Eastern Europe

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The Szymborska Phenomenon*

More than three decades ago, in 1962, a slim book of poems bearing the monosyllabic and hardly soul-stirring title of Sól (Salt) came out in Poland. Its author, a woman then in her late thirties, had apparently considered it fitting to include in her collection, among other poems, her own verse epitaph. Obviously a tongue in cheek performance, this piece nonetheless seems to be quite serious about two things: first, it is an epitaph of no one but the author herself (identified by her surname in the poem’s final line); second, it is an epitaph of a self-declared “oldfashioned” poet, a hopelessly backward user of rhyme and punctuation who “had failed to join the avant-garde, of course.” The punishment for her inability (or unwillingness?) to keep pace with the spirit of the time is, naturally enough, oblivion. The interred “authoress of verse” accepts this verdict with equanimity; indeed, in her final exhortation of the “passerby” to “take his electronic brain out of his briefcase / and meditate on Szymborska’s fate for a moment” (thus in literal translation) we somehow don’t detect much belief in posterity’s eager cooperation.

Thirty-two years have passed and we can safely say that there has never been a prophecy so wide of the mark as this little poem. Just about

*Four poems by Wislawa Szymborska follow this installment of Stanislaw Baranczak’s column.
everything in it has, in fact, turned out its exact opposite. The poet is, fortunately for all of us, still very much alive; rhymes and commas have not totally disappeared from present-day verse; the joining of an avant-garde, if anything can be termed so these days, is no longer de rigueur for a contemporary poet; the expression “electronic brain” sounds as obsolete today as “velocipede” or “zeppelin,” while it seems incomprehensible to us that the notion of carrying a computer around in one’s briefcase could have ever worked for anyone as an absurd joke; and finally, “Szymborska’s fate” so far can only be described as consistent ascension to worldwide fame rather than a sinking into oblivion.

It was precisely Salt, her fourth book of poems (featuring such classics as “Rubens’s Women,” “Coloratura,” “In Heraclitus’s River,” or probably the most frequently anthologized poem she ever wrote, “Conversation with a Stone”), that turned her into that strangest of all God’s creatures: a modern poet whose poems and collections are actually widely read and eagerly awaited. Another poem included in Salt, “Poetry Reading”, a self-ironic vignette in which the poet faces “teeming crowds” of admirers that consist of “Twelve people in the room, eight seats to spare ... / Half came inside because it started raining, / the rest are relatives,” was for her the last opportunity to complain, even half-seriously, of the lack of readers. In fact, she had been recognized as a major talent at least since 1957, when her third book, Calling Out to Yeti, came out. If her beginnings had not shown much promise, it was History, rather than herself, that was to blame. Born in 1923, she had the bad luck of having to launch her literary career at the worst possible historic time: during the first decade of Communist rule. 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 — and it is with this
title's first word that the genuine Szymborska begins. From one volume to the next, her “That’s why,” turns into an unspoken “Why?”; the cocksure self-confidence of someone who has a ready answer to anything gives way to doubt expressed in a “question,” or rather a series of “questions put to myself”; and what is perhaps the most significant, the plural “we” is replaced with the singular “I.” In one of the most recent of very few interviews which Szymborska has consented to give in the course of her career, she sums up the “mistake” underlying her early writing by saying that she tried then “to love humankind instead of loving human beings.” One might complement this extremely insightful observation by saying that the aesthetics of Socialist Realism demanded “love” for nothing less general than humankind while at the same time, ironically, narrowing down the multidimensionality of human life to just one, social, dimension; contrariwise, it is Szymborska’s seemingly narrow focus on the individual and her continuous defense of whatever is unique about a given human being that allows her to view human reality in all its troublesome complication. “Questions Put to Myself” have remained, for the past four decades, the essence of her writing.

