymborska who herself translates French poetry.

Szymborska said in an interview that she would donate her prize money of 2 million to charity. The first announcement came before Easter. She donated one hundred thousand dollars to the fund managed by the former Social Security Minister Jacek Kuron whom she greatly admires for his social conscience.

Szymborska is a very private person. She declines invitations to functions in her honour and says that she hopes the Nobel Prize won't change her lifestyle. She wants to be left alone to do what she does best: write poetry.

*Note*

1. All quotations of comments made by the Swedish Academy come from the Nobel Foundation's press release in English ‘The Nobel Prize for Literature 1996.’

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In English:


**Criticism: George Gömöri (review date spring 1997)**


[In the following review of View with a Grain of Sand, Gömöri generally approves of Stanislaw Barańczak's and Clare Cavanagh's English translations of Szymborska's “conceptualist” poems.]

The award of the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature to Wislawa Szymborska took most people by surprise. Outside her native Poland relatively few poetry lovers—or even critics for that matter—had heard anything about Szymborska, although two of her verse collections had been translated into English. In England, Forest Books published People on a Bridge in 1990, and in the United States Harcourt Brace was responsible for a 1995 collection which has now been reproduced in paperback form by an eminent British publishing house. View with a Grain of Sand provides the best introduction in English to the poetry of Szymborska, an introduction which, one presumes, will attract many new readers to her work.

Szymborska's first book was published in a less than auspicious time for poetry: in 1952, when Polish cultural life still suffered Stalinist regimentation. Young people had to wait until 1956 to publish nonaffirmative and nonpolitical verse, and Szymborska probably regards her first two collections as somehow compromised by the political demands of the period. That surmise is supported by the editorial choice in the Barańczak—Cavanagh collection: it includes no poems from the first two books and only three from the much more accomplished Wolanie do Yeti (Calling Out to Yeti), published in 1957. The selection from the five subsequent collections seems to be even-handed, including many of Szymborska's most acclaimed poems.

It is hard to tell what “school” this accomplished Cracow-based poet represents. She is clearly an intellectual who cultivates intelligent modes of speech. According to Adam Czerniawski, she is also “a conceptualist,” which probably means that she usually starts out from a concept, an idea, a kind of intellectual thesis, and molds it into verse through an image-studded poetic argument. Philosophical ideas usually do not work in poetry; what is amazing about Szymborska is that with her humor, her well-applied irony, and something I would call her “personal touch,” she manages to get away with so much philosophizing. In fact, many of her poems deal with axioms (“nothing can ever happen twice”) or paradoxes (“only what is human can truly be foreign”). The strangeness of human nature is a subject Szymborska often writes about, and she has great empathy not only for other human beings but even for pets. One of her often-quoted poems is “Cat in an Empty Apartment,” the witty description of a cat's frame of mind after its master's (or shall we say minder's?)
death. Permanent absence is something a cat's mind cannot grasp: "Just wait till he turns up, / just let him show his face. / Will he ever get a lesson / on what not to do to a cat."

Most of the poems are rendered faithfully and elegantly by the Polish-American team of translators. There are only a few places where the translation veers off the original in some small but perhaps significant way; in the poem quoted above the cat promises that it will not greet the absent master enthusiastically upon his return—"and no leaps or squeals at least to start"—where the Polish original speaks about no meowing or purring. Elsewhere, in the poem "Przylot" ("Returning Birds"), the phrase "sztuka klasyczna" is rendered, I think quite needlessly, as "Aristotelian drama," and in "Thomas Mann" the phrase "sceny zbytkowne" is translated as "baroque gems." Moreover, an introduction or an afterword, however short, would have been useful; although the poems speak for themselves, the English-speaking reader is often eager to know a bit more about the undisputedly distinguished but (for our times) exceedingly modest author.

Criticism: Edward Hirsch (essay date spring 1997)


[In the following essay, Hirsh encapsulates Szymborska's poetic work, considering its irony, skepticism, subjectivity, clarity, and wit.]

The Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska, who won the 1996 Nobel Prize in literature, is a canny ironist and rapturous skeptic. She writes a poetry of sardonic individualism, and comes at common experiences from her own angle, with her own perspective. "Four billion people on this earth, / but my imagination is still the same," she confesses in her poem "A Large Number"; "It's bad with large numbers. / It's still taken by particularity." Szymborska is all too aware of how the world keeps escaping our various formulations about it: "But even a Dante couldn't get it right," she admits, "Let alone someone who is not. / Even with all the muses behind me."

Despite her modesty, Szymborska has mounted in her work a witty and tireless defense of individual subjectivity against collectivist thinking, and her poems are slyly subversive in a way that compels us to reconsider received opinion. No sooner does a familiar idea come her way than she starts turning it around to see what it will look like from different directions. She manages to question herself even as she exposes general assumptions and undermines political cant. Indeed, the rejection of dogma becomes the premise of a thoughtful personal ethics.

Szymborska was born in 1923 in the small town of Bnin in the Poznan area of western Poland. She moved with her family to Krakow when she was eight years old and has lived there ever since. She attended school illegally during the German occupation, when the Nazis banned Polish secondary schools and universities, and after the war studied Polish literature and sociology at Jagiellonian University. From 1952 to 1981, she worked on the editorial staff of the cultural weekly Zycie Literackie (Literary Life). She has published nine collections of poems and several editions of her selected verse, as well as a volume of newspaper reviews and columns. She is also known to Polish readers as a distinguished translator of French poetry, mostly of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Szymborska came of age during World War II, and spent much of her life under Stalinism. Thus she saw her country twice destroyed. She shares with Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Rozewicz—the two other major Polish poets of the half-generation after Czeslaw Milosz—an absolute distrust of rhetoric, of false words and sentiments, of political creeds and ideologies, of general ideas and philosophies. The war was such a traumatic event for the writers of this generation that it called all moral and aesthetic values into question and, in a sense, poetry had to be rebuilt from the ground up, like the country itself. Hence, these poets have deliberately
cultivated a cool, economical, and antirhetorical style, writing a stripped-down poetry of drastic simplicity. For these poets, stylistic clarity became a matter (and a form) of ethics, a response to ideological obfuscations, political double talk.

Szymborska is a philosophically oriented poet who raises universal subjects nonchalantly, with an offhand charm. She typically begins a poem with a question or a simple paradoxical assertion which the poem breezily sets out to explore. Her strategy is to run through all the ramifications of an idea to see what it will yield. Often she begins by seeming to embrace a subject and ends by undercutting it with a sharp, disillusioned comment. For example, in the poem “Children of Our Age,” she takes a common assertion—“We are children of our age, / it's a political age”—and examines it until it begins to leak and fall apart. She tries to find the human being—the human reality—obscured by political dogma.

Meanwhile, people perished, animals died, houses burned, and the fields ran wild
just as in times immemorial
and less political.

One key to Szymborska's style may be the way she works subversive variations on familiar rhetoric.

Szymborska's poems—wise, funny, and personal—have the sting of long experience. She looks at the world with the eye of a disabused lover and understands something fundamental about our century. In the poem “Hatred,” she writes, “See how efficient it still is, / how it keeps itself in shape— / our century's hatred.” In “The Century's Decline,” she writes, “Our twentieth-century was going to improve on the others”:

A couple of problems weren't going to come up anymore:
hunger, for example, and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect for helpless people's helplessness,
trust, that kind of stuff.

Anyone who planned to enjoy the world
is now faced with a hopeless task.

Yet Szymborska's bitterness about human fallibility—human cruelty—mingles with her sense of the world's unfathomable richness. Despite the odds, she finds herself enjoying the world after all, revitalized by commonplace miracles, by what she calls in one poem “miracle fair”: fluttering white doves, a small cloud upstaging the moon, mild winds turning gusty in a hard storm, the inescapable earth. In the end, she pits her dizzying sense of the world's transient splendor against unbearable historical knowledge. Or, as she puts it: “My identifying features / are rapture and despair.”

Criticism: Jacqueline Osherow (essay date spring 1997)


[In the following essay, Osherow takes delight in Szymborska's poetic imagination and view of the commonplace.]

Let me begin by making a peculiar confession: I love reading poetry in translation. I suppose this has to do with the way you experience what you're reading as inaccessible, so that the poem, elusive as it necessarily is,
becomes, itself, almost an object of poetic longing. But there are also less heady reasons for reading poems in languages we don't know. One can go on and on about what is not translatable in poetry—and certainly no dearth of eloquence has been expended on this subject—but I want to focus here (as indeed I must, since I don't know Polish) on what isn't lost in translation. It seems to me that we in America—especially as we scramble to find places for ourselves in the line-up from, say, language poetry to new formalism—put far too much weight on a poem's surface. What the pleasures of poems in translation prove—and Wislawa Szymborska's do this exquisitely—is that there is something essentially poetic that does not inhere merely in a poem's surface. Call it substance. Call it thought. Call it wild association. What poetry does with these—and so many other—imaginative possibilities is at least as interesting as what it does with language. That said, let me also make clear that I wish I knew Polish, and remind myself, even as I make this case for poems in translation, how I came to love Eugenio Montale from a single translation of Robert Lowell's that I loathed when I finally learned Italian. The surface of a great poem is always miraculous; it's no wonder we are often too bewitched to look beyond it. And even as I admire—and I do, wildly—these poems of Szymborska's, I know I am being extravagantly short-changed.

Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh make her poems read like excellent English poems, and I am certainly grateful for that (View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems, Harcourt, Brace, 1995). These translations are far smoother and more colloquial and, frankly, more poetic than those I've seen before. Nonetheless, earlier translations never got in the way of my immense enthusiasm. I do suspect, however, from trying to piece together the Polish in an earlier bilingual edition (Sounds, Feelings and Thoughts, translated by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire, Princeton University Press, 1991), and from my sense that its translators have stayed very close to the literal meaning of the text, that Barańczak and Cavanagh make free, at times, with the poet's meaning. Occasionally, I prefer other translations to theirs: John and Bogdana Carpenter's version of “The Joy of Writing,” for example, begins “Where is the written doe running, through the written forest?” (from Contemporary Eastern European Poetry, edited by Emery George, Oxford, 1993). Barańczak and Cavanagh's reads, “Why does this written doe bound through these written woods?” (Krynski and Maguire opt for “Where through the written forest runs that written doe?”—which is why I suspect this team of accuracy. What else could explain that sort of awkwardness?) What's the point of changing “Where” to “Why”? And where else have I been duped?

I also find no reference to the game “solitaire” in Maguire and Krynski's version of the “Notes from a Nonexistent Expedition to the Himalayas”, nor can I find room for it in the Polish; but there it is, in Barańczak and Cavanagh. It's worrying, but then, I do love these versions of the poems (indeed, I have to admit, I even like the “solitaire”) and most of the time they appear to offer, with real grace, the same meanings given far less effectively by other translators.

Whether they're perfectly accurate or not, the rewards of reading Barańczak and Cavanagh's renderings are real. But I doubt that even the clumsiest language could entirely mask Szymborska's endearing sense of humor, her finely tuned but matter-of-fact self-consciousness, her genius for the unexpectedly resonant detail. What most distinguishes her poems is the quality and complexity of her thought, the pressure she puts on what already seem like revelations, the way she moves not only in unexpected but unimagined directions, or, as she herself puts it, in the poem “Into the ark,” that “eagerness to see things from all six sides.”

Szymborska's poems are demanding ones—less on her readers than on herself. Even in her earliest poems we benefit from these demands. She begins “Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition” with an observation many poets would be pleased to arrive at in conclusion: “So these are the Himalayas. / Mountains racing to the moon.” We see her characteristic combination of seriousness and whimsy, her cataloging of incongruous and telling details:

Yeti, down there we've got Wednesday,
bread and alphabets.
Two times two is four.
Roses are red there,
Violets are blue.

Szymborska doesn't belabor a proposition to which a lesser poet would devote at least an entire poem, namely, that “two and two” aren't necessarily “four” elsewhere. And that lesser poet would not have trusted the specificity of “Wednesday,” the generality of “bread.” (We might have been stuck with, say, “daylight” and “croissants.”)

And the characteristic coexistence of bleakness and optimism that gives such breadth to Szymborska's work is also apparent in this early poem: “We've inherited hope— / The gift of forgetting.” But it is her simultaneous fusion and inversion of the ordinary and the extraordinary, her way of revelling in that fusion, and, above all, that inversion, that is, finally, her trademark:

Yeti, we've got Shakespeare there.
Yeti, we play solitaire
and violin. At nightfall,
we turn lights on, Yeti.

“Solitaire” aside, not only are “Shakespeare,” the “violin” and “turn[ing] lights on” placed on the same level, but we arrive at the turning on of lights—needless to say, a well-chosen representative of the miracle of the ordinary—as if it were the greatest of the treasures “down there” has to offer. Of course, the effect is double-edged. Is this an exaltation or a trivialization of earthly experience? Both, of course. And then there is the pure wonder of the conceit of the poem, that we readers should have the experience, once in our lives, of being addressed, even for a moment, as “Yeti.”

Szymborska perpetually insists on and delivers a wide scope of vision, despite her indebtedness to tiny details; at the same time, she begs our pardon for those expectations. In another fairly early poem, “Museum,” I suppose she's talking about her own enterprise when she says: “Since eternity was out of stock / ten thousand aging things have been amassed instead.” In that poem too she begins with what some would have found an opportune conclusion:

Here are plates but no appetite.
And wedding rings, but the requited love
has been gone now for some three hundred years.

and ends by making the thing surprisingly personal:

The battle with my dress still rages on.
It struggles, foolish thing, so stubbornly!
Determined to keep living when I'm gone!

That turn—calling the “dress” the “foolish thing” instead of herself—and revising the notion of who's a patsy in the “struggle … to keep living” strikes me as the only way to bring off a poem in which a museum's leftover things call to mind one's own mortality. The charm and humor and surprise leave potential self-pity behind.

But the only proper way to appreciate Szymborska—and this is clearly turning into an appreciation—is to look at a poem in its entirety. I choose “Under One Small Star”:

My apologies to chance for calling it necessity.
My apologies to necessity if I'm mistaken, after all.
Please, don't be angry, happiness, that I take you as my due.
May my dead be patient with the way my memories fade.
My apologies to time for all the world I overlook each second.
My apologies to past loves for thinking that the latest is the first.
Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home.
Forgive me, open wounds, for pricking my finger.
I apologize for my record of minuets to those who cry from the depths.
I apologize to those who wait in railway stations for being asleep today

Pardon me, hounded hope, for laughing from time to time.
Pardon me, deserts, that I don't rush to you bearing a spoonful of water.
And you, falcon, unchanging year after year, always in the same cage,
your gaze always fixed on the same point in space,
forget me, even if it turns out you were stuffed.
My apology to the felled tree for the table's four legs.
My apologies to great questions for small answers.
Truth, please don't pay me much attention.
Dignity, please be magnanimous.
Bear with me, O mystery of existence, as I pluck the occasional thread
from your train.
Soul, don't take offense that I've only got you now and then.
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.
I know I won't be justified as long as I live,
since I myself stand in my own way.
Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words,
then labor heavily so that they may seem light.

