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An Acrobat of the Imagination

Monologue of a Dog by Wislawa Szymborska

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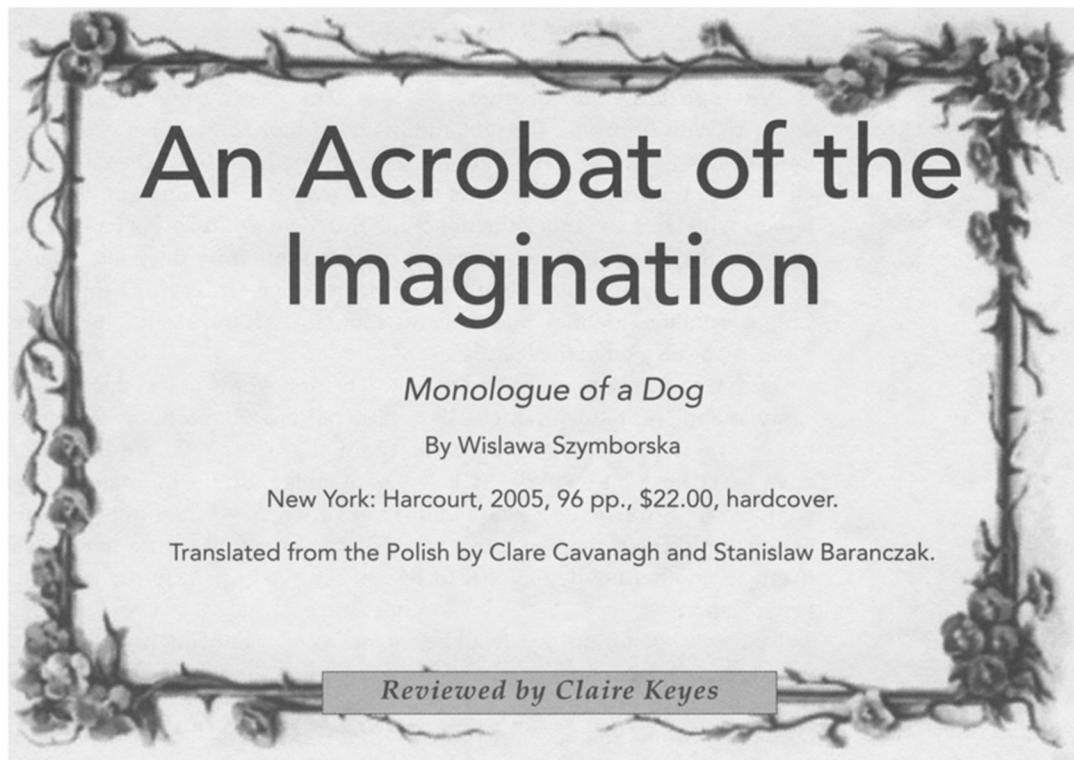
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Perhaps we should simply be grateful that Harcourt has provided us with a bilingual edition of Wislawa Szymborska's latest work and not wonder at the Nobel Laureate's choice of title. Typically Szymborska takes her book titles from either her lead-off or closing poem, and in this case, "Monologue of a Dog Ensnared in History" is her powerful first poem. But no way is this fascinating and diverse collection the "monologue of a dog."

The earthy Szymborska whom I love from previous translations is here in *Monologue of a Dog*. Like an old friend I haven't talked to for a while, she is still direct, provocative, and necessary. For Americans, she carries the *gravitas* of the European who has lived through Hitler's war and Soviet-dominated Poland. Now in her early eighties, Szymborska has survived it all, and she both cherishes that amazing fact and conveys a sense of ruefulness about it. But not all survivors have Szymborska's imaginative faculties. Billy Collins, in his useful introduction to this volume, refers to Szymborska as having an "acrobatic imagination." By this, I think he means her ability to take imaginative leaps—not out of a surrealist impulse to connect the unconscious and the conscious, but rather to heighten reality.

Take, for example, the poem "A Few Words on the Soul." Szymborska begins with a quirky observation:

We have a soul at times.  
No one's got it non-stop,  
for keeps.

Her language is colloquial and matter of fact. She goes on to personify the soul:

Sometimes  
it will settle for a while  
only in childhood's fears and raptures.  
Sometimes only in astonishment  
that we are old.