What I have just typed sounds, in fact, more apt in English than it would in Polish, since the English word “question” gives more balance to its two basic meanings, that of “a problem” and that of “an interrogative sentence.” The uniqueness of Szymborska’s writing is a straight consequence of the fact that most of her poems are “questions” in that double, philosophical and syntactic, sense. And the incomparable success of her work with the reading public, particularly in recent years, has resulted not merely from the fact that the “questions” she raises are problems of utmost importance for both humankind as a whole and each and every one of us separately; it also stems from the fact that these are “questions” she actually asks. It is precisely her inimitable way of asking or “putting a question to herself” (and to others) that matters the most here. Szymborska’s poems are indeed based, as a rule, on the structural model of a question, inquiry, or sometimes even quite literal interrogation-like questioning. The principal tenet of her individual poetics is, in nearly every poem she has written, to bring up this or another assertion or opinion that is dogmatic, sanctified, widely accepted, and never put in doubt—and to ask a well-aimed NAIVE QUESTION that, in its ultimate consequences, forces the
dogmatic pseudo-truth to reveal its own shakiness or downright falsity.

The strange thing about Szymborska's reception is that, popular and critically acclaimed as she is, she is still waiting for some major critical work to tackle all the complexity of her art. Particularly after the publication in Poland, in May of 1993, of her bestselling latest collection, *The End and the Beginning*, but also earlier, after a comparable success in 1986 of the volume titled *The People on the Bridge*, Szymborska has presented a peculiar problem for her critics. The problem lies in the fact that it's nearly impossible to write about the work of a poet who has attained the status of a contemporary classic while at the same time refusing stubbornly to be cast in marble. Szymborska represents such a case perhaps to a greater extent than anyone else in today's Polish poetry, with the possible exception of Czeslaw Milosz. On the one hand, at least since the early 1960s there could have been no doubt that her work belongs among the most lasting contributions of Polish poetry to world literature; no time or distance has been necessary for the critic to be able to appreciate her poems' historic significance. On the other hand, Szymborska's work seems to be anything but a closed chapter of literary history; on the contrary, it surprises the critic with its constant and consistent renewal. Her unique voice is instantly recognizable, while no single new poem of hers is predictable. We are dead sure, as it were, that we have a great poet in our midst but, as her greatness consists, among other things, precisely in her uncanny ability to surprise us, we can never give it its due, because we prove simply unable to catch up with this poet's rapid evolution.

"Rapid" may sound funny to those who remember that Szymborska, as far as sheer numbers are concerned, strikes the critic as one of the least prolific contemporary Polish poets. Over the past couple of decades, she has published sparingly in the literary press—as a rule, one or two new poems here and there every six months or so—and her slim collections remind one of those by Philip Larkin or Elizabeth Bishop, volumes divided by seven-to-ten-year-long intervals. Yet her development as a poet is —here's another paradox — indeed systematically accelerated rather than slowed down, and emphasized rather than obscured, by this scarcity. What happens is not that she enjoys her readers' respect in spite of some prolonged writer's block, but, rather, the opposite of that: she writes deliberately little because she holds the highest stan-
Szymborska, quite simply, does not write irrelevant poems.

This could even suffice as the shortest possible definition of her incomparable stature in modern poetry: "Szymborska = a poet whose each and every poem matters." I remember how much my American collaborator Clare Cavanagh and I were awestruck by this peculiar feature of Szymborska's work when we deliberated several years ago on the selection of poems from her aforementioned volume The People on the Bridge to be included in our anthology of most recent Polish poetry, Spoiling Cannibals' Fun. After many hours of scrutinizing, one after another, each of the 22 poems that form Szymborska's collection and trying to play a pair of devil's advocates ready to pounce on any noticeable flaw, we couldn't help but come to the conclusion that we were facing a veritable miracle: a book in which every single poem is equally necessary and irreplaceable. There was no other way: we simply had to translate and include all 22 of them. That this was no mere accident has recently been confirmed by our analogous scrutiny of Szymborska's most recent volume, The End and the Beginning. In this, even slimmer, collection featuring just 18 poems, each one is nothing less than a discovery: some became famous immediately after their first appearances in literary periodicals, and at least one of these, the amazing and moving "Cat in an Empty Apartment" (in which the absence of someone who is dead is presented from the perspective of the house pet he left behind) is already something of a cult object among Polish readers.