There are many ways to read this poem, it seems to me, all of them correct. The speaker could, I suppose, be apologizing for her poetry not being “everywhere at once,” not representing “each woman and each man.” At the same time, the poem delights so much in its own specificity—in its own “small answers” to “large questions”—apologizing not for the “table,” for example, but for “its four legs,” that it resists such a reading.

Even the endearing gesture of the first two lines, of covering all bets in the face of her own confusion, is only, as it turns out, an opening gambit. After all, the speaker does make extraordinary claims for herself, even if she does so (in what strikes me as a very Dickinsonian gesture) with immense humility. It may be a mere “thread”; it may be only “occasional,” but she is telling us that she has managed to “pluck it” from no less a garment than the “mystery of existence.”

Her apologies are sincere, but this is a woman aware of her achievements. For those who are not convinced, we have the authority of the last two lines, which soar, even as they deflate themselves. What would be another poet's triumph is, for Szymborska, a source of shame. As she masterfully puts one last thing over on us, she apologizes with such genuine pathos that the newly completed poem seems like the ultimate act of treachery. She places before our eyes the possibility of another poem: one that speaks head on, that doesn't “make light,” that doesn't “labor,” that doesn't shy away from “weighty words.” So, even as we admire her, we are left dreaming of that other poem until that poem, finally, is this poem's great achievement, despite the fact that it appears only as shadow.

But Szymborska is not only talking about her poetry. The poem moves easily between the world at large and poetry: those “flowers” the speaker's been “bringing home” despite the “distant wars” could be poems, but, then again, they could be flowers. And the person in the railway station at 5 a.m. who is more real to us than the “distant wars” is meant to be more real. We've been in that damned railway station; we haven't, thank God, been in those particular wars.

Szymborska doesn't shy away from addressing enormous subjects head on. In the relatively recent poem, “The Century's Decline,” an impossible subject she knows first hand, her capacity for epigram is suddenly given wings:
God was finally going to believe  
in a man both good and strong,  
but good and strong are still  
two different men

It is, of course, the mitigating and insistent “still” that gives the stanza its power, simultaneously undercutting the otherwise pompous epigram and rendering it eternal. In her provocative, imaginative, and nervy use of God, one is reminded of the dress in “Museum.” Here, the inversion is of God and man: surely it's God's apparent inability to be both “good” and “strong” that Szymborska is also surreptitiously lamenting.

Effectively, she is being indirect even when she appears to be direct, and it is, after all, the power—and ultimate marksmanship—of her indirectness that is Szymborska's crowning achievement. Take “In Broad Daylight,” a poem that begins in this deadpan fashion:

vacation in a mountain boarding house, 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

One is a trifle bored, but this is Szymborska, so one goes on reading. One should, I suppose, begin suspecting something with:

About his ear, just grazed by the bullet  
when he ducked at the last minute, he would  
say: “I was damned lucky.”

but I admit that it was only when I read:

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

along with the accompanying translators' note—“Krysztof Kamil Baczynski, an enormously gifted poet of the ‘war generation,’ was killed as a Home Army fighter in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 at the age of twenty-three”—that I recognized the gift I was being given. My first reaction was fury at myself for never having thought of writing a poem in which antibiotics were invented 175 years earlier and Keats is an old man on a trip to Rome; but I'd stupidly have imagined Keats writing poems, instead of “moving toward the door.” And even if I had managed to come up with that “door,” never, in a million years, would I have pushed it further:

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

And so of course, we arrive, through the war, through poetry, through what might have been, through all kinds of weighty and important subjects, back at that one “mystery of existence” that Szymborska has “plucked out” so magisterially: the impenetrable mystery of the “commonplace.”
And each time Szymborska makes the “commonplace” miraculous, the miracle is newly astonishing. The poem “In Praise of Dreams” begins, “In my dreams / I paint like Vermeer van Delft”, and I am forced, once again, to recognize the futility of my own jealousy (as in, why the hell didn’t I write those lines? haven’t I always wanted to paint like Vermeer van Delft?). Good as those lines are, they would never have led me through her particularly graceful and amusing list of examples—(my favorite: “I can't complain: / I've been able to locate Atlantis”). And certainly never, in my wildest dreams, would I have thought to end:

A few years ago
I saw two suns

And the night before last a penguin,
clear as day

Note

This review was not generated by the awarding of the Nobel Prize, but written much earlier. Needless to say, I’m thrilled by the honor to Szymborska. J.O.

**Criticism: Publishers Weekly (review date 30 March 1998)**


*[In the following review of Szymborska’s Poems New and Collected, 1957-1997, the critic praises the work’s expert translation and comprehensiveness.]*

“Whatever else we might think of this world—it is astonishing,” writes the Krakow native in her 1996 Nobel Lecture, and her poems continually testify to this astonishment at the world’s good and evil, which she often juxtaposes. Expertly translated by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak, this edition collects, as they note, “virtually all of Szymborska's work to date”; in sheer quantity and in quality, it supplants all others. Like her compatriots Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Rozewicz, Szymborska is intensely aware in her seven books (from *Calling Out to Yeti* in 1957 through *The End and the Beginning* in 1993) of her own belatedness in writing about the Holocaust—particularly in the bitter, uncompromising “Still” and “Hitler's First Photograph”—and of other atrocities of 20th-century Europe. Nonetheless, she can still imagine a humane “Utopia,” albeit one that is uninhabitable, “as if all you can do here is leave / and plunge, never to return, into the depths, // Into unfathomable life.” The 7 new poems extend Szymborska's range of responses to life and language, as in her meditation on “The Three Oddest Words”—“Future,” “Silence” and “Nothing.” Perhaps closest among American poets to Amy Clampitt, Szymborska's tough naturalism does allow rays of light to penetrate its bleak landscapes, leaving lasting, sustaining impressions.

**Criticism: Graham Christian (review date 1 April 1998)**


*[In the following review of Poems New and Collected, 1957-1997, Christian finds Szymborska's collected works in English an “essential” volume.]*

“I'm working on the world,” says Polish poet Szymborska. In this new retrospective collection of her works, a “revised, improved edition.” It may seem superfluous to praise a Nobel Laureate in literature, but Szymborska
is a splendid writer richly deserving of her recent renown. While it seems likely that the academy noticed her for her unflinching examination of torture and other wrongs inflicted by repressive regimes, what seems extraordinary about Szymborska is her humility, her openness to wonder. Her motto, she says in the Nobel lecture included in this volume, is “I don't know,” a surprisingly fruitful starting point. She is capable of stunning lyrical images (“0 swallow, cloud-borne thorn, / anchor of the air, / Icarus improved, / coattails in Assumption”), but she is less interested in poetic showiness than in miracles of survival: “I’ll die with wings, I’ll live on with practical claws.” She has no counterpart in English verse, except perhaps Stevie Smith, who shared with her a knowledge of the exhilarating power of a kind of serious laughter. This gathering in English of all the verse Szymborska wants assembled should be an essential purchase for all collections interested in literature.

**Criticism: Jaroslaw Anders (review date 17 May 1998)**


[In the following review of Poems New and Collected, 1957-1997, Anders highlights the extraordinary depth and diversity found in Szymborska's complete oeuvre of roughly 200 poems.]

Wislawa Szymborska, who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1996, must be one of the most reticent or most self-discerning poets of today. Of the literary career spanning more than half a century, she is willing to acknowledge only some 200 of her poems collected in eight slender volumes. This sparse body of work, however, displays unusual diversity and polychromy. Szymborska can be simultaneously highly sophisticated, pursuing involved philosophical questions in what she herself calls “essay poems,” yet also be accessible to the extent that some of her poems have been used as lyrics of popular songs. She struggles for the utmost precision of expression, yet engages in complicated linguistic games employing rich polyphonies of her native tongue, unexpected rhymes, puns, mixtures of “high” and “low” poetic styles. Most important, she is a poet of modern experience, who often hides behind a mask of an “innocent” still capable of asking “naive” questions about the origins and nature of evil. One should be grateful to Szymborska's long-standing translators, Stanislaw Bara´nczak and Clare Cavanagh, for giving us most of her compact, intriguing verse in a superb English translation.

Born in 1923, Szymborska belongs to the generation of Polish writers who, in young adulthood, witnessed some of the worst atrocities of the century, which left a lasting impression on their terse, restrained language and their dark, disenchanted world view. It is not surprising, therefore, that a subtle, intelligent, often ironic meditation on mortality seems to be the main unifying theme of her poetry. Her most recent poems include a number of moving valedictions addressed to deceased friends. Yet the theme of perpetual, universal fading and departing—not only of people, nations, living organisms but also memories, images, shadows and reflections—was present in her poetry from the very beginning. The very first poem in this volume, “I’m Working on the World,” written when the poet was in her 30s, contains a moving invocation to an ideal death:

When it comes you'll be dreaming
that you don't need to breathe;
that breathless silence is
the music of the dark
and it's part of the rhythm
to vanish like a spark

One of the recurrent motifs in Szymborska's poetry is a kind of existential contest between living, that is mortal, beings and inanimate matter, which often serves as a reminder of life's impermanence and imperfection. In “Museum,” life is presented as a race—decided, as we are made to believe, long before it had
started—between the human body and objects, in which “The crown has outlasted the head. / The hand has lost out to the glove. / The right shoe has defeated the foot.” Free of the inner division into mind and matter, almost impervious to time and unable to experience pain, objects evoke the admiration and envy of perplexed human beings. In “Conversation With a Stone,” the poet knocks “at the stone's front door” demanding to be allowed to partake, at least for a moment, in its tranquil, if inhuman, reality. “You shall not enter. … You lack the sense of taking part,” answers the stone contemptuously. “I don't have a door.”

If inanimate objects represent the ultimate economy of existence, living organisms epitomize its magnificent but also extravagant and wasteful generosity. In “Returning Birds,” birds have returned too early from their winter migration (“Rejoice, O reason: instinct can err, too”) and now are dying of cold:

... a death
that doesn't suit their well-wrought throats and splendid claws,
their honest cartilage and conscientious webbing,
the heart's sensible sluice, the entrails' maze,
the nape of ribs, the vertebrae in stunning enfilades,
feathers deserving their own wing in any crafts museum,
the Benedictine patience of the beak.

The last word in the poem belongs, again, to a stone that comments “in its own archaic, simpleminded way” on life as “a chain of failed attempts.”

It is possible to read such a passage as a general meditation on life's frailty that seems to mock and contradict its amazing complexity and beauty. Those familiar with the poet's native realm, however, will guess that it is the memory of war and the Holocaust that engenders her imagery and gives it an unmistakably moral resonance. There are moments when, despite the author's taciturn style, the experience of her wartime generation speaks through her poems directly and with shattering force. “Write it down. Write it. With ordinary ink / on ordinary paper: they weren't given food, / they all died of hunger.” Thus begins a poem, “Starvation Camp Near Jaslo.” The Nazi death camp in Jaslo, in southern Poland, was one of those places where inmates were crowded in an empty, fenced space and left to die a slow death without food and water. This is not an easy subject for a poem, but Szymborska handles it masterfully by reversing the pastoral image of nurturing nature:

Sunny. Green. A forest close at hand,
with wood to chew on, drops beneath the bark to drink—
a view served round the clock,
until you go blind. Above, a bird
whose shadow flicked its nourishing wings
across their lips. Jaws dropped,
teeth clattered.

This is less a “moral indictment” than an expression of existential horror that an event like this could somehow become a part of the human universe. The horror is deepened by the anonymity of death—the erasure of memory that inevitably follows an act of genocide. In the same poem, Szymborska writes:

History rounds off skeletons to zero.
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 grows,
stairs for a void bounding out to the garden,
no one’s spot in the ranks.
One of Szymborska's poems, as well as a book published in 1976, is entitled “A Large Number,” and the notion of statistical abstraction often figures in her poems as a kind of death’s double, a shadow that enters the stage after the massacre to wipe out the stains and to prepare the ground for new atrocities. It is, therefore, a moral duty to remember everything that is singular—to save and preserve the concrete, particular facts, moments, sensations. And yet, this labor of memory is also increasingly difficult and frustrating. The past and the present have become too crowded and chaotic. When, in the poem “Census,” no less than seven cities are uncovered at the site of mythical Troy, “Hexameters burst” while multitudes unrecorded in verse clamor in vain for our attention:

We three billion judges
have problems of our own,
our own inarticulate rabble,
railroad stations, bleachers, protests and processions,
vast numbers of remote streets, floors, and walls.
We pass each other once for all time in department stores
shopping for a new pitcher.
Homer is working in the census bureau.
No one knows what he does in his spare time.

Cities without their own epic, the author suggests, can easily share the fate of Atlantis: “Hypothetical. Dubious. / Uncommemorated. / Never extracted from air, / fire, water, or earth.” (“Atlantis”), or even that of Hiroshima from the poem “Written in a Hotel,” which, unlike the celebrated Kyoto, was considered undistinguished, one of countless “inferior cities” of the world.

Many of Szymborska's poems are laments on the insufficiency of human perception that leaves so much of the world unnoticed, undescribed, “beyond the reach / of our presence.” In “A Large Number,” she speaks of this anguish directly:

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.

The thought that the human mind may be the only mirror in which the universe can see its own reflection, perhaps its only recourse to nonbeing, is in Szymborska's poetry a source of constant guilt, which sometimes reaches semi-religious intensity:

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.
I know I won't be justified as long as I live,
since I myself stand in my own way.

—“Under One Small Star”

The darkness of Szymborska's vision is undeniable. In her universe, man is alone, unaided by any transcendental guidance, his perceptive faculties and moral instincts evidently not up to the task with which they have been burdened. Unable to hold in his mind the plurality and diversity of things, he seems doomed to reduce them first to abstractions and then to ashes. Still, it would be hard to classify this vision as entirely pessimistic. The poet's reluctance to become yet another prophet of doom is dramatized in “Soliloquy for Cassandra,” in which the eponymous doomsayer ponders the futility of her prophetic powers. She loved the people of Troy, but loved them “From heights beyond life. / From the future. Where it's always empty / and nothing is easier than seeing death.” Those who did not want to hear the prophecy are dead.

But in them they bore a moist hope,
Though some critics see it as her weakness, Szymborska seems to be determined not to discount the “moist hope” completely. In “Reality Demands,” she takes us on a tour of the famous slaughter grounds of history—from Actium and Chaeronea, through Kosovo Polje and Borodino, to Verdun and Hiroshima—to show that they in fact became places like any other—with gas stations, ice cream parlors, holiday resorts and useful factories. “So much is always going on, / that it must be going on all over,” she says. “Perhaps all fields are battlefields, / those we remember / and those that are forgotten.” Should we be horrified or relieved by that realization? “What moral flows from this?” asks the poet. “Probably none. / Only the blood flows, drying quickly, / and, as always, a few rivers, a few clouds.” Thus life remains a contradiction and a puzzle. The universe does not want to yield a direct answer about its “moral,” or purpose, but it does not preclude a search for one, either:

I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility
that existence has its own reason for being.