In simple language and a deadpan tone, she continues,

It rarely lends a hand  
in uphill tasks,  
like moving furniture,  
or lifting luggage,  
or going miles in shoes that pinch.

Szymborska deftly captures an abstraction—the soul—in the language of the ordinary and has us considering its nature through comic irony. She doesn't debunk the concept of the soul; she refreshes it:

We can count on it  
when we're sure of nothing  
and curious about everything.

There, she has it. Though I understand zero Polish, I can't help casting an eye on the original. The Polish version has the same three-line stanza, with perhaps some end-rhyming going on in lines two and three. But does she sound this fresh in Polish, this funny, this true?

Szymborska's imagination is fired by her contemplation of such concepts as the soul or, in "Plato, or Why," what her translators call "Ideal Being." Here we find the same pattern as in "A Few Words about the Soul." She begins with a quirky observation:

For unclear reasons  
under unknown circumstances  
Ideal Being ceased to be satisfied.

Then, the imaginative play begins: "Why on earth did it start seeking thrills/ in the bad company of matter?" As she plays with this encounter, the acrobatic qualities of her imagination become manifest:

Wisdom limping  
with a thorn stuck in its heel?  
Harmony derailed by roiling waters?

Reading Szymborska stretches us in delightful ways.

But her poetry is not all fun and games. Szymborska is fearless in the flexibility of her mind and her choice of subject matter. In the title poem, she adopts the point of view of the pet of a feared dictator. Blinded by his special status, the dog observes his master's dog-like behavior:

He raged at others often, loudly.  
He snarled, barked,  
raced from wall to wall.  
I suspect he liked only me  
and nobody else, ever.

When the master abruptly disappears, chaos ensues, and the dog, with no one to protect him, is shot. Arrogant even in his dying moments, the dog says:

He couldn't even shoot straight,  
since I died for a long time, in pain,  
to the buzz of impertinent flies.  
I, the dog of my master.

The situation is deliciously weird, and Szymborska gives voice to the dog in all its "dogginess" without getting mawkish.

Szymborska's acrobatic imagination is partly the result of her ability to maintain the perspective of a child. We see this in the poems "Puddles" and "A Little Girl Tugs at the Tablecloth." In "Puddles," she recalls her childhood fear that she might suddenly be swallowed whole.

I'll start rising downwards  
then even deeper down  
towards the reflected clouds  
and maybe farther.

It's typical of Szymborska that she puts no bounds on this happening, and that her rendering of the upside-down puddle-world is horrific. In "A Little Girl Tugs at the Tablecloth," Szymborska writes in third person, but the same quality of immediacy prevails. The girl who has "been in this world for over a year" takes a keen interest in "things that don't move by themselves." Once again, as in "A Few Words on the Soul," Szymborska's skill at animating the inanimate takes over:

the tablecloth . . .  
—when well-seized by its hems—  
manifests a willingness to travel.

So, too, the things upon it are "fairly shaking with desire to move." Portraying the girl as an inquisitive investigator, Szymborska elevates her action from prank to experiment:

What form of motion will they take, . . .  
will they roam across the ceiling?  
fly around the lamp?  
At a year old, anything is possible.

For Szymborska, despite her age, the world still holds surprises and terrors. In "Photograph from September 11," she describes events that surpassed even her powers of imagination. She handles the subject of people flinging themselves to their deaths from the Twin Towers with compassion and restraint. Such horror needs no embellishment:

The photograph halted them in life,  
and now keeps them  
above the earth toward the earth.

She respects the individuality of the victims:

Each is still complete,  
with a particular face  
and blood well-hidden.

What she refuses to do is write the ending:

I can do only two things for them—  
describe this flight  
and not add a last line.

This book has its quiet intervals when the poet seems to be saying what poets always say: "Seize the day. Don't let life pass you by." But Szymborska, with her proclivity for the odd perspective, is never predictable. "Moment" begins with a bucolic scene:

“This book has its quiet intervals when the poet seems to be saying what poets always say: ‘Seize the day. Don’t let life pass you by.’”

solitary rambler, green grass, blue sky. Then, *pow!* it opens up to a vast sense of time: “As if there’d never been any Cambrians, Silurians, / rocks snarling at crags, upturned abysses.” Being in the moment for Szyborska involves awareness of time past, all the way back to the chaos of earth’s creation. She subtly mocks the present, where “everything is in its place and in polite agreement,” with “woods disguised as woods alive without end.” Perhaps we humans can exist only if we think that things will remain as they are: that trees and forest will endure. The irony at the end of the poem is quite thick and not so comic:

This moment reigns as far as the eye can reach.  
One of those earthly moments  
invited to linger.  
Invited, yes. Invitation accepted, no.