As to her audience in the West, Szymborska has thus far been introduced to the English-speaking readers by as many as three different book-length selections, two of them published in the U.S.A. and one, more recently, in England. View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems, translated by Clare Cavanagh and myself, and scheduled to come out next spring through Harcourt Brace, differs from the existing selections in one essential point: it includes 120 poems, that is to say, at least about twice as many as in each of the three earlier publications (the largest of them, the Princeton University Press bilingual volume, contains 70 poems). Insofar as Szymborska's output since the late fifties has not, as I have already said, included a single irrelevant or artistically inferior poem, any larger selection of her work is simply a better selection of her work, because it...
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offers the reader a larger number of excellent poems.

But the effect of such a broadened selection will be, we hope, not merely quantitative. It will also show Szymborska in a new light by making the reader realize the enormous scope of her thematic concerns and versatility of her technical means. In the earlier translations certain crucial aspects of her work are heavily underrepresented as a result of the translators' reluctance to cope with specific kinds of poems — those which offer a higher degree of stylistic organization or certain aesthetic qualities that may seem resistant to transplantation into another language. The reader of those selections may, for instance, never really find out that Szymborska's chief asset is her humor, particularly the kind of humor that her clever puns and witty ambiguities produce; that she can be stylistically opulent as well as ascetic; and, last but not least, that Szymborska has written a number of poems in rhymed and metrically regular verse.

Contrary to what her translators usually make her look like, Szymborska is clearly a poet for whom language is not just a transparent pane in a window opening to some outside, view but a "question" or problem in its own right. An effervescent example of that is "Coloratura," a poem which can sound to a superficial reader like merely a parodistic imitation of the phonetics of the operatic bel canto. But Szymborska's clever and comical sound orchestration ultimately produces the poem's basic concept: in the original, two words, "hair" and "voice," which form a full rhyme in Polish, find their ultimate rhyming echo in the third word, the meaning of which is "fate." If we need art to reflect our human fate, is this task also performed by such an extremely detached and super-conventional kind of art for art's sake as the operatic coloratura? Are we supposed to ridicule the self-absorption of such art, or perhaps try to find in its mannerisms some human sense of its own? This would be the central "question" of this poem, one asked indirectly, by means of highlighting specific (here, phonetic) correspondences concealed underneath the surface of language and making them "stand for" certain ideas or issues.

Another great example of Szymborska's use of phonetic correspondences is the poem "Birthday," where the brilliantly executed structural conceit — making a poem of a series of enumerations of elements of nature selected according to the principle of the phonetic similarity of their names — helps make clear the poem's central "question" (=problem),
which is the abundance of the world’s individual components that over-whelms each of us from the moment of our births. The related, also central “question” (=inquiry): how is the mere mortal supposed to cope with all this? Is the world’s bounty a gift or a burden, a blessing or a curse?

Three more examples will show unexpected uses that Szybmorska may make of word construction, grammar, and syntax. In “The Onion,” an almost philosophical (though also very comical) argument about the human individual’s irreversible exclusion from the world of nature (in a sense, a variation on Pascal’s “thinking reed” motif) makes its point by, among other things, introducing a couple of abstract-sounding neologisms stemming from the rather trivial “onion,” thus underscoring the onion’s “idiotic onionoid perfection” that remains inaccessible to humans. In “A Medieval Miniature” it is the superlative of adjectives that becomes a sort of grammatical protagonist of the poem’s lyrical action: its conceit-generating role becomes clear as we gradually come to realize that the poem, ostensibly being just a description of a painting, is in fact a miniature treatise on the role that the idealization of reality plays in art. Finally, in “In Broad Daylight” a corresponding question concerning the role of heroic myth in human society, its relation to the essentially non-heroic nature of actual life, emerges as a result of Szybmorska’s skillful manipulation of the dominating feature of the poem’s language, which is its use of the conditional (the poem speculates on what would have become of the young poet who died a hero’s death during the war, had he survived and gone through the prosaic experiences of an average life).