—“Possibilities”

This may not be much of a consolation—says the Polish poet’s quiet, intelligent voice—but it is the only one we can expect and perhaps the only one we need.

**Criticism: Lavinia Greenlaw (review date 26 April 1999)**


*In the following excerpted review of Poems New and Collected, 1957-1997, Greenlaw mentions the dark humor, simplicity surrounded in artifice, and tantalizing wisdom of Szymborska’s poetry.*

Wislawa Szymborska was little known but widely admired when her reputation was dramatically consolidated by a Nobel prize in 1996. As a child, she attended illegal classes in Nazi-occupied Krakow and she later worked on a Polish literary journal for almost 30 years, so it shouldn’t be surprising to see what a conscientious writer she is. Her poems appear so open, so friendly, that it’s hard to grasp the length to which she goes to remind us of their artifice. It’s like being captivated by a picture while the artist is trying to direct your attention towards the frame. The effect is rarely stultifying; more, a reminder of her receptiveness. She wants us to see what more there is to see and to show that her view is only passing—“mine as long as I look”.

The props and devices Szymborska brandishes at us include running commentaries on language and grammar, theatricals, history and myth. At the same time, she is fascinated by the imaginative potential of classified ads, yetis and supersonics; of lost objects, the small hours and interstices; of trips she never made and those she does not love. She can be blackly comic, as in her dialogue for two figures in a Byzantine mosaic.

Over the distance of these 164 poems, her dexterity and pace can be a bit wearing. It is her more contemplative poems that stand out. “To Our Friends” considers aeroplanes and stars, with their dislocation of the normal scale of action and reaction, then shifts focus to “faster takeoffs”: “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.”
In this final image, simile sits within metaphor like a box within a box, suggesting worlds trapped within worlds—the cosmic, political and personal.

However conscious of the frame, Szymborska is compelled by the power of language. She gives names to deported Jews and, when faced with the grounds of a starvation camp, she urges herself (as Bishop does in an altogether different context) to “Write it”. She reminds us that we are random and ephemeral creations, and that life comes down to appetite and expectancy. At her best, Szymborska is as tantalising as the sister she describes as writing only postcards which invariably promise that “when she gets back, she'll have / so much / much / much to tell”.

**Criticism: Stephen Tapscott and Mariusz Przybytek (essay date July 2000)**


“In my end is my beginning”: in the aftermath of World War II, T. S. Eliot meditates about the relations among place, collective history, memory, and identity. Placing himself in personal, historical and mystical time, throughout *The Four Quartets* (1940-2) Eliot finds continuity and psychic permanence in a circling, ritual sense of ends and beginnings. Historical pattern locates, reveals, and affirms personal identity through signification—*my* ends and *my* beginnings, made articulate. It’s worth recalling Eliot’s sense of time and history, his memorializing as an act of personal and cultural ritual, in part because Eliot’s influential example memorably summarizes for many English-language readers a familiar late-Modernist, mid-century relation to history—personal, psychological, questing, circling around the historicized self, circling in *toward* place.

In the same period, Central Europe has had a different set of historical contingencies to address. Central European writers have meditated about different relations between historical ends and beginnings, and under pressure from totalitarian forces the language of their writings has had to adapt.

In this context, Polish writing is especially interesting because the Polish tradition—largely shaped by Romanticism—has felt intense formal and psychological stresses under totalitarian pressures. Some post-war Polish writers have worked to adapt this Romantic tradition as a vehicle for national consolidation. Others have retrieved a related subversive tradition of literary “language experimentation” that seems to evade or to subsume, and sometimes implicitly to undercut, political exigencies. And still others, like Czeslaw Milosz (the example probably most familiar to English language readers), have called into question the utility of the themes and forms and tones of idealistic Polish Romanticism in the face of absolutist political forces. Several of the representative “cases” in Milosz’s influential study *Captive Mind* (1951) are artists whose commitments to self-sacrifice and idealism effectively render them mute. Milosz places his poem “Dedication” (“Przedmiescie,” literally “Preface,” “first-speech”) surprisingly at the end of the book entitled *Rescue* (*Ocalenie*, 1947). In that poem’s reversal of ends and beginnings, Milosz (b. 1911) challenges the idealistic, self-martyring Polish Romantic literary-and-cultural tradition, among other traditions the poem resists and eulogizes.¹

You whom I could not save
Listen to me.
Try to understand this simple speech as I would be ashamed of another.
I swear, there is in me no wizardry of words.

¹
I speak to you with silence like a cloud or a tree.

What strengthened me, for you was lethal.
You mixed up farewell to an epoch with the
beginning of a new one,
Inspiration of hatred with lyrical beauty,
Blind force with accomplished shape.

Here is the valley of shallow Polish rivers. And
an immense bridge
Going into white fog. Here is a broken city,
And the wind throws the screams of gulls on
you grave
When I am talking to you.

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or peoples?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut
in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls.
That I wanted good poetry without knowing it,
That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,
In this and only this I find salvation.

They used to pour millet on graves or poppy
seeds
To feed the dead who would come disguised
as birds.
I put this book here for you, who once lived
So that you should visit us no more.

It's worth recalling that Polish Romanticism more closely resembles French, German, and Russian models (Goethe, Pushkin) than British, though Byron was popular. Polish Romanticism is infused with messianism, nationalistic yearning, Byronic rebellion. After *Pan Tadeusz*, his national-lyrical-epic poem, the most important work of Adam Mickiewicz is his drama *Forefather's Eve*, which has become what Milosz drolly calls something of a “national sacred play” for some Poles of the 20th century. Book II of Mickiewicz's famous drama opens with a scene of peasants scattering mustardseeds on graves, to be visited by ghosts on All Soul's Night. Some of the ghosts refuse and some accept the offering; the scene becomes a summoning of traditional energies of place, history, and Polish autonomy.²

Revisiting metaphors from this scene in the play by Poland's most esteemed Romantic poet, Milosz summons a literary and social tradition in order to honor it, and yet to challenge it as a useful model, in a sense to defuse it by praising it too late, after its inadequacies have been historically made clear. As many families still do on All Saints' Day in Poland, Milosz stands at the grave of ancestors in order simultaneously to memorialize them, to placate them, and to lay them to rest—and in a sense to exorcise them. “I put these words here so you / may visit us no more.” For Milosz (at least at this point, in his first book published after W.W. II), the question of endings has to be settled before beginnings can begin.³ Milosz maintains a belief in the power of a new poetry to “save nations or peoples,” but he doesn't go farther in this manifesto than to anticipate the new mode; his “dedication” comes at the end of the “rescue,” after it is too late for those whom the earlier poetic “could not save.”

By contrast, in the last book she published before she won the Nobel Prize in 1996 Wislawa Szymborska (b. 1923) poses related questions of ends and beginnings, at a different juncture of Polish history—from different perspectives, in different circumstances and with different tonalities. In Polish the title of the book is *Koniec i poczatek*. Already in the title the absence of articles in the Polish language allows the phrase latitude: it means
“the end and the beginning,” “an end and a beginning,” and even simply “end and beginning.” The ends and beginnings lie some distance grammatically and ideologically from Eliot’s sense of “my” end: the difference is practical, a sense of time that works not abstractly (like an alpha and omega) but more colloquially, more experientially, more within spoken discourse. Milosz values Szymborska as a poet of “reticence” and “consciousness”; it’s worth noticing from the start that in her oddly inclusive, colloquial reticence, what concerns Szymborska in the title is not my end and my beginning, but some complex of specific and general and obliquely personal ends and beginnings. Szymborska’s book takes its energy from this very tension between generality and specificity, as it works to account for an end, the end, ends (as philosophical ends), even the end-stop as grammatical punctuation. Szymborska’s idiomatic diction comfortably sustains all these options—and as the first poem dramatizes, that aspiration toward inclusiveness within limitation is also part of the thematic of the poems, as well.

This essay considers some of the achievements of that remarkable book, including its meditation on several dualistic tensions. Szymborska considers the relations between history (generalized) and memory (personal), and she uses the vehicle of poetry to consider the limits of representation in the face of historical movements and personal losses. Since the Nobel Prize she has been popular in the West, widely translated and anthologized, chiefly as a poet of beautiful separate poems. In the West we know her as a poet of witty conceits and memorable images. She seems a clever poet: discontinuous, philosophical, whimsical. We may recognize, even in translation, some characteristics and quirks that amount to sense of “style”: a simple diction, colloquial and even punning, but carrying the idiomatic music of aphorism; a tendency to think by means of abstraction and personification; lists of questions that gradually lose their question-marks (as doubts and interrogations become assertions); a discontinuity between the “occasions” of the poems; in general, a sense of illuminated ordinariness, a willingness to act as a “spoilsport” or as a “naïf,” posing common-sense questions against established truths. So far, so accurate. But what we miss in this valuation is a sense of Szymborska as a systemic thinker, or as someone who thinks about systems. That is, we miss the philosophical and compositional sense, which is clearer in Polish, that she is a writer whose concerns enlarge beyond the occasional, its provisional insights and conceits. As a poet, Szymborska uses autonomous but interrelated pieces; she addresses philosophical questions through resolutely idiomatic, accessible diction, so that some of the joy of the poem resides in its effortless clarity and its down-to-earth conclusions. As Stanislaw Barańczak has it, “The typical lyrical situation on which a Szymborska poem is founded is the confrontation between the directly stated or implied opinion on an issue and the ‘naive question’ that raises doubt about its validity. […] Szymborska’s finest point is the very dogmatism of the opinion that prompts the naïveté of the question.”

This restlessness of tone—each accessible question challenging each received opinion—generates the larger structure of the book, which appears slightly discontinuous insofar as individual poems register particular responses to different generalizing systems. Although it is composed of autonomous poems, The End and the Beginning as a book also represents a sequenced argument about philosophical questions considered from different perspectives. (Szymborska rarely publishes separate poems in Polish periodicals; the entire book tends to be her unit of production.)

The title of the book suggests both the book’s themes and its method of procedure—and in a self-referential way, it signals also how the book problematizes writing itself, the book of signs as end and beginning, the only alpha and omega that limited human beings can realistically aspire to. According to Hegel, ends become new beginnings. But we tend to recognize the dynamic sequence of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis chiefly in totalizing events like wars, occupations, ideological movements: what we call “history,” collective memory. It can be difficult to recognize this Hegelian process in personal experience and personal memory, however; history is shaped and carried by personal memory, but its energies are different. In the book’s sequential poems, Szymborska enacts the tension between public memory and personal remembering. Her language shifts modes to enact these differences and to meditate about them at the same time. The opening poems of the book dramatize the problem of finding a language to unify public and private, in the paradox that these personal-lyric forms are made to express philosophical abstractions. The middle poems measure “randomness” and “coincidence” as moral and linguistic standards. Poems near the end of the book dramatize
the problem of using abstract discourse (empirical science, theology, economics, anthropology, the rhetoric of colonization) to rediscover and to recover personal experience.

Throughout these poems, the historical individual stands at the intersection of Cartesian axes: x and y, end and beginning, history and memory, science and experience, progress and grievance, remembering and forgetting, collectivity and subjectivity, profit and loss, statement and image, and even (as at the end of the first poem) “despair” and “delight.” Like the small Polish conjunctive “i” (“and”) in the title of the book, consciousness stands at the crossroads as both the grammar of conjunction and the almost-invisible pivot of knowing and not-knowing: the individual connects the end and the beginning and yet knows itself as end and beginning, known and unknowable, as well.

The first poem of the book (“Niebo”) is a tour de force that considers idealistically what life would be like without Cartesian duality—until the need for limitation makes the speaker slowly, pragmatically, accept division, particularity, and signification. At its most direct, the Polish noun “niebo” of the title means simply “sky,” and in the opening line of the poem Szymborska undoes the work of creation-and-separation of earth and firmament—creation by separation, at the “beginning”—that God performed in Genesis I:1 (“Na poczatku Bog stworzyl niebo i ziemie,” … “in the beginning God created heaven and earth”—in italics here, the same Polish words as Szymborska’s choices). Szymborska’s revision of Genesis proposes instead “I should have begun with this: the sky.” Undoing the “beginning” of God’s creation (by which means God also establishes that He is transcendent), Szymborska proposes a revision and then follows it through, logically; we think we'd want such immanence, but do we?

The first five stanzas of the poem consider the possibility of this Utopian, undifferentiated unity the opening lines propose. The experience of mystical unification, however, would be still located in the individual's somatic experience:

I've got the sky behind my back, at hand, and on my eyelids. The sky binds me tight and sweeps me off my feet […]
The sky is everywhere, even in the dark beneath your skin […] I eat the sky, I excrete the sky.

[VGS, 173-4]

In this ideal state, body and soul would seem to unified because earth and sky are unified. The God of Genesis made a universe in which difference accounts for identity. God's first act establishes the relation between the divine and the human as difference, making the ground of ultimate reality transcendent, but at the same time establishing a formal need—an explanation—for human language, longing, and history. (Later God's first commandment will insist on this transcendence, prohibiting iconic representation at the same time it seems to require the symbolic as a mode of signification.) Szymborska's poem wonders what would happen if we could think holistically. Suppose we translate “niebo” as “heaven” instead of “sky.”

I've got heaven behind my back, at hand, and on my eyelids. Heaven binds me tight and sweeps me off my feet [...]

The effects of immanence in the poem are intensified when one realizes that in Polish “niebo” indicates not only “sky” (and “a sky” and “the sky”) but also “heaven” (“a heaven,” “the heaven,” even “the heavens”). Lurking behind the poem, then, is not only the possibility of material integration, but a hope of spiritual oneness and immanence, full integrity.
Heaven is everywhere,
even in the dark beneath your skin [...]
I eat heaven, I excrete heaven.

With this poem, then, the book opens with a vision of pure induction and immanence, in which both body and language would be whole, like the sky itself: “An aperture, nothing more, / but wide open.”

However, the last stanza of this poem reluctantly acknowledges the need for—the inevitability of—dualism. Although division is admittedly “not the proper way / to contemplate this wholeness,” it “simply lets me go on living / at a more exact address.” That is, the need to accede to this dualism proves to be in part social, a function of identification and of placement, because identity is both social (“where I can be reached promptly / if I'm sought”) and spatial (as on a grid or street-map or Cartesian plane). In this world, space—what God in the Beginning established with His separation of heaven and earth—is the social realm, marked by dualistic identifying grids of demarcation and denotation (personal characteristics, addresses, language) by which other people can find us. (The question is also related to the status of historical time, because the Genesis myth in effect had marked the beginning of time with the establishment of God's time as “elsewhere”; thus the poem's “fall” into dualism is also a fall into human time, into history and human memory.) The need for the social as a category—the historical fact of other people and their demands on us—undoes the immanence of Szymborska's anti-Genesis. However much the ecstatic subjective self wants to experience the wholeness of the unified sky/heaven, the reality is that the Other impresses itself on us through space and history and the social realm, through the need for “identifying signs,” representations, through our own dualism and dimensionality. Szymborska jocularly insists that her identifying “signs” are internal (rapture and despair) instead of objectivizing scars and physical details—but as she does so, she retrieves some of the ecstatic subjectivity she's just set aside. Thus the poem ends by defining the self according to “identifying features” (“znaki szczególne,” as on a driver's licence or official documents), which the speaker claims in her case are “rapture and despair.” Oddly, the need for those “signs” seems official, potentially authoritarian, but the system of signification that emerges from that challenge seems essential, giving the speaker permission—indeed, the responsibility—to articulate a personal self, with characteristics.

Division into earth and sky
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.

[VGS, 174]

The poem that began by proposing an ecstatic vision of selfless unification concludes instead with personal identity, written representation, metaphor, and the dualism of intense contradictory (or Hegelian) emotions that characterize the self. The end of ecstatic abstraction is the beginning of the articulate self, at the crossing—or on the cross—of dualistic tensions.

The first poem thus functions as a kind of overture to the rest of the book, both in its themes and in its mode of argument. Within individual poems the meditative voice can operate dialectically, considering a position and then emending it, but the position of poems in sequence also constitutes a dialectic, an on-going conversation. In a short essay like this one, we do not have space to consider all the individual poems in the book, and so we propose to discuss some of the representative poems in this continuum, to show how the book makes its largest argument from its abutment of quasiautonomous parts.
After the first poem returns us to history and particularity, signs and memory, the next cluster of poems in the book advocates a relation to history which is practical and, occasionally, robustly forgetful. At first, in the next few poems, this argument seems like a pure assertion of the idiosyncratic specificity that the poem “Sky” had affirmed in its last lines. The next poem “Moze by´c bez tytulu” (“No Title Required”) concludes:

And so it happens that I am and look.
Above me a white butterfly is fluttering through
the air
on wings that are its alone,
and a shadow skims through my hands
that is none other than itself, no one else's but
its own.

When I see such things, I'm no longer sure
that what's important
is more important than what's not.

[VGS, 177]

This attitude seems at first to advocate passive pleasurable subjectivity, even perhaps a Braudel-like attention to the “small” experiential details of history. Consider, however, what a surprising and provocative claim this is for someone who lived in Krakow, near Auschwitz (Oswie[UNK]im), during the War. Since W.W.II Central European poetics have seemed full of echoes of the moral pressure to remember and to memorialize. It's this moral urgency that makes Paul Celan (in “Todesfuge” 1948) famously turn the German lyric into a fugue of remembering and naming, in his case in elegiac recollection of the dead of Auschwitz (“your golden hair Margarete / your ashen hair Shulamith”). By contrast, it is a daring, paradoxical, and provocative elegiac gesture for Szymborska to remind us so lucidly that “life goes on.” Within the first cluster of poems in The End and the Beginning, she argues that the diurnal continues, however it is conditioned and preceded by calamity. Our remembering, therefore, is braided with a responsibility also to forget, that is, to continue, without, for instance, hereditary guilt.

After every war
someone has to tidy up [...]
Someone has to trudge
through sludge and ashes,
through the sofa springs,
the shards of glass,
the bloody rugs.

[VGS, 178]

These lines from the poem entitled “The End and the Beginning” begin to thicken the book's attitude toward history. Subjectivity and the need to continue are not escapes from history; rather, they constitute a different kind of responsibility. After the “end,” the new “beginning” is not necessarily fresh or smooth. After atrocities someone has to clean up the detritus of shattered buildings, ruined lives, even devalued ideologies. The “sludge” and “ashes” in these lines clearly refer to Poland (and elsewhere) during the War, but Szymborska's patient elegiac tone also relates the poem to conditions in contemporary Poland. After 1989, many thinkers (including the poet Zbigniew Herbert) honorably held the position that Poles once again had a responsibility to remember old grievances—not to permit former Communists to serve in the new social structures, and so on. In her careful ironical-factual tone, however, Szymborska argues that progress might also consist in “not knowing”—in strategic forgetting in order to make room for continuity, for new growth, even for liberated day-dreaming.
Those who knew
what this was all about
must make way for those
who know little.
And less than that.
And at last less than nothing.

Someone has to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects,
with a cornstalk in his teeth,
gawking at clouds.

[VGS, 179-80]

These lines picture someone lying in the grass and (like a young poet? like a neo-Romantic?) looking back at the heavens. The “not knowing” proposed here is not simple happy ignorance, but a recognition that in order to look up and forward, we lie on the earth that contains the bones of the dead, but we face the other direction. Throughout the poem, progress has been represented by an evolution of not-knowing—not ignorance, exactly, but forward-looking clear-mindedness.

The next poem in the sequence (“Nienawís´c,” “Hatred”) also shows a personified hatred that “stares into the future,” but the poem after that (“Rzeczywisto´s´c wymaga,” “Reality Demands”) reverses terms, admonishing that “Reality demands / that we also mention this: / life goes on.” Szymborska's is a complex form of “not knowing”; it includes both forgetting and remembering, revision and memory, indignation and patience. The “Reality” poem, for instance, embeds a kind of elegiac tone in its simple vocabulary: language is an unregulated process of memorializing in the process of forgetting. Language turns place into memory, when the names of tragic places enter the language as simple nouns. “Letters fly back and forth / between Pearl Harbor and Hastings, / a moving van passes / beneath the eye of the lion at Cheronea.” This verbal “not knowing” accepts historical facts (abbreviated, iconized, and assimilated in the short forms, “Pearl Harbor,” “Hastings”) and nominalizes them as nouns in its grammar. To name is to remember, and at the same time such memorial nominalization opens toward predication about the past. This verbal strategy (which resembles her famous technique of personification) paradoxically allows Szymborska a modest equanimity in her elegiac tone, an effect sometimes amazing to English-language readers but perhaps more familiar to readers of Polish because it registers much of the grim good humor of contemporary idiomatic Polish. (As Jan Jedrzejewski writes, Szymborska's meditations “may be tragic, but they are never dark.”)

This opening cluster of poems in the book advocates “not knowing” as an elegiac mode of creative forgetfulness and of clear-sighted, forwardlooking memory. Indeed, in her Nobel speech in Stockholm Szymborska proposes the shibboleth “nie wiem” (“I don't know”) as a very password of creativity, significantly in science and in the arts.

This is why I so highly cherish those three small words: ‘I don't know.’ Small, but with powerful wings, broadening our lives into regions in us and regions in which our tiny earth is suspended. If Isaac Newton hadn't said ‘I don't know’ to himself, the apples in his orchard could have dropped on his very own eyes like hailstones: the best result would have been simply that he'd stoop over to pick them up, eating them heartily. If Marie Skłodowska-Curie hadn't said ‘I don't know’ to herself, she would have become a chemistry teacher in a finishing-school for girls from good families, and she'd have spent her life in this (not ignoble) profession. But she repeated to herself, ‘I don't know’—and exactly these words brought her (twice!) to Stockholm, where people of restless spirit and infinite inquiry are honored with Nobel Prizes.
The poet, also, if he's a real poet, continually has to repeat to himself ‘I don't know.’ With each work he tries to answer. But as soon as he points a period at the end of a sentence, hesitation seizes him: he begins to realize that this answer is provisional and absolutely insufficient. So: he tries again, and again.\(^9\)

The Cartesian axes of rapture and despair locate the individual but do not define her. Her freedom consists exactly in this indeterminancy. After Szymborska's famous poem “Some Like Poetry” (“Niektórzy lubia poezje”) has factored the question into ironically faux-naïf subquestions (who are “some” people? what does “like” mean? what is “poetry,” anyway?), it concludes against the momentum of its own evidence: having suggested that poetry is elitist, inexplicable and inexact, unprovable, then the poem praise this indeterminate, essential form of support:

More than one wobbly answer

to this question has been proposed.
And I don't know, and don't know, and hold on

to it

as to a saving rail.

Through *The End and the Beginning*, “not knowing” permits the speaker that tone of “naïf,” of “spoilsport,” of accessibly-logical questioner, that underlies the movement of separate poems in the book, and that generates the “discontinuous” structure of the whole. In local structure, this sense of provisional, insufficient, repeated, creatively essential “not knowing” propels Szymborska into the next cluster of *The End and the Beginning*. In this group of poems through the late-middle of the book, a tension arises between collective history and personal memory. The first poems had proposed forgetting as a healthful Hegelian motion, because “life goes on.” The more personal poems in the middle of the book, however, problematize the possibility of forgetting, especially in personal terms.

The poem “Rachunek Elegijny” (“Elegaic Calculation”—a “rachunek” is also simply your bill in a bar) serves as a transition to this personal mode of the question by introducing the problem of representation and personal memory as a problem of grammar and cognition. The surface of the poem tries to ask an anguished question about personal loss, but assertion and qualification work against one another, as self-consciousness disrupts momentum, demanding subordination:

How many of those I knew
(if I really knew them)

men, women
(if the distinction still holds)

have crossed that threshold
(if it is a threshold)

In the poem's grammatical “calculation” or “ledger” of accountability, however, the speaker can never quite add things up to ask a question—even a question about other peoples' histories—without also questioning the question. Questions about the destiny of other people are undermined by underlying questions about the self as survivor/ speaker, which questions in turn are undermined by questions about the communicability of speech itself in this context. Szymborska is raising issues related to Theodor Adorno's claim that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (along a spectrum from culture-barbarism), because in a reified culture, the subjectivity of the critical artist is tainted, and a “transcendent” position is unstable.\(^{10}\) Szymborska grounds her claim in questions about the power of language to represent other peoples' experience, acknowledging the inherent instability of her “objective” position. The Polish poem interrogates the grounds of its own speech, ending by associating the “doubt” the dead “experience” (if they can be said to experience) with the poem's linguistic self-doubt. The difference, of course, is that the dead no longer hope to overcome their limitations; being completed, they don't hope, and so they can't conclude their conversations with plans for a future.
See you soon.
See you tomorrow.
See you next time.
They don't want
(if they don't want) to say that anymore.
They've given themselves up to endless
(if not otherwise) silence.
They're only concerned with that
(if only that)
which their absence demands.

[VGS, 188]

Language doesn't provide us only with the possibility of recuperative memory; language embodies the process of the erosion and limitation of signification. Interrogating the power of representation to ask questions even about her own dead, Szymborska tests the limits of the Cartesian system that at the beginning of the book had seemed to make the articulate subject possible.

After the opening section of the book advocates forgetting, the more personal middle section of The End and the Beginning shows how forgetting is not so easy. We live separate lives; we suffer separate losses; coincidence and randomness distort us. To forget in particular terms is to lose the details of that very subjectivity that forgetting was supposed to set free. Insofar as it is involved in the historical conditions of its making, language proves to be part of the problem, as well as part of the problematic solution.

The most famous poem from this section is probably “Kot w pustym mieszkaniu” (“Cat in an Empty Apartment”). The poem is a whimsical elegy on the death of a friend's husband, focusing on the denial and hope and implausible resilience of the survivor, in the proud silent puzzlement of a cat left alone. In her reticence Szymborska never mentions the human but poignantly tells the whole story from the aggrieved position of the animal. Here is the whole poem.

“CAT IN AN EMPTY APARTMENT”

Die—you can't do that to a cat.
Since what can a cat do
in an empty apartment?
Climb the walls?
Rub up against the furniture?
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.

Footsteps on the staircase,
but they're new ones.
The hand that puts fish on the saucer
has changed, too.

Something doesn't start
at its usual time.
Something doesn't happen
as it should.
Someone was always, always here
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared.

Every closet has been examined.
Every shelf has been explored.
Excavations under the carpet turned up nothing.
A commandment was even broken,
papers scattered everywhere.
What remains to be done.
Just sleep and wait.

Just wait till he turns up,
just let him show his face.
Will he ever get a lesson
on what not to do to a cat.
Sidle toward him
as if unwilling,
and ever so slow
on visibly offended paws,
and no leaps or jumps at least to start.

[VGS, 189-90]

This diction echoes the wistful, rebellious diction of Polish Romanticism in its details and its refusal to forget—but with the human ache removed. The cat doesn't understand the ideological need to forget, because the cat's identity is based on the habit of remembering the details of the cat's life. The first section of the book had proposed the responsibility to forget; this poem ironically shows the personal need to remember. Such selfhood, based on remembering, is slow to admit change.

Something doesn't start
at its usual time.
Something doesn't happen
as it should.

[VGS, 189]

The poem ends on an oddly charming aria of feline pride and projected revenge, which we know can never be accomplished (“Just wait till he turns up, / just let him show his face.”) The cat feels personal loss (absence) but imagines the return of the human hand (presence) and imagines resisting (revenge, projected absence—but of the wrong party! The person is missing, but the cat imagines withholding itself from the person.) The reader, however, knows that the cat is imagining (and then ostensibly refusing) something that can never happen. The “stubbornness” of the person's absence—projecting its own stubbornness, the cat thinks the person is “stubbornly” absent—proves to be the stubbornness of fact, of fate.

What remains to be done.
Just sleep and wait.

Just wait till he turns up,
just let him show his face.
Will he ever get a lesson
on what not to do to a cat.
Sidle toward him
as if unwilling,
and ever so slow
on visibly offended paws,
and no leaps or jumps at least to start.

[VGS, 190]
What the cat thinks temporary absence (remembering, cognitive presence) is in fact permanent absence (full experiential absence, which will require forgetting). No one will come to touch the cat, and so the cat's fantasy of revenge-and-recuperation (“no leaps or jumps”) is doubly poignant. “[A]t least to start”: Bara´nczak and Cavanagh translate the Polish as an infinitive (“to start”), but grammatically it is a prepositional phrase, “at the start,” using the same noun for “start” “poczatek,” as the word for “beginning” in the title and the title poem of the book, the same word as in Genesis. The cat's projection of the “beginning” that cannot happen moves ironically beyond the sense of reclaimed “beginning” with which the opening poem had concluded.

In this experiential case, however, as the readers know, there will be no new beginning (absence as narrative knowledge): the present is a sustained motion of deferred realization. This end is an end, not a beginning, except in the cat's ironic delusion. This end doesn't even mark the beginning of wisdom (the acknowledgement of limits, loss, space, difference); some losses are permanent, recurrent, and almost unassimilable. That is the terrible price of subjectivity, that some of our ends are final ends, despite history's new beginnings. Part of the charm of the poem is the cat's wistful, deluded, bewildered, vengeful hope, even though “despair” is the second half of the system that defines us humans as individuals.

What's remarkable about this poem is not only its implied human emotions, but its delicate, ironic tone. In the poem the cat's situation is not hopeless except insofar as we observer-readers understand it is. From the cat's perspective, remembering is necessary for its sense of a coherent self, however deluded that remembering can seem. The position of the cat in the empty apartment re-enacts the situation of Schrödinger's cat in the box, in the famous thought-experiment (1929) of contemporary physics.

