Szymborska Wislawa

Wisława Szymborska was one of the most important 20th-century European poets and essayists. Robert Hass called her "unquestionably one of the great living European poets," and Charles Simic considered her "one of the finest poets living today." She was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1996.

Szymborska was born in Kornik, western Poland, on July 2, 1923, and lived in Kraków from the age of eight. She made her literary début at age 21, in March 1945, with the poem "Szukam słowa" (I Seek the Word), which was published in the newspaper Dziennik Polski (Polish Daily). After World War II, in September 1945, she enrolled at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków to study Polish literature and sociology. For most of her career (1953–81), she worked as poetry editor and columnist at the Kraków literary weekly Zycie Literackie (Literary Life), where the well-known series of her essays Lektury nadobowiązkowe (Nonrequired Reading) has been translated into many languages.

With print runs comparable to those of popular novels, a number of Szymborska's books have been best sellers. She published profusely and regularly, and the list of her major works is long: Dlatego żyjemy (That's Why We Are Alive, 1952), Pytania zadawane sobie (Questioning Yourself, 1954), Wolanie do Yeti (Calling Out to Yeti, 1957), Sól (Salt, 1962), 101 wierszy (101 Poems, 1966), Sto pociech (No End of Fun, 1967), Poezje wybrane (Selected Poetry, 1967), Wszelki wypadek (Could Have, 1972), Wielka liczba (A Large Number, 1976), Ludzie na moście (People on the Bridge, 1986), Poezje: Poems (bilingual Polish-English edition, 1989), Lektury nadobowiązkowe (Nonrequired Reading, 1992), Koniec i początek (The End and the Beginning, 1993), Widok z ziarnkiem piasku (View with a Grain of Sand, 1996), Sto wierszy—sto pociech (100 Poems—100 Happineses, 1997), Chwila (Moment, 2002), and Rymowanki dla dużych dzieci (Rhymes for Big Kids, 2003). Subsequent translated collections by Szymborska include Monologue of a Dog (2005) and Here (2010). Collections of her poetry have also been published in Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Czech, Danish, English, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovak, Swedish, and other languages. They have also been widely published in anthologies of world poetry. Szymborska herself published translations from French poetry, especially baroque lyrics. Her own poems belong to the long humanist tradition and stand apart from some contemporary movements. They contain witty intellectual observations, poetic paradoxes, and social satire expressed as a sort of tender irony.

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech Szymborska confessed to writing poetry goaded by her own ignorance. She said that poetry wrestles with the question, What do I know about this? Each poem "marks an effort" to come to grips with uncertainties, so that "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." The quest for language in which to wrap one's experience of reality is, for Szymborska, the project of poetry. In that speech she self-deprecatingly compared the photogenic creative processes of painters and sculptors with those of poets, who, when they are working, appear to be only staring endlessly into space, although they are struggling, sometimes mightily, against the limits of language to compose something valuable in their heads. Representative of her aesthetic, "In Praise of Self-Deprecation" and "View with a Grain of Sand" are only two of her enormous output of simply expressed but ethically challenging poems. Another work highly recommended for its wry humor is her 27-line "Under a Certain Little Star," in which she apologizes profusely to necessity, happiness, the dead, time, old loves, "far-off wars," "open wounds," "cut-down trees," and a dozen other important (and some unimportant) entities for not being able to "be everywhere" and for not being able ultimately to justify herself; the poem concludes with a self-reflexive apology to "speech, that I borrow weighty words, / and later try hard to make them seem light" (Paine 304–305). It is a poem that recognizes the situation of human beings in the worlds of history, nature, and culture and also recognizes the very real limitations under which human beings manage their lives from moment to moment.

Besides the Nobel Prize, Szymborska was awarded the City of Kraków Prize for Literature (1954), the Polish Ministry of Culture Prize (1963), the Goethe Prize (1991), the Herder Prize (1995), an honorary doctor of letters degree from Poznań University (1995), the Polish PEN Club prize, and others. She died in 2012.

Further Information