Brilliant as they are, these technical feats are nevertheless only partly responsible for Szybmorska’s popular success. To be sure, it never hurts to ask why a popular poet is popular. This is true particularly of our age, in which a poet’s genuine popularity is such a rare phenomenon that it almost inevitably arouses suspicions. We are used to the fact that the poet’s popular appeal is, as a rule, a commodity purchased in exchange for some concessions, for the poet’s renunciation of at least a part of what constitutes the natural complexity of his or her self. Compared to that prevailing norm, Szybmorska seems to be endowed with an almost superhuman ability to speak of matters of universal importance without compromising her intellectual or artistic integrity and yet in a way which enables her to address successfully an impressively wide circle of readers.
She seems to possess the secret of how to be complex and yet comprehensible, ambitious and yet approachable, individualistic and yet involved.

If this secret can be rationally explained at all, it most certainly has to do with the adoption and masterful use by Szymborska of one particular model of a lyrical situation that I have already identified: the situation of “asking a question,” inquiring, questioning, etc. It is a model that, even though disguised in a variety of ways in different poems, makes its presence felt with striking frequency and insistence throughout her entire work. In the concluding part of her poem “The Century’s Decline,” Szymborska even prompts us with a fit adjective to denote the specific — and crucially important — quality that marks all the “questions” she asks. The preceding, much longer part of this poem might be called a sequence of inverted variations upon the theme stated in line 1: “Our 20th century was going to improve on the others.” I refer to them as inverted, since in each of the “variations” — consecutive brief sections of the poem — this past hope is shown as ultimately thwarted by the eternal and, in fact, incorrigible flaws of our humanity. The poem concludes as follows:

“How should we live?” someone asked me in a letter.
I had meant to ask him
the same question.

Again, and as ever,
as may be seen above,
the most pressing questions
are naive ones.

Once again, the English semantics help the translator bring into relief the double meaning of the word “pytanie”: faced with the most “pressing questions” (= dilemmas) of human life (manifesting itself in extremely varied areas: from a historical drama of existence as such to contemporary politics), the individual tries to solve them, or at least disarm them, by asking his or her own “naive questions.” To be more precise, in Szymborska’s poetry the “naive question” usually pricks the balloon not so much of the issue per se as the prevailing (mostly anonymous), commonly shared opinion or viewpoint on it. To stage the clash between
a widely held opinion and her own "naive question," Szymborska employs an astonishing variety of means and devices. Such a commonplace or "received idea" can be put forward directly by a speaker delivering a dramatic monologue and representing a value system drastically different from that of the author (example: "There's nothing more debauched than thinking," the opening line of "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography"); it can be brought up, as a sort of quasi-quote, and then contradicted by another type of dramatic-monologue speaker, one with whom the author at least partly identifies (example: "They say I looked back out of curiosity. / But I could have had other reasons," the beginning of "Lot's Wife"); it can be quoted, quasi-quoted or alluded to by the author's porteparole (example: "You expected a hermit to live in the wilderness, / but he's got a little house and a garden," from the poem "Hermitage"); and finally, it also may be "silently" present in the poem's background as an unspoken assumption, one so widely held that it does not even require quoting.