Imagine a cat being placed in a box. Inside the box there is a radioactive source with a 50:50 chance of decaying. If it does decay, poison gas is released and the cat dies. However, not until someone looks, quantum physicists say, does the radioactive source have to ‘decide’ whether it has decayed or not. So the act of looking seals the cat's fate.11

Only the action of the observer-reader realizes—“makes real”—the hopelessness of the situation of Szymborska's cat. Until the need to choose demands realization, the situation remains in suspension, deferred, its determinations still in potentia. (In fact, Albert Einstein and Erwin Schrödinger disagreed, in terms of quantum mechanics, about the fate of the cat. Einstein argued that while the box is closed the cat is either alive or dead, and we can't know which; Schrödinger argued that the cat is neither or both, and that the act of opening the box would determine the cat's fate.) As an exercise in point of view, the very act of reading Szymborska's poem, in effect, activates Schrödinger's power of quantum resolution toward the cat.

Just as Szymborska's “Elegiac Calculation” had tested the limits of language to address human loss, so “Cat in an Empty Apartment” shows both the necessity and the limits of remembering—and the power of irony and narrative observation. The poem does so, further, by using the most personal situation of the book in a way that implies abstract problems of contemporary physics, at the intersection of observer and observed, chance and fate, remembering and forgetting. The poem in effect uses a scientific paradigm to depict a deeply personal, displaced situation.

Thus far in the book, some poems have illustrated the personal need to remember, and some have questioned whether it is possible to remember; the “Cat” enacts the impossibility of forgetting, even if remembering is a kind of delusion or a deferral of finality. Thus the “Cat” poem opens toward the final sequence of poems in The End and The Beginning. In these poems Szymborska tests first whether mathematical randomness and chance can explain the patterns of human experience, then whether the scientific world-view and its discourses can be used to resolve the thesis-antithesis momentum she had set up in the first two-thirds of the book.
Critics in both Polish and English have often admired Szymborska for her use of contemporary idiomatic language and rhythms. About the final poems of The End and The Beginning, however, it might be more accurate to say that Szymborska doesn’t so much use contemporary systems of knowledge and their dictions, as she assays their usefulness and tries to assimilate them into a fuller post-Romantic, post-War, post-colonial (post-Soviet) vision. In the last group of poems in the book, Szymborska in effect tests several contemporary discourses, to see whether their grammars of “objective” representation can propose a resolution between the abstracting and forgetful objectivity of the first cluster of poems in the book and the particularizing memory of the second cluster. Szymborska tries on the discourses of randomness and of chaos theory (“Seans,” “Séance”—the word can mean also a “performance” like a film's screening-time), of statistics and convergence-theory (“Mio’sc od pierwszego wejrzenia,” “Love at First Sight”), of experimental lab-science (“Moze to wszystko,” “Maybe All This”), of economics (“Nic Darowane,” “Nothing’s a Gift”), and of space travel, anthropology, and colonizing discourse (“Wersja wydarze’n,” “One Version of Events”). Each attempt offers a provisional conclusion. The most memorable moments of these poems finally render subjective experience individually—but paradoxically from the distanced perspective of science, economics, and so on. Surprisingly, these objectifying visions do not so much reduce the individual as acknowledge the mystery and clarity of individual experience.

Even laboratory science proves to be a form of surprised “not knowing”—as at the conclusion, in the monitored experimental laboratory, of the poem “Moze to wszystko” (“Maybe All This”). The poem opens with the theory that our lives are determined, that we might be under observation in a laboratory. This poem is another shadow-version of the first (“Sky”) poem: the space of transcendence now seems virtually unbridgeable, the superior creatures unknowable, their purposes wholly objectifying. Where the first poem had reluctantly asserted that language, doubleness, and space are related to individuality, the “Moze” poem surprisingly celebrates individuality, as if the supervisory, gods-like scientists need the individual, the idiosyncratic, the mystery of the ordinary.

Look! on the big screen a little girl
is sewing a button on her sleeve.
The radar shrieks,
the staff comes at a run.
What a darling little being
with its tiny heart beating inside it!
How sweet, its solemn
threading of the needle!
Somebody cries enraptured:
Get the boss,
tell him he’s got to see this for himself!

[VGS, 202]

These attempts to view individual experience from “larger” perspectives of knowledge and of objective diction repeatedly lead to re-discoveries of the importance of the particular mysteries of subjectivity and individuality.

Somewhat higher on a scale of abstraction than the scientists of the laboratory poem, even angels represent something of this distanced perspective, as in the poem “Komedyjki”. (“Slapstick”—literally, “little comedies”). From their heavenly/skyward perspective, angels enjoy and affectionately laugh at the ultimate subjectivity of Charlie Chaplin. In the film of the comedian from the beginning of the twentieth century the angels recognize a droll tragi-comedy that is both the end and a new beginning, both a speech and a silence, objectivity and subjectivity, tragedy and comedy. Like Szymborska, they applaud—but with their wings.

If there are angels,
I doubt they read
our novels
classic thwarted hopes.

I'm afraid, alas,
they never touch the poems,
that bear our grudges against the world. [...]

To our dirge wailers,
garment renderers,
and teeth gnashers,
they prefer, I suppose,
that poor devil,
who grabs the drowning by his toupee
or, starving, devours his own shoelaces
with gusto ...

If there are angels,
they must, I hope,
find this convincing,
this merriment dangling from terror,
not even crying save me Save me
since all of this takes place in silence.

I can even imagine
that they clap their wings
and tears stream from their eyes
from laughter, if nothing else.

[VGS, 204-5]

In their translation, Cavanagh and Barańczak usefully render the title of this poem as “Slapstick”; that interpolation helpfully stresses the element of physical humor and of somatic individuality that is the charm of the human, from the angels’ perspective. That is, the angels respond to a wordless-but-articulate, physical, individualistic human “comedy” (like the Divine “Comedy”) of human life seen from a distance. Romantic art and gestures (insurrections, suffering, sacrifice, high rhetoric) do not appeal to them, as the poem had maintained at its start:

I'm afraid, alas,
they never touch the poems,
that bear our grudges against the world.

If art and history tell only about large events and great news, the angels recognize, such forms and genres don't render the comedy, the rapture and despair, of full individual experience, space, and identity.

Thus although it does make a distanced perspective seem attractive, even charming, the “angels” poem opens toward the last poem, which returns the book to the concerns of the opening poem of the book. The poem “Wielkie to szczęście” returns to the need for language as a mode of knowledge that respects the creative power of “not knowing.” The “Sky” poem eventually recognized that the otherness of other people—more than the otherness of God!—is what proves the need for a dualistic system, generating history and spatiality and limits and linguistic signification and paraphrasable personal identity. The last poem of the book (“Wielkie to szczęście”) begins by downright praising limitations. The title claims that “We're Extremely Fortunate” (a relatively-familiar, neutral idiom, meaning “it's lucky” or “it's a stroke of luck,” even “it's a blessing”) … “not to know what kind of a world one lives in.” The book's opening poem (“Niebo,” “Sky”) had asked what full knowledge and full Utopian incipience would be like. By the end of the book, the “Fortunate” poem of the ending emphasizes the utility of limitation (“not-knowing”)—not only its
inevitability, as in the “Sky” poem, but also its helpfulness and desirability. To know the world in full, one would lose too much. The costs would be too high: one would need to live too long, to “rise above the flesh,” and to “transcend time, / in which everything scurries and whirls.” One would have to “bid farewell” to the “incidents and details” that make us human, according to the book’s location of “the human” as involving both objectivity and subjectivity, immanence (ironic tragedy, the cat) and transcendence (tragi-comedy, the angels), despair and rapture. Knowing the world in full would distance us from denotation, communication, and language:

We're extremely fortunate
don't to know precisely
the kind of world we live in.

One would have
to live a long, long time,
unquestionably longer
than the world itself.

Get to know other worlds,
if only for comparison.

Rise above the flesh,
which only really knows
how to obstruct
and make trouble.

For the sake of research,
the big picture,
and definitive conclusions,
one would have to transcend time,
in which everything scurries and twirls.

From that perspective,
one might as well bid farewell
to incidents and details.

The counting of weekdays
would inevitably seem to be
a senseless activity;

dropping letters in the mailbox
a whim of foolish youth.

the sign ‘No Walking on the Grass’
a symptom of lunacy.

[VGS, 213-4]

These last two lines pun on the Polish word “napis,” “sign,” as if the “sign” were a “sign/symptom” of the lunacy of such prohibition (the Polish word “napis” is repeated in the last two lines, as the word for both sign and symptom). That is, writing itself is one of the locating and defining activities that would be unnecessary if we did live in the “fortunate” state that the title of the poem ironically proposes—like a shadow of the book’s first, anti-Genesis poem. The final pun of the final poem implicates writing itself as a further “symptom”; the joke relates the process of signification to the identifying personal “features” (signs) of the first poem.

The first poem had opened the book with a reluctant accession to limits and Cartesian grids, which make selfhood easier to locate, making personal “identifying features” possible and necessary as “signs,” like a grid
of an address in case one is “sought.” The idiomatic diction of the book has in effect emphasized and problematized this theme of the immanence of the ordinary. Here at the end of the book Szymborska doesn’t object to the sign of limitation (the sign “No Walking on the Grass”). Rather, she objects to the limitation of significatio; in a world of full understanding, writing (making signs, necessarily of limits) would be a symptom of lunacy, a fully unnecessary activity. That is, in this poem Szymborska positively praises limitation, because dualism and limits make signification possible. It would not after all be so “fortunate” fully to “know” the world in which one lives. We would lose our language because there would be no need for language; that is, we would lose our blessed generative ignorance, our capacity to forget and therefore the need to rediscover, to rename, and to reclaim the changing world. If we knew, we'd have to relinquish “not knowing.” But the restless skepticism of consciousness turns ends into beginnings, “complete” knowledge into provisional hypotheses. As Szymborska said in Stockholm: “Out of every solved problem, new questions swarm. Inspiration, whatever it may be, emerges from an unending ’I don't know.’”

Notes

1. Czeslaw Milosz, Selected Poems (NY: Ecco), 45-6. In the Polish, the verb “[could not] save” of the first line derives, punningly, from the same root-verb (“ocala´c”) as the noun “rescue” of the title; at the end of the book Rescue (of whom? from what? through what means? to what purpose?), the poem addresses those-whom-the-poet-could-not-rescue. Further, the word for “Dedication” here means literally pre-speech, an etymology that re-contextualizes the “rescue” the book might effect. The use of the “prefatory” poem at the end suggests that Milosz is “anticipating”—speaking for, or making a speech that is the first speech-act of—a new cultural-linguistic aesthetic; he is not for instance “dedicating” a memorial, or inaugurating a movement. In this sense this poem, written in Krakow in 1945, anticipates many of Milosz's later poems of retrospection and of surprised personal memory.


3. For an excellent account of the “complex blend of irony and moralism” in Polish poetry since the late 1960's—and therefore an illuminating cultural grid in which to read Szymborska's later work—see Stanislaw Bara´nczak's “Introduction” to his helpful anthology (co-translated with Clare Cavanagh), Spoiling the Cannibals' Fun: Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades of Communist Rule (Evanston: Northwestern), 1991, 1-15.


In this context, the evolution of Milosz's published opinions represents an interesting pattern. Milosz includes Szymborska work in his 1963 Penguin anthology Postwar Polish Poetry, although he wonders about her tendency toward “playing with ideas borrowed from anthropology and philosophy.” His account of her work in the first edition of his History of Polish Literature (Berkeley: California) repeats the characterization: “It would be unjust to present her as a poetess of narrow range; her discipline enables her to practice philosophical poetry with a conciseness matched only by Zbigniew Herbert. Yet she often leans toward preciosity. She is probably at her best where her woman's sensibility outweighs her existential brand of rationalism” (485). In an “Epilogue” to that History he describes a more “mature” philosophical Szymborska (534). Both Szymborska's practice and Milosz's evaluation evolve; in the revised edition of his anthology (1983) Milosz admits his earlier misgivings, acknowledges changes in Szymborska's work, and includes more of her poems than earlier. This earlier reading had been grounded in a concern that the use of ideas “borrowed” from other disciplines might make poetry “dependent on intellectual fashions and encourage preciosity.” As our reading of The End and the Beginning hopes to show, however, in these later poems Szymborska's playfulness has the effect of ironizing her use of the discourses of these objectifying systems—a reading that echoes Milosz's initial reading, but finds a purposive
self-referential twist in Szymborska's use of “borrowed” “ideas.”

Throughout this discussion, we allude to “clusters” and “movements” in the sequence, with the understanding that that characterization is our critical interpolation; in fact Szymborska gives the eighteen poems of the book as a continuous whole, without sectioning.

7. In her insistence that “life goes on,” Szymborska may be stressing also that poetry goes on, and that Polish poetry need not be restricted to post-War experiences of collectivity and witness. Patterns of criticism and reviewing in the West have reinforced Western assumptions that such concerns remain primary in Central and Eastern European writings over the last fifty years. See Jerzy Jarniewicz, “Co Anglicy lubia najbardziej?” [“What the English Like the Best”], NaGlos 12, 1993, 114-28; also for instance A. Alvarez, Under Pressure: The Writer in Society, Eastern Europe and the USA (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1995). In 1993 these issues were summarized and argued in an exchange of polemical review-essays by Donald Davie and others in the Times Literary Supplement and the London Review of Books.

For an excellent discussion of the pressures that different cultural expectations have on the process of translation, using Szymborska's poems as the paradigm, see Stanislaw Bara´nczak, “Amerykanizacja Wislawy” [“The Americanization of Wislawa”], in Rado´s´c czytania (op. cit.), 308-20.

Criticism: John Blazina (essay date January 2001)


[In the following essay, Blazina explicates Szymborska's poem “Bruegel's Two Monkeys,” considering the work's imagery, irony, use of language, and theme of “an identity of opposites.”]

Like the hero of folktales, the speaker of ‘Bruegel's Two Monkeys’, by Wislawa Szymborska, is confronted by a test, an interrogation. She is taking her graduation exam, experiencing a rite of passage marking the transition from schooling to life, and she is failing. She stammers and falls silent when asked about the history of humanity. Answering a question or writing a poem about human history, in Poland after Auschwitz, cannot be easy. What is there to say if she can no longer parrot the party line of progress toward utopia? But help is at hand. As so often in folk tales, an animal offers help to the heroine. A monkey rattles its chain, uses its chain as a sign, and a conversation begins.

‘Bruegel's Two Monkeys’ appeared in the literary weekly Zycie Literackie in June 1957, and again in July, in Szymborska's third collection, Waiting for the Yeti1. In 1956 workers' riots and student demonstrations led to the crisis and compromise of October when, with Soviet troops massed along the border, Poland narrowly
avoided the fate of Hungary. These events provide a ready context for the usual reading of the poem as a reference to Stalinist oppression.\(^2\) Another context has been less remarked. ‘Bruegel's Two Monkeys’ is an ecphrastic poem, a poem about a painting. This context allows us to predict that the conversation might be about poetry itself, and specifically about the relation between language and reality. Poets and painters worry intermittently about whether their chosen medium adequately represents or does justice to their subject matter. The painting might be a metaphor for this relation or lack of relation. In either case the monkeys, conventionally associated with subversive imitation, are the key element of painting and poem. Chained to a window, they are signs of poesia, emblems of Szymborska's anxiety about her art.

The speaker begins by describing a dream in which she is answering questions on an exam about ‘the History of Mankind’ and receiving help from a monkey. We are in a dream world where the speaker is anxiously trying to get the right answer and where monkeys are ironic and wise:

\[
\text{Tak wyglada mój wielki maturalny sen:} \\
\text{siedza w oknie dwie malpy przykute lańcuchem,} \\
\text{za oknem fruwa niebo} \\
\text{i kapie sie morze.} \\
\text{Zdaje z historii ludzi.} \\
\text{Jakam sie i brne.} \\
\text{Malpa, wpatrzona we mnie, ironicznie slucha,} \\
\text{druga nibi to drzemie—} \\
\text{a kiedy po pytaniu nastaje milczenie,} \\
\text{podpowiada mi} \\
\text{cichym brzakaniem lańcucha.} \\
\]

\[
\text{(Here's what my great dream of my final exam is like:} \\
\text{two chained monkeys are sitting in a window,} \\
\text{the sky is fluttering outside} \\
\text{and the ocean is bathing.} \\
\text{I'm being examined on human history.} \\
\text{I stammer and cast about for words.} \\
\text{One monkey, staring at me, listens ironically;} \\
\text{the other appears to be dozing—} \\
\text{but when silence descends after a question} \\
\text{he coaches me} \\
\text{with the soft rattling of his chain.)(3)} \\
\]

There is a strong sense of formal and semantic closure in the third stanza. A rhyme scheme (abb'ca) provides a sense of order achieved, of something understood, after the first two rhymeless and irregular stanzas. The rattling chain seems to resolve the sharp disparity between fluttering (or flying) and stammering, and the point made is at once ironic and poignant. The creature in chains helps those who chain it understand their own imprisonment. There is a sense too of something unresolved. In the first few lines there is a striking and even puzzling transition. After the prosaic notation of line 2, lines 3 and 4 introduce a surreal, figurative note: ‘the sky is fluttering outside / and the ocean is bathing’ (or \textit{B and C}, p. 15: ‘the sea is taking a bath’). These lines describe features of Bruegel's painting distorted by what we take to be dreamwork. They take their cue from but also add something to the painting. As interpretations rather than descriptions, they make it clear that someone is observing the painting. Before we examine these lines, however, we need to question the general thematic relevance of the painting to the poem. Why mention it in the title?

The main elements of the painting are already in the poem: the monkeys, their chains, and the window as the site of oppositions between confinement and freedom, culture and nature. The reader has no need to look at
the painting to see a simple assertion in the image of chained monkeys: we have failed the test of history. Nor is the painting necessary for the reader's recognition that received oppositions between animal and human, freedom and bondage, human history and nature have been dissolved by the ironic reversal of competence displayed in the final lines. In Szymborska's world, Poland under communism, the correct answer to the exam question would appear to be progress toward some utopian dream of perfection, but the speaker's ability to wallow in the usual human presumption is disrupted by one monkey's ironic gaze. The poem contests the human claim to evolutionary progress, to civilization, to superiority over the animal world. The monkey seemingly asleep provides the imaginative, subversive answer. Human history is all that the chains imply: cruelty, bondage, and increasing estrangement from nature. Humanity is less, not more, 'civilized' than the 'lower primates' it enslaves for entertainment and self-aggrandizement.

Szymborska makes the point repeatedly, from the perspective of animals, that human beings are cruelly anthropocentric and 'unforgivably stupid'. The sight of animals trained to 'ape' human beings, a dog dancing, a monkey riding a bicycle, arouses shame in the speaker of 'Circus Animals'. In 'The Monkey' the animal is 'worshipped in Egypt', 'deprived of a soul' in Europe, and 'considered edible in China' (B and C, p. 27). In 'Tarsier' the eponymous speaker is relieved at being of absolutely no use to human beings. An ironic distance, or dissonance, between the possible meanings of 'humanity' (ludze) is one component of the stammering in 'Bruegel's Two Monkeys'.

If reading the poem as moral and political allegory were sufficient, why does Szymborska refer specifically to Bruegel in her title? Are there aspects of the painting that would clarify or complicate our reading of the poem? If we look closely at the painting we see (the poem's title forces us to see) that the foreground consists of a window occupying most of the frame and set in a wall several feet thick. The monkeys are chained on either side of a large ring anchored in the centre of the sill, one facing away and looking down at a scattering of nutshells, the other facing the viewer but also looking down. Their tails curl elegantly in toward the centre and complete a circle originating in the window's arch and passing through the unnaturally curved bodies of the monkeys. Behind them, and intensely contrasting with the brown hues of the monkeys and the walls, are birds in the bright sky and boats in the harbour of a town indistinctly seen through a bluish haze.

Does Szymborska merely want us to envision the monkeys, and if so, why? There seems to be very little in common between the abject monkeys of the painting, usually referred to as downcast, dejected, mournful, sad, and those of the poem, one seeming to sleep, the other ironic. The poem is very different in tone from the painting: spare, self-mocking, almost a set of notes. There is a lack of detail, and the opening lines only hint at the visual force of the painting's contrast between the dark, fortress-like embrasure (suggesting both power and imprisonment) and the light-filled space beyond. Nevertheless, the title encourages us to bring if not its details, then the painting to the poem and to reflect on their relation.

We bring not only the painting but also the culture in which it is, or was, embedded. We bring the painting as a sign that makes sense in terms of that culture and of parallel or antecedent texts. Christian iconography, for example, took 'apes in high places' to figure 'the pride of the powerful'. Fettered monkeys could mean folly, or reason enslaved by passion, the human descending to the level of the animal in the great chain of being. The nutshells alone would have disposed some of Bruegel's contemporaries to read the painting allegorically, in the spirit of patristic exegesis, discovering the kernel of spiritual truth (or political: there is evidence that the painting was read as a political allegory referring to Spain's domination of the Netherlands), and dismissing the earthly husk or shell, however accurately visualized. Her title functions in the same way for Szymborska's contemporaries. It gathers the dark, densely allegorical potential of the painting between the lines of her own spare commentary. It also summons the double vision of Bruegel's work as a whole: the world of The Cripples, The Blind Leading the Blind, The Battle between Carnival and Lent, a world of cruelty, suffering, the sheer folly of human being; a world also of subversive play, pleasure, and participation in the natural world.
Like the painting, the poem is chained to its time and place, and evokes the themes, metaphors, and evasions of Szymborska's contemporaries. Writing in Poland under Communist rule in the 1950s, the poet summons the painting as an analogue, to reinforce as well as distance her own allegorical point. The painting's stark contrast between entrapment and freedom underlines the gap between the reality and the delusive utopianism of Stalinist power. Freedom, from this ironic perspective, is reduced to a figment of propaganda, the fantasy of animals imprisoned by ideology. The poet is necessarily oblique in making her subversive point. There are parallels, she implies, between the Lowlands oppressed by Spain and Poland oppressed by Communism. It would be foolish, if not fatal, to propose this analogy explicitly. Instead, like the dreaming monkey she hints at the resemblance by rattling a chain, her title, suggesting that meaning and history are continuous, not disjunct.

There is a problem, however, in the apparent ease of this reading. The monkeys present an image almost too rich for interpretive taste. Indifferently they reflect power, possession, pride, deracination, alienation. They translate too easily into oppressed workers, oppressed humanity, the natural world in general, or even the primate of choice for scientific research. Clearly differentiated in poem and painting (in posture, position, direction of gaze), they can suggest polar responses to ideological power: ironic contempt on the one hand and keeping your head down on the other. We could say that one is listening and looking, in order to remember and witness, while the other is the imaginative, inventive side of the oppressed mind, free enough to provide a useful hint to the dreamer, whose life under communism is one of imminent graduation into some utopian future, so long as she finds and lives the right answers. These possibilities flow easily into contradiction. Given the conformity of Szymborska's first two collections to the dictates of socialist realism, we might read the poem as a Marxist allegory in which the speaker receives help from workers enslaved by bourgeois capitalism. This reading uneasily coexists with a subversive reading: the monkeys are workers still, but chained by the very ideology that proclaims their freedom, and part of a cruel experiment in utopian thinking. Taken out of context, Bruegel's image can reinforce or subvert Poland's dominant ideology, and the irony inherent in its ambiguity may be taken further.

The monkeys' impact in the painting can be measured against their imagined absence. Without them our view of the scene outside is untrammelled. Even the wall's oppressive thickness is cancelled by the viewer's unimpeded gaze. There is access to the wishful world beyond the window. The monkey's presence, on the other hand, transforms the painting's space to one of pathos and boredom. Chained to the wall, blocking our view, they are lost to the world, one staring vacantly inside the room, the other gazing down at fragments of shell, as if contemplating the remnants of a lost wholeness. They take no notice of one another, and though chained together could not seem more separate. They belong nowhere. The wall now seems to manifest their terrifying lack of relation and the sheer weight of the boredom of captive animals. Chained to the monkeys, it not only divides, it diminishes and negates, it cancels out any possible relation between inside and outside for those capable of chaining (and painting!) a pair of monkeys. No allegorical substitution is worthy of this image. It rebuffs allegory, insofar as allegory depends on relatedness, and presents itself purely as a sign of absence.

If this image is what Szymborska's title has summoned to the poem, the reader is unable to establish a stable viewpoint. Poem and painting interact dialectically toward the disruption of thesis. The poem-monkeys, ironic and dreaming, take on the painting-monkeys' disruption of the viewer's gaze. As she moves back and forth, the reader is implicated, by an aesthetic of self-consciousness, in the creation of history, slavery, and meaning. The painting-monkeys make us aware of our gaze stumbling past them into the space beyond. Aware of ourselves seeing, and of the painting as something seen, we notice the latter's strong division into painted surface (the windowsill) and illusionistic space (sky and sea). The poem's own dialectical thrust comes into focus: between dream and reality, poem and painting, question and answer, animal and human, listening and seeing, analysis and empathy. The formal structure of the poem, varying line length, simple and complex syntax, and the simultaneous use of free and syllabic verse, is also antithetical, as Jacek Brzozowski has shown. Brzozowski finds, for example, a 'semantic abyss' between the elaborate syntax of the second line,
speaking of enslavement: ‘siedza w okni dwie malpy przykute lańcuchem’, and the brief, simple utterances of lines three and four, reflecting freedom: ‘za oknem fruwa niebo / i kapie się morze’ (pp. 22-23). The poem's chief tropes (irony and personification) and its primary images (dream, chain and window) reinforce our growing conviction that Szymborska is less interested in a particular meaning than in the topic, or dialectic, of representation. The window is an especially pertinent image. A peculiar amalgam of near and far, inside and outside, both threshold and barrier, transparent to what it is not, the window captures and frames many paradoxes of representation. Like the chain, it connects and restricts. Both, and especially the chain used as a sign, direct us to the topic of language.

The poem's genre provides the appropriate context. ‘Bruegel's Two Monkeys’ is one of several ecphrastic poems by Szymborska. Their subject is the power of images: the power, in ‘People on the Bridge’, to pin down the moment for close analysis; the power, in ‘A Medieval Miniature’ and ‘Ruben's Women’, where slender women are ‘exiles of style’ (K and M, p. 51), to misrepresent and exclude by means of idealization; or the power to betray, in both senses, the repressed truth, as in ‘The Monkey’, where a ‘painter-monk’ portrays ‘a saint with palms so thin, they could be simian’ (B and C, p. 27). In ‘Bruegel's Two Monkeys’ Szymborska contemplates the apparent gulf between language and the representational transparency of the image, and more broadly, between language and reality. Poets have long questioned the analogy between poetry and painting epitomized in Horace's phrase *ut pictura poesis.* How could poetry compete with an illusion of grapes that deceived sparrows or with painted curtains that fooled another artist. How could poetry compete with and capture the truth of nature itself?

Parodist, trickster, ‘caricature of man’ in the margins of medieval discourse (Janson, pp. 14-15, 163), the monkey becomes the principal figure of this debate. Was the poet *simia dei,* the mere copyist or ‘ape’ of nature and god; were the arts merely *simia naturae?* Szymborska's painted monkeys seem to glance at these ecphrastic themes, and the one who ‘speaks’ with its chain evokes the related epigrammatic tradition (compare Keats's urn) of giving the mute statue or painting a voice (Hagstrum, pp. 22-23). They summon a long meditation on the subject of mimesis, the imitation in art of the world and consciousness of the world. Szymborska's voice in this debate asks the crucial question: how can poetry work with the very chains of language and culture that seem, irrevocably, to sever the human from its place in the natural world?

There have been many answers to the question of human history: a fall into sin; a struggle between classes; eternal recurrence; the sublimation of desire into civilization. The speaker's stammering, her very inability to choose between competing and contradictory answers, draws our attention to the seminal role of language in human, or rather animal evolution. Human history is that of the language-speaking animal that separates itself from a so-called nature, sees itself as separate from nature, by naming it, classifying it as nature. The human is defined as that which is not animal. However, these are words, and in ‘View with a Grain of Sand’ Szymborska asserts that the word is not the thing: ‘We call it a grain of sand / but it calls itself neither grain nor sand’ (B and C, p. 185). Far from an aperture, a transparent window on the world, the word can be an ideological wall obscuring the thing, abstracting us from contingent reality. Elsewhere, Szymborska has seen the apparent gulf between language and reality as liberating. In ‘The Joy of Writing’ she revels in ‘a time I bind with chains of signs’ (B and C, p. 67), but here she is concerned with the anxiety of representation induced by the nature of language as abstraction. The gift of language seems to carry a terrible price, separating us, like the window, from what it purports to describe. All we get is the wrapping. ‘Only what is human can truly be foreign’, she says in ‘Psalm’ (B and C, p. 148). Consciousness, as language, thickens the wall between us and the sky every time we say ‘I am not that’. Like an eye embedded in stone (the eye, *oko,* is in the window, *okno*), consciousness seems to be neither in the world nor even of the world but merely a window on the world, embedded in a thick wall of words incapable as abstractions of capturing the particular and indivisible. Is there a way to bridge this abyss? Is there really an abyss?

Animal helpers in folklore and myth turn nature (the social outcast) into culture. Animal tricksters, figures of irony, ambiguity and the liminal, turn culture into nature. Bruegel's monkeys do both. They are clearly
part of, but excluded from, the natural world we see represented through the window. Removed from their ecological niche, trapped in a fortified niche, they now belong to nature only as defined by and in contrast to culture. Enforced by massive chains and intensified by the flight of birds behind them, their separation is cultural. The ‘human’ defines itself against nature and enforces the distinction by exploiting, enslaving, and degrading the natural. As animals the monkeys project our superiority to whatever we can dominate. Their chains signify our difference, our superiority: we humans are not monkeys; we have imprisoned them precisely to signify our own separation from nature and our own superiority to them as nature. They have become cultural signs and signs of culture. However, for Bruegel and Szymborska as well, the chained monkeys, observing and judging, undo the very distinctions they are designed to make, between human and animal, culture and nature: we too are separated from the natural world, and we alarmingly resemble the lower primates. We are also chained to the monkeys by our biology, our evolutionary history, and by our use of them, our idea of ourselves as different from them, superior to them, above and against nature, able to imprison and own and examine it. Further, we are chained by and to the language that is, ironically, our main claim to superiority, a claim deflated by the monkey's help in understanding history. Reduced to signs of human difference and superiority, the monkeys nevertheless expose these as figments of language, figures of speech.