About her personal life, Szyborska exerts the restraint lacking in her imagination. We learn about her childhood fear of puddles, about her “First Love,” about how she cares for her houseplants (“Silence of Plants”), and the like, but in such poems she uses the same techniques (irony, personifying the inanimate) as in her other poems, and the effect is a kind of distancing. Actually, it’s refreshing, considering the opposite approach in the poems of many contemporary Americans.

“First Love” begins on a down note:

They say  
the first love’s most important.  
That’s very romantic,  
but not my experience.

This sentiment is perhaps to be expected from an octogenarian who’s seen a few things more important. Later, she meets her first love, after years:

the conversation of two chairs  
at a chilly table.

The poem might have ended with this stunning metaphor, but Szyborska continues to explore her subject, contrasting her first love to others that “still breathe deep inside [her].” The new information is satisfying and widens our view of Szyborska’s life. But it’s not enough for the poet. She goes deeper still:

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

Only a poet with a long view could have written that last line. Her first love was a beginning, an opening out into a larger life. That moment is never going to happen again. That gate—as so many others—is closed, and maturity has given her a different, more tragic perspective. Ultimately, Szyborska’s sense of the tragic gives this book weight; her sense of the comic leavens it delightfully. ☺

Claire Keyes is professor emerita at Salem State College and the author of *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich*. Her poems and reviews have appeared in *Calyx*, *ReviewRevue*, *Anthology of New England Writers*, *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, and other publications.

## ESSAY

# Yaoi 101: Girls Love "Boys' Love"

By Cathy Camper

“It felt like a dream... with a man who whispers foreign words... a single night of fantasies... my world would never be the same.”

—from *Golden Cain*, by You Asagiri

This may sound like a quote from a romance novel, except that in this Japanese manga, or comic, created by women for women, the lovers are pretty gay boys. Manga have hit America big time. If you’re an adult, the word “manga” may not be in your vocabulary yet. But if you’re a kid, manga are everywhere: on Saturday morning cartoons, in toy stores, and in magazines. Librarians see manga flying off the shelves, and even more telling, “how to draw manga” books are now way more popular than “how to draw superhero” books. Chances are, comics by the next generation will emulate the big eyes of Astroboy, not the bulging biceps of Superman.

Recently, TOKYOPOP, a manga publisher, negotiated a deal to publish manga in Universal Press Syndicate’s daily newspapers. The newspapers hope the manga will draw younger, hipper readers. TOKYOPOP hopes to introduce manga to the mainstream. Shelf Awareness, an e-mail newsletter for booksellers, notes that US manga sales have risen from \$10 million six years ago to \$300 million today. And unlike readers of traditional comics, sixty percent of manga readers are female.

Why would women read romances about “gay” guys? Well, why do straight guys like images of lesbians? Generally, the thought is that two pretty people are better than one. But perhaps more telling, as with romance novels, in

boys’ love manga, women are the ones creating the male images. Ironically, a romance between two men can bypass misogyny and female stereotypes; removing the femme avatar can open up a freedom of sexual exploration and imagination for female artists that they don’t find in heterosexual erotica. For example, rough play in het relationships is almost always abusive toward women, but with two guys, readers can pick and choose whom they want to identify with.

In Japan, there are manga for boys, girls, and adults. Everyone reads comics, and they’re not considered a lesser art form. The “gay” love comics are just one genre among *shojo*, or girls’ comics. Such comics have lots of names and genres. *Shonen-ai* or *shounen-ai* means “boy love.” This genre emphasizes relationships and romance over sex. *Bishonen* or *bishounen* means “beautiful boy.” *Yaoi* is the sexier stuff, an acronym for “*yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi*,” or “no climax, no point, no meaning”—a pretty good definition of pornography generally. There’s also an old joke that *yaoi* is really an acronym for “*yamete kudasai, oshiri ga itai yo*,” or, “Stop it, my butt hurts!” Generally, *yaoi* is smuttier than *shonen-ai*, but the Japanese names have shifted in meaning over time, as have their connotations in the West, so for this article, I’ll use the generic term “boys’ love.”



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