In any case, what actually triggers the poem's lyrical "action," is the moment when this or another widespread opinion, thoughtlessly approved of and adopted by most people, is put into doubt by the poet's "naive question." This is why the most effective among Szymborska's poems are those which do not waste time on quoting or rephrasing the opinion that they are about to demolish, but go straight to asking this or that "naive question," leaving the task of "reconstructing" the challenged assertion to the reader. This, in turn, helps one understand why so many poems of Szymborska begin with what could be called a poetic sound bite: a concise, gnomic statement, usually a one-liner, which condenses in itself the paradox underlying the poem's central "question." The poem "Museum," for instance, opens with the line: "Here are plates, but no appetite," and this simple observation, of the kind that every visitor to the museum of crafts would be able to make, evolves in the following lines into a much more complex vision of the relationship between the material and the spiritual, the immortality of a dead object and the immortality of a human soul, etc. Interestingly, the first line of a Szymborska poem is, as a rule, not paradoxical per se (although it may function as a "sound bite" thanks to the unusual statement it makes or image it conjures up); its paradoxical quality results, rather, from its semantic clash with either the preceding or the
following piece of information, that is to say, either the poem’s title or its next line(s). The first line “Conceived on a mattress made of human hair,” for instance, is undeniably striking, but it comes to function as a paradoxical “question” only when we realize that the poem’s title is “Innocence.” The line “And who’s this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?” is not even striking (unless we consider it striking in the stylistic context of poetry, because of its utter colloquiality); but what a difference if we realize that it comes on the heels of the poem’s title, which is “Hitler’s First Photograph”! Similarly, the first line that reads “Nothing can ever happen twice” may even be considered philosophically banal; it becomes, however, paradoxical with the arrival of the next three lines, which do not do much more than draw a conclusion from the initial statement, one apparently logical but pregnant with unexpected meanings:

Nothing can ever happen twice.
In consequence, the sorry fact is that we arrive here improvised and leave without the chance to practice.

The term “paradox” implies a clash of mutually opposite statements. In an earlier essay on Szymborska, I attempted to reduce all specific embodiments of such oppositions to their common denominator, which might be put as the phrase, or rather the beginning of a phrase: “All right, but...”. This (usually unspoken, yet detectable) signal of mental objection is the crucial part of every poem of Szymborska. It functions as a logical and rhetorical link between the (expressed openly or, more frequently, programmed into the “naive question”) generally accepted belief or opinion and the rest of the poem which presents, as it were, evidence to the contrary. The poem “The Century’s Decline” that I have already quoted is a clear-cut example of how this sort of technique usually works. The initial line, “Our 20th century was going to improve on the others,” is actually a quasi-quote; it refers to an easily recognizable and widely shared opinion (in this case, the optimistic outlook of those who in the beginning of our century used to put an equation mark between the notion of technological progress and that of mankind’s potential for moral self-improvement). An unspoken “All right, but...” has to be mentally inserted between this initial
line and the next in order for the reader to understand that the entire ensuing part of the poem is actually one extended "naive question" asked to undermine theoretical optimism with empirical doubt: "[You have once said:] 'Our 20th century was going to improve on the others.' [And I am asking now:] All right, but what to do with the fact that the century is nearing its end and there's still no improvement in sight?"

In "The Century's Decline" this implied logical construction is relatively transparent. Let's look at a poem where Szymborska employs the more complex technique that I have already mentioned — the method of referring to the basic premise of some generally shared opinion without actually quoting it. The reader's required cooperation consists here not only in making a necessary logical connection by putting the missing "all right, but..." in its place, but also in reconstructing the belief that the speaker's "naive question" undermines. A brilliant example of this method of handling the poem's implied reader is provided by "On Death, Without Exaggeration." What we are confronted with here is not any stated opinion at all but, as in John Donne's "Death, Be Not Proud," a detailed list of failures that Death can be accused of, or achievements that remain beyond its reach:

It can't take a joke,
find a star, make a bridge,
it knows nothing about weaving, meaning farming,
building ships or baking cakes.
...

Oh, it has its triumphs,
but look at its countless defeats,
missed blows
and repeat attempts!

The unspoken initial assumption and the (also unexpressed directly) "naive question" could be, then, put as follows: "You say that death conquers all, that it is omnipotent and ultimately triumphant. All right, but what is to be admired in a triumph that occurs only once in a long while, after a multitude of botched attempts? Isn't such an apparent winner
in fact a loser, like an aging Don Juan who sometimes gets what he wants, but only because he woos, just in case, each and every woman he meets?"