The personifications of lines 3 and 4 also disrupt the cultural code of separation from nature: ‘the sky is fluttering outside / and the ocean is bathing’. Once monkeys and window figure separation, sea and sky become metaphors of union, self-identity, nature enjoying what it is in itself. How can the ocean bathe? The trope transfers agency to sea and sky, reconfigures the human use of nature into a gestalt in which the human is an implicit part of the natural world. The point of the joke is identity prior to differences imposed by language. The sky also flutters because in the painting there is a flock of birds and the sky is the flock of birds and the fluttering of the bird’s wings. We, using abstract, referential language, see them as separate, bird opposed to air, boat (in Bruegel) to water, but they do not see themselves at all. They are what they are, we can strain holistically to say, they are where they are and what they do. They are not in nature, they are nature: unlike us, who see ourselves apart from the nature that in fact sustains us. We paint and write and categorize, we cast about for words that are barriers and fetters.

Except when transmuted by the art of poetry. In ‘Conversation with a Stone’ Szymborska's speaker, trying to enter into the stoneness of a stone, is told that entry into the stone requires ‘a sense of taking part’ and that she has ‘only a sense of what that sense should be, / only its seed, imagination’ (B and C, p. 63). Imagination, like dream and by way of metaphor, can hint at what ‘taking part’ might be like. We can apprehend our own participation in what we summarily call nature by means of metaphors that slip through (and monkey about with) the abstractions of language. We can take part insofar as we engage in the kind of imaginative reciprocity exemplified by a poem about a dream which looks like a painting of monkeys who speak to us (as in a play, prompting us) and we to them. There is a chain of meaning connecting the monkeys and the speaker, who does finally know or make an answer. She has successfully passed her final exam not by giving the required answers, and not by resigning herself to captivity in the fortress of language, but by redefining language, poetry, imaginative art in general, as dialogue.

The speaker dreams about exams (maturalny sen) because she wants to write poems that will pass the test of time, that are, as maturalny implies, mature. In Poland the matura, the final exam at the end of high school, is also called ‘egzamin dojrzało´s´ci’, exam of maturity. In a brief discussion of examination dreams, Freud anticipates several of Szymborska's motifs. In his own dreams of failure, he says, ‘I am invariably examined in History, in which I did brilliantly’. Such dreams arise from ‘the relentless causal chains of real life [that] take charge of our education’ (p. 274). Past success is summoned, albeit ambiguously, to reassure the dreamer anxious about professional competence or failure. The word Matura, Freud adds, ‘also means maturity’ (p. 275). With or without Freud we can surmise that Szymborska is concerned about her poetic maturity, her graduation from the immaturity of poetry vitiated by ideology. The painting provides the relevant imagery for her desire: it is seen and seen through from a site of entrapment to a bright vision of flight and buoyancy, of
perfect ease in one's medium. The poem picks up and develops this contrast. In its dream of a final exam we are in the presence of extreme anxiety about the writing of poetry, as well as shame generated by the judgment of the other. Stammering, inarticulate, the speaker is afraid of failing, of giving the wrong answer, of being seen and judged to be inadequate. She falls into silence. Failure is imminent. Then she hears the sound of a chain, a sound that breaks the spell of ignorance (and the dominance of the visual) and resolves the speaker's difficulties. The sadness and anxiety of the poem is resolved by unexpected kindness (we might even say ‘humanity’) when a monkey softly rattles a chain, uses the chain that imprisons her to communicate. A conversation has begun. The speaker is rescued from anxiety about mimesis by the idea of representation as conversation. The mimetic disadvantages of language disappear in the reciprocity of conversation. The distance of the eye dissolves into the empathy of the ear. The concluding rhyme of the poem, slucha/lańcucha (listens/chains), makes this point brilliantly audible, the sound echoing the sense and resolving into rhythmic utterance the meaningless repetition of sounds implied by ‘stammering’: the onomatopoeic word ‘brżakanimię’ (rattling, but also strumming, as on a lyre) is instrumental here. The poet is talking to the world and the world, the natural world endlessly generous with images and sounds, is talking back, in a poem.

Szymborska's readers will take part in this dialogue and dream. They will remember their own rites of passage, personal and, for some, political (October, 1956), and take the metaphor of chained monkeys literally. The reader's inevitable self-consciousness derives from the ambiguity of the poem's images and the interaction of its elements: the poem refers to a dream and is the dream. Szymborska's use of the present tense, Brzozowski suggests, conjoins the metaphorical and the occasional, the subjective and the objective, a sense of immediacy and an ‘atemporality’ conducive to allegory (pp. 14-16). There is an implicit atemporal claim, moreover, in ecphrastic poetry, a ‘topos of the stopped moment’ that Szymborska contemplates in ‘People on the Bridge’ and ‘The Joy Of Writing’. The temporal flow of language is, figuratively, subsumed in the ‘still moment’ of painting as a spatial art. In the timeless, liminal realm of the dream vision, the reader links one thing with another, poem, painting, dream, and play coincide, and the chain resonates ambiguously as a symbol of connection as well as confinement, of poetic freedom as well as the ‘mind-forged manacles’ of ideology. The window, too, dissolves difference, fusing reader and poem, consciousness and world. The monkeys also provide a powerful double vision of what we deny and what we recognize: they are imprisoned by us and they are ourselves imprisoned: the gaoler jailed by his jailing. In stark contrast to the birds and the boats beyond the window, which are in their element, at one with their element, they seem to be part neither of the natural nor of the human world. Nevertheless, they connect those worlds, as do we when we are not brutally severing them. They are the trickster-poet, the monkey-poet turning, troping, the divisions of language and ideology into images of wholeness and connection: the last few lines, for example, unhook the great chain of being from hierarchy and fasten it to evolution, putting Darwin in a nutshell.

The poem's personifications also participate in the chastening of Szymborska's reader. We too, we humans, are merely a trope, personified abstractions self-deceived, perceiving freedom as a distant prospect beyond the cell of self, as separation from, rather than immersion in, the natural world we have never left and can never leave. That world is language. We too are in our element, at one with our element, which is language, if we use it not to separate but to connect. Like a beak, language can hold a fledgling or tear its prey to pieces. Language is the way we take part in the world, the way we enter and construe the world. ‘The ocean is bathing’. Language says ocean and bathing. It classifies and then undoes the classifications. Pun and personification override our eyes and our customary use of language to say this and that, A and not-A. They imply an identity of opposites that is the poem's enabling theme. They mock the narrow view of difference dividing culture from nature. Walls and windows, dream and exam, readers and monkeys mix and merge in the monstrous element, the language of poetry.

In the context, then, of an ecphrastic tradition conflating poet-apes, imitation, art, nature, and subversion, we can see Szymborska's monkeys as two aspects of her own ‘marginal’ voice, one taking an ironical view of the best of all possible worlds, the other dreaming an alternative world into existence, one expressing judgment and the other empathy. This double voice is stifled, however, stammering and silent, until it receives
help from a chained monkey. The chain imprisons but it also connects. Like dream and window it serves as a
sign of liminality, where opposites coincide, dialectic dissolves, and poem and painting fuse into an image of
wholeness.

Notes

2. Wislawa Szymborska, Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems, trans. by Magnus J. Krynski and
also Jacek Brzozowski, ‘Poetycki sen o dojrzałości: O Dwóch malpach Bruegla’, in O wierszach
Brzozowski reads the poem as ‘a clear summing up of experiences inspired by the October
breakthrough’ and draws a precise parallel between Szymborska and Bruegel responding with
‘private, yet universal’ symbols to similar political crises (pp. 12, 20). For a useful collection of
essays on Szymborska, see Radość czytania Szymborskiej: Wybór tekstów krytycznych, ed. by
3. Translation by Madeline G. Levine, Contemporary Polish Poetry 1925-1975 (Boston: Twayne
Publishers, 1981), pp. 95-96. Other selections are from Wislawa Szymborska, Poems New and
148). On the theme of nature in Szymborska, see Edyta M. Bojanowska, ‘Wislawa Szymborska:
5. Margaret A Sullivan, ‘Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Two Monkeys: A New Interpretation’, Art Bulletin,
63 (March 1981), 114-26 (p. 124).
6. H. W. Janson, Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (London: Warburg
Institute, 1952), p. 147.
8. Referring to Szymborska’s many poems on paintings, Stanislaw Balbus observes that falseness is the
price art pays for its idealization of the living world (Swiat ze wszystkich stron ‘swiata: O Wislawie
the generalization of ecphrasis, in the context of semiotic theory, into ‘a universal principal of poetics’
see W. J. T. Mitchell, Picture Theory: Essays in Verbal and Visual Representation (Chicago and
11. On the trickster as liminal and the nature of liminality as ‘betwixt and between all fixed points of
Robert D. Pelton, The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight
12. Eva Karpinski, in correspondence, sees an allusion to the Asian sculpture of three monkeys who see,
hear, and speak no evil. The speaker is the third monkey, unable to speak openly in a time of political
repression. I am grateful to Eva Karpinski, York University, and Anna Passakas, Toronto, for reading
and commenting on this paper.
13. Implications of maturity may also be present in the fluttering (fruwa) sky. There is an echo in fruwa,
for Eva Karpinski, of podfruwajka a word applied to young girls on the verge of maturity.
1955), pp. 274-75.
15. There is some precedent for Szymborska's play on stammering. On the ‘prophetic stammering’ of biblical figures overwhelmed by unutterable sublimity see Herbert Marks, ‘On Prophetic Stammering’, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 1 (Fall 1987), 1-20. Nietzsche brings the pressure between language and the sublime home to poetry in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where a poet, stammering and ashamed, speaks to animals who offer him advice. When Zarathustra speaks of words as ‘illusive bridges between things that are eternally apart’, his animals advise him to fashion a new lyre for new songs (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), pp. 197, 217-20). Szymborska's version of this dialogue explores the same disjunction between word and world.


18. Szymborska's poetry is written, Wojciech Ligeza has aptly said, ‘on the margins’ (*´Swiat w stanie korekty: O Poesji Wislawy Szymborskiej*, *Twórczo´s´c*, 29 (October 1983), 89-102 (p. 89).

**Criticism: Ruth Franklin (essay date 4 June 2001)**


*[In the following review of Miracle Fair, Franklin remarks on the humor of Szymborska's poetry and mentions a number of her poems that appear in English for the first time in this collection.]*

It is Wislawa Szymborska's custom to dress up the serious in the costume of comedy. Even her Nobel Lecture began with an *ars poetica* disguised as a joke. “They say that the first sentence in any speech is always the hardest,” she said. “Well, that one's behind me.” But in fact escape is not so easy, she continued:

> 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. Imperfection is easier to tolerate in small doses.

“Imperfection is easier to tolerate in small doses” could be said to be Szymborska's motto. The Nobel Lecture is titled “The Poet and the World,” and it is the imperfect world that she expounds and interprets in her poems, in carefully apportioned and gently administered measures. Her poetry is the antithesis of confessional poetry: Szymborska has never published a poem about her sex life, or her mother, or what she ate for breakfast. When she does write about topics that appear to be personal, it is only as a jumping-off point for a meditation on the human condition.

Her poems are founded on the assumption that hers is a universal voice. “In Szymborska's poetry the ‘we’ denotes all of us living on this planet now, joined by a common consciousness, a ‘post-consciousness,’ post-Copernican, post-Newtonian, post-Darwinian, post-two-World-Wars, post-crimes-and-inventions-of-the-twentieth-century,” Czeslaw Milosz writes in his introduction to *Miracle Fair*. “It is a serious and bold enterprise to venture a diagnosis, that is, to try to say who we are, what we believe in, and what we think.” But this is not to say that Szymborska is a poet of abstractions. One of the most distinctive features of her poetry is the way in which she builds from the particular a route to the universal. As she put it in 1976 in “A Large Number,” in the collection of the same name:

> Four billion people on this earth,
> but my imagination is the way it's always
been:
bad with large numbers.
It is still moved by particularity.

For Szymborska, such “particularity” can mean almost any of the details of life: a cat’s incomprehension of the death of its owner, a man dozing at a poetry reading, a single raindrop “crafted from the Ganges and the Nile / from the ascended frost of a seal's whiskers / from water in broken pots in the cities of Ys and Tyre.” Or, as in the chilling “Starvation Camp at Jaslo,” an individual conjured out of the murk of historical statistics:

History rounds off skeletons to the nearest zero.
A thousand and one is still a thousand.
As if that one weren't there at all:
an imaginary embryo, empty cradle,
a primer opened for no one,
air that laughs and screams and grows,
stairs for the void running down to the garden,
nobody's place in the ranks.

In her native Poland, where much poetry is “popular”—printed in newspapers, read and discussed—Szymborska's poetry is exceedingly so; and her popularity has followed her to America, where she is one of the few Polish poets to be read by people who are not especially interested in Poland or in poetry. Her style, as much as her subject matter, is responsible for her aura of approachability. The neatly assembled sentences of which her poems are constructed are miniature marvels of precision in a Polish literary tradition famous for lines and constructs of Latinate complexity. She has a special flair for the opening line: “After every war / someone has to clean up”; “I owe a lot / to those I do not love”; “A one-sided relationship is developing quite well / between you and me.” (The “you” of this last sentence refers to plants.) These lines are impeccably Szymborska: seemingly straightforward propositions that veer off in an unsettling yet gently humorous direction.

Joanna Trzeciak's translations of Szymborska's poetry have been appearing in magazines for years, and now they have been revised and gathered into Miracle Fair, which arrives at the end of a boomlet in translations of Szymborska into English. In 1996, Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh published View With a Grain of Sand, a selection of one hundred poems, which they translated exceptionally well. Two years later came Poems New and Collected 1957-1997, a nearly comprehensive presentation of Szymborska's work to date; it comprises nearly the entire contents of her seven major volumes of poetry, plus a handful of poems published over the past decade. This is not as many poems as one might expect from a poet who has been publishing for more than fifty years. Szymborska owes her compact style to her own harsh editing of her work, and produces only a few final draft poems each year. (“So few poems, so much poetry,” the critic Stanislaw Balbus has said of her.)

The sixty-one poems in Trzeciak's book do not pretend to be a complete representation of Szymborska's work to date. The main strength of Miracle Fair, rather, is its presentation. Trzeciak has grouped the poems in six sections, each devoted to a certain theme: love, war and politics, the natural world, humankind, philosophy, art. The ten or so poems in each section are arranged chronologically. One loses the coherence of reading as a group poems from individual volumes; but one gains a heightened sense of the progression in Szymborska's technique and thought over the years.

It is obligatory for any new translation to present the debuts of a few poems that are being translated for the first time, and Trzeciak has fulfilled her duty in this regard, though it could not have been easy. In their Translators' Note to Poems New and Collected, Baranczak and Cavanagh confessed that they had left out just
a handful of poems, and those only because of “specific unsurmountable problems of a technical nature involved in the translation of each.” It was inevitable that some plucky translator would be unable to resist the challenge implicit in this statement; and Trzeciak proudly includes poems that have never appeared in English before, several of which, she writes, “had been deemed untranslatable.”

But there is another reason that a few of these poems will be new to English readers: they are taken from Szymborska's unpublished first volume of poetry, which was rejected by the government as incompatible with the Socialist Realist aesthetic that was gaining prominence at the time, as well as from her first two published books, both of which were deemed compatible with Socialist Realism and published during the early 1950s, the heyday of Stalinism in Poland. Most critics have chosen, benevolently and somewhat condescendingly, to overlook these volumes, arguing that the first is juvenilia and that Szymborska herself does not consider the published ones artistically authentic. And these poems are certainly not to be counted among her finest. Still, it would be ludicrous to ignore the first twelve years of Szymborska's career in an overview of her work, and Trzeciak rightly makes the case for the inclusion of these poems. It is understandable that Polish critics tend to “forget” the work that some of the country's literary heroes produced under Stalinism, but as that period fades further into the past, the “warts and all” approach seems to be gaining a foothold.

Soçrealizm—as Socialist Realism was called in Poland—was imposed by Communist Party decree in 1949 and dominated Poland's literary and artistic scene until 1955, when the “thaw” began. Some writers, including the critic Jan Kott and the poet Adam Waszyk, embraced early on the idea of basing literature on Marxist criteria, and advocated a “broad realism” like that of Balzac or Proust; but in general Soçrealizm was enforced by prescriptions handed down by government officials and so-called “terroreticians.” Avant-garde experimentation, which had thrived in Poland during the interwar period, was strictly forbidden. The preferred literary form was the “production novel,” which usually had as its setting a factory or a collective farm, with all the inherent drama thereof. Poetry was restricted to metered and rhymed verse, which was thought to have the maximum appeal to the proletarian reader.

Many writers were silent during “the period of errors and mistakes,” as it later was known. And so in 1956 there was an explosion of poetry, with the delayed debuts of writers such as Zbigniew Herbert and Aleksander Wat. Others escaped abroad, publishing their work in the Polish exile press, which reached a limited readership. And still others devoted themselves to creating literature emblematic of Soçrealizm, including Tadeusz Borowski, who until then had been known for his unflinchingly testimonial short stories about Auschwitz, the most famous of which is “Ladies and Gentlemen, This Way to the Gas.” After producing a steady stream of newspaper and magazine articles extolling the new system, Borowski abruptly committed suicide in 1951, at the age of twenty-nine.

Szymborska was part of a minority: the relatively few writers who tried more or less to continue, under the new restraints, with what they had been doing. In keeping with the usual etiquette of silently overlooking work that was published under Soçrealizm, most collections of Szymborska's poetry start with her third volume, Calling Out to Yeti (1957), which was read as emblematic of the Polish thaw: the poem to which the book's title refers, “Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition,” is a monologue describing the joys of the world, from Shakespeare to electric lights, to a distant abominable-snowman figure.

Yet Szymborska had been publishing poetry for twelve years by the time Calling Out to Yeti appeared. Her first published poem, “I'm searching for a word,” appeared in a literary supplement to the Kraków newspaper Dziennik Polski in March of 1945. She hoped to publish her first book in 1948, but her poetry was deemed inaccessible and overly preoccupied with the horrors of World War II. Still, she managed to bring out her first collection, What We Live For, in 1952, at the height of Stalinism. The following year Szymborska became poetry editor of Zycie Literackie, one of Poland's most important literary magazines, and in 1954 she published her second book, Questioning Oneself.
Many critics, including Milosz, have had a hard time with the propagandistic tendencies of Szymborska’s first two volumes. The poems deal largely with political topics. They certainly reflect the anti-Western and anti-capitalist tendencies of the time, though they are not in the same league as the Socialist Realist howlers, with their rhetoric about tractors and fields of grain. In an interview several years ago, Szymborska said that the “mistake” hampering her early writing was that she had tried “to love humankind instead of loving human beings.”

Despite any attempts to the contrary, however, it is human beings that Szymborska has loved all along; and her early poems, like those of any poet, are best understood as premature precursors to her later work, not as blots on her record. A good example is “We knew the world backwards and forwards,” written in 1945 and included in the volume of early poetry that was never published. It first appeared fifty-five years later, when Szymborska herself chose it to open a Polish collection of her poems:

We knew the world backwards and
forwards—
so small it fit in a handshake,
so easy it could be described in a smile,
as plain as the echoes of old truths in a prayer.

History did not greet us with triumphant
fanfare—
it flung dirty sand in our eyes.
Ahead of us were distant roads leading
nowhere,
poisoned wells, bitter bread.

The spoils of war is our knowledge of the
world—
so large it fits in a handshake,
so hard it could be described in a smile,
as strange as the echoes of old truths in a prayer.

It is quite obvious why this poem was deemed unpublishable at the time, with Socialist Realism just around the corner. And it is almost as obvious why it was not published later—though it should be said that the original possesses a symmetry and a rhythm that do not come through in the clunky lines of Trzeciak’s translation. Szymborska’s later work would abandon this sort of heavy-handed didacticism for a far more subtle approach, but “We knew the world backwards and forwards” signals the beginning of a preoccupation that has remained with the poet for her entire career. Many later poems can be seen as re-writings of this one, especially “The Turn of the Century,” the first poem that Szymborska published after the declaration of martial law in Poland in 1981. It is too long to quote in its entirety, but here are the first two stanzas:

It was supposed to be better than the rest,
our twentieth century.
But it won't have time to prove it.
Its years are numbered,
it's step unsteady,
it's breath short.

Already too much has happened
that was not supposed to happen,
and what was to come
has yet to come.
The poems share a common theme—simply put, that war and other forms of political violence force us to re-evaluate our most basic assumptions about the world in which we live. The first poem derives much of its power from the literal reversal of tropes, echoing the reversal of expectations, that occurs with the third stanza's repetition of the first. But while the first poem states its “old truths” unblinkingly and rather roughly, the later poem is exquisite in its indirectness: there is no need even to name what is being referred to, since by now we are all far too familiar with the tragedies of the twentieth century. In fact, if it were necessary to name what “happened that was not supposed to happen”—one hears in these lines an echo of Paul Celan's oblique formulation of the Holocaust as simply “what happened”—the impact of the poem would be lost, since it rests on the assumption of humanity's universal grief.

The structure of Trzeciak's book, and the chronological ordering of poems within sections, allow earlier poems to be read together with later poems in a kind of counterpoint, emphasizing the deepening of Szymborska's expression over the years as she refines her technique. In the mid-career poem “A Thank-You Note,” for example, she acknowledges her debt to her loved ones indirectly, by celebrating the more casual, less weighty relationships she has with those whom she does not love:

Between rendezvous and letter
no eternity passes,
only a few days or weeks.

Our trips always turn out well:
concerts are enjoyed,
cathedrals toured,
landscapes in focus.

And when seven rivers and mountains
come between us,
they are the rivers and mountains
found on any map. …

Turning the clichés of love poetry inside out, Szymborska uses the signs of love's absence to define its presence. There is a soft note of teasing in her reference to the “eternity” of “a few days or weeks” when one is waiting to hear from a beloved; and the rivers and mountains, fixed geographically, are comforting in their very prosaicness. But finally there is a quite deliberate emptiness in these stanzas, a mournful banality that is the mark of lovelessness. There is far more to life than placid encounters and pleasant scenery, and satisfaction with such half-measures bespeaks a limited mind and heart.

The recent short poem “Negative,” in which Szymborska imagines a frame of film as a window to the world of the dead, is one of Szymborska's elegies on the death of her companion. It recapitulates the idea of absence and love, but comes at it from quite a different perspective:

In a grayish sky
a cloud even more gray
with a black outline from the sun.

On the left, that is, on the right,
a white cherry branch with black blossoms.

On your dark face light shadows.
You have sat down at a small table
and laid your grayed hands on it.

You seem like a ghost
trying to summon the living.
(Because I'm still counted among them,  
I should appear to him and tap:  
good night, that is, good morning,  
farewell, that is, hello.  
Not begrudging him questions to any  
answer  
if they concern life,  
that is, the storm before the calm.)

Playing on the commonplace yet surreal image of the negative, Szymborska slowly builds reversal upon reversal, starting with the obvious—a white branch with black cherry blossoms, a dark face with light shadows—and moving toward the metaphysical—good night instead of good morning, questions instead of answers—to reach the poem's startling last line, itself the inversion of a cliché. Each line carries more and more weight until, at the end, the poem's true subject is revealed: life itself, “the storm before the calm.”

“To be frank, [Szymborska’s] is a very grim poetry,” Milosz writes in his introduction to Miracle Fair, comparing her outlook on life to the “despairing vision” of Philip Larkin. To be sure, the two poets have certain stylistic similarities: both are among the plainest and most lucid writers of their generation; and both play with traditional forms to create a poetry that manages to feel modern within the very constraints of its formalism. Yet it is hard to imagine two poets further apart philosophically. At the heart of Larkin's poetry is an impervious misanthropy, while Szymborska is one of the great humanists of our time. Milosz himself acknowledges the depths of the “pity and compassion” for humankind that informs Szymborska’s work.

Szymborska also differs from Larkin in her mischievous, whimsical sense of humor. Even when the British poet is fooling around (“They fuck you up, your mum and dad …”), he is always grimly serious at heart; but Szymborska is capable of indulging her sheer delight in the world. “The Silence of Plants” is a fine example of her distinctive comedy:

A one-sided relationship is developing  
quite well  
between you and me.

I know what a leaf, petal, kernel, cone,  
and stem are,  
and I know what happens to you in April  
and December.

Though my curiosity is unrequited,  
I gladly stoop for some of you  
and for others I crane my neck. …

Just ask and I will explain as best I can:  
what it is to see through eyes,  
why my heart beats,  
and how come my body is unrooted.

But how does someone answer questions  
ever posed  
when on top of that  
she is such an utter nobody to you? …

Szymborska is obviously not the first poet to write a poem about a plant, or even to address a plant in a poem; but it is her unusual inversion of the tired “flower poem” that makes “The Silence of Plants” so original and so engaging. Her poems exult in connections: between people, between people and animals, and here even such a relationship as exists between people and plants. She celebrates the most ordinary actions—stopping or
craning one's neck—as expressions of this relationship; she longs to explain to the plants what a person is, seeing herself through a plant's eyes, as it were (describing her body as "unrooted," for example). At the poem's conclusion, there is a sadness in the acknowledgment that, needless to say, dialogue with plants is impossible; but it is the joy in life required even to seek such a dialogue that dominates.

Unfortunately, the poems in *Miracle Fair* are more representative of Szymborska's gravity than of her whimsy. This may be a result of the restrictions imposed by Trzeciak's thematic groupings, which preclude the selection of poems that do not fit neatly within the various categories. The book gives a good sense of her general philosophy and of her idiom, but what is missing are the measured explosions of charm and delight that punctuate her body of work. Consider “In Praise of Dreams,” a series of couplets describing fantasies, from the most outlandish to the most mundane (here in Baranczak and Cavanagh's translation):

In my dreams
I paint like Vermeer van Delft.

I speak fluent Greek
and not just with the living.

I drive a car
that does what I want it to. …

Or “The Onion,” which celebrates the apparent perfection of that vegetable, in contrast to messy, incoherent humanity (again in Baranczak and Cavanagh's version):

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. …

In the original, this poem takes advantage of the capabilities of Polish, an inflected language, to produce every possible variation on *cebula*, the word for onion, resulting in a tangled tongue-twister of “c”s and “cz”s. (The lines above give as accurate a reproduction of this as is possible in English.) It is impossible to recite this ode to the onion with a straight face.

And again the ending packs a surprise. Here is the last stanza:

Nature’s rotundest tummy,
its greatest success story,
the onion drapes itself in its
own aureoles of glory.
We hold veins, nerves, and fat,
secretions' secret sections.
Not for us such idiotic
onionoid perfections.

In the translation, it is almost possible to overlook the word “idiotic,” tucked in at the end of the penultimate line; but not in the original, the last two lines of which are “*I jest nam odmówiony / idiotyzm doskonałości,*” literally, “And we are denied / the idiocy of perfection.” Although human beings are by design unable to achieve the perfect coherence and symmetry of the onion, such superficial perfection is idiotic, based on nothing—like the poem itself. Imperfection, we must conclude, is far more interesting.
Szymborska, Wislawa: Further Reading

CRITICISM


Mentions a bilingual (French and Polish) volume of Szymborska's selected poetry.


Briefly comments on the delicate balance and subtle humor of Szymborska's poetry.


Characterizes Szymborska's poetic sensibility, including her concentration on the commonplace in which she finds joy and universalizing truths.


Kirsch calls Szymborska's work “a poetry of resistance” that blends joy and despair, and compares it stylistically to that of John Donne.


Observes the accomplished English translation of Szymborska’s Poems New and Collected, 1957-1997 and summarizes the poet's life and literary career.


Finds Joanna Trzeciak's English versions of Szymborska's poetry in Miracle Fair less skillfully produced than those of former translators, noting occasional “clumsy and banal” rhymes and other faults.


Includes a very terse sketch of Szymborska's life and an English translation of her poem “In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself.”

Additional coverage of Szymborska's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: Contemporary Authors, Vol. 154; Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, Vol. 91; Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 99; Contemporary Women Poets; Contemporary World Writers, Vol. 2; Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 232; Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook, 1996; DISCovering Authors 3.0; Literature Resource Center; and Major 20th-Century Writers, Ed. 2.
Analysis: Other Literary Forms

Wislawa Szymborska is primarily a poet, but she also published several collections of short articles written during her career as a columnist at the weekly Zycie Literackie in the years 1968-1981. Lektury nadobowiazkowe (1973; nonrequired reading) is a collection of witty, short essays inspired by a vast and eclectic selection of books ranging from the classics of literature to cooking and gardening manuals. Szymborska began publishing Lektury nadobowiazkowe in the daily Gazeta Wyborcza in the mid-1990’s.

In Zycie Literackie, Szymborska also hosted (anonymously) a column for aspiring writers. Her witty responses to hopeful writers have been collected in the volume Poczta literacka (literary mail, 2000).

Analysis: Achievements

Wislawa Szymborska is known as the first lady of Polish poetry. Her poetry is elegant, witty, and delightfully intelligent. Szymborska is that rare phenomenon: a poet of universal appeal. Her poems—beloved by both demanding intellectuals and high school students—introduced humor, irony, and wit into the dreary reality of Communist Poland. Her work, however, is by no means of merely local consequence. Szymborska’s poetry has been translated into nearly all European languages as well as into Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, and Hindu.

Szymborska received numerous literary awards, including the City of Cracow Award, the Polish Pen Club Award, the Solidarno´s´c Award, the Jurzykowski Foundation Award, the Kallenbach Foundation Award, the Goethe and Herder Prizes, and the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1996. Szymborska is also known for her superb translations of French poetry, especially of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Bibliography


