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*Bożena Karwowska*

## The Female Persona in Wisława Szymborska's Poems

ABSTRACT: Wisława Szymborska's poetry (Nobel Prize for Literature, 1996) has gained wide acclaim not only in her native Poland but also abroad, including the English-speaking countries, where translations of her work have appeared both in book form and in numerous periodicals. Yet the critical response has been largely disappointing. This may be due to the fact that Szymborska's poetry transcends both patriarchal and feminist categories. It creates models of sensibility and outlook that seem to represent what Julia Kristeva has called "the new generation of women," with their "mixture of two attitudes—insertion into history and the radical refusal of the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time." The article shows how this "avant-garde" attitude manifests itself in various features characteristic of Szymborska's poetry and its poetics, including the poetic persona, irony, the concept of "the other," "mirthful pity" and a revalorization of traditional womanhood.

The awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Wisława Szymborska in 1996 resulted in the publication of several volumes of translations of her work into English—and evoked wide critical interest. Commenting on the wealth of critical publications on Szymborska, both in Polish and in other languages, Włodzimierz Bolecki wrote:

Szymborska has published some 300 poems so far. And how many pages of commentaries have been published to those poems? If we take into account the several books, hundreds of reviews and dozens of articles, we would probably arrive at several thousand pages of commentary. We might then draw the conclusion that every poem by Szymborska has already been analyzed, interpreted or quoted several times over.<sup>1</sup>

Szymborska's poetry has been studied from a variety of points of view. In addition to several books of a more general nature,<sup>2</sup> Szymborska's work has

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<sup>1</sup> Włodzimierz Bolecki, "Wisława Szymborska and Modernism in Poland" (forthcoming). The Polish version of the article ("Wisława Szymborska i modernizm") was published in *Pogranicza* 1 (Szczecin 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See Wojciech Ligęza, *O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej: świat w stanie korekty* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001); Dorota Wojda, *Milczenie słowa. O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 1996); Anna Legeżyńska, *Wisława Szymborska* (Poznań: Rebis, 1996); Anna Węgrzyniakowa, *Nie ma