Finally, just one example from Szymborska's latest collection. Its title poem, "The End and the Beginning," opens with a statement which sounds so disarmingly trivial that, when read or heard separately, it does not seem to contain any startling revelation at all:

After every war
someone's got to tidy up.
Things won't pick
themselves up, after all.

Yet the "naive question" implied in this poem concerns no less of a "pressing issue" than the meaning of human history—or perhaps the senselessness thereof—exemplified by the trail of destruction left behind by every war. The "All right, but..." line of argument starts, in this case, from a singularly "naive" observation—one which would sound perfectly natural coming, say, from an average TV viewer watching the evening news and giving vent to his common-sense realization of the discrepancy between the official announcement and what he sees with his own eyes: "You say that the war in the country X has ended and that peace has been restored. All right, but what about those mountains of rubble? Who's gonna clean up all that mess? What kind of peace is that, if your home is ruined, not to mention you might not have survived at all?"

What makes this poem particularly interesting is that its basic "naive question" almost imperceptibly moves to another plane. The action of "cleaning up the mess" turns, by metaphoric equation, into the process of forgetting. Both are equally natural and, in fact, necessary for mankind to live on after every disastrous experience brought about by the course of history. Just as you must remove the rubble, you must remove the remembrance of human evil from your memory and the premonition of its eventual resurgence from your imagination—otherwise, the burden of living will be unbearable. But this necessity means, in effect, that we never learn from history. That which saves us—our ability to forget—makes us, at the same time, repeatedly commit the same tragic blunders. "The End" of each cataclysm not only precedes "the Beginning" of another but...
is that Beginning, contains it inextricably within itself.

The typical lyrical situation on which a Szymborska poem is founded seems to be, then, the confrontation between the directly quoted or indirectly implied opinion on some "pressing issue" and the "naive question" that tries to put into doubt this opinion’s validity. As we have seen, certain regularities can be discerned here. The “opinion” not only reflects some widely shared belief or is representative of some widespread outlook, but also, as a rule, has a certain doctrinaire ring to it: the philosophy behind it is usually speculative, anti-empirical, prone to hasty generalizations, collectivist, dogmatic, and intolerant. As opposed to this philosophy, the “naive question” is always concrete and down-to-earth, based on experience, preferring specificity over typicality, expressing an individual viewpoint, open to change, and far from imposing.

One crucial thing has to be added here: the irony that the clash between the “dogmatic opinion” and “naive question” never fails to provoke (needless to say, irony is the most efficient offensive weapon of the “naive question” in that duel) is, in a way, brought by the “dogmatic opinion” on itself. Being dogmatic, it naturally tends to strengthen its authoritarian appearance by sounding as self-confident and categorical as possible. As an ironic result, it ends up patching its logical and moral holes by resorting to blatant oversimplifications, unjustified generalizations, and blindly optimistic (or blindly pessimistic, for that matter) predictions — and such patches, being particularly easy to discern, almost invite ironic treatment from the skeptical individualist. The more all-encompassing ambitions a generalization has, the easier it is, naturally enough, for the skeptic to find a specific example or two which will punch new holes in the already patched-over cloth. The common denominator of the contradictory relationship between the “dogmatic opinion” and “naive question” is, then, that the latter is always a pars pro toto in regard to the former. The “naive question” always brings the “dogmatic opinion” down to the level of an individual exception that contradicts the general rule and by the same token renders it, if not invalid, then at least suspect.

The dominance of this kind of operation in Szymborska’s poems sheds additional light on the individualistic and fundamentally anti-utopian nature of her outlook. In fact, her notion of the function that the poet in the human world should perform may be compressed into one brief
phrase: the poet should be a spoilsport. The poet should be someone who calls any bluff and lays bare any dirty trick in the game played by the earthly and unearthly powers, where the chief gambling strategy is dogmatic generalization and the stakes are the souls of each and every one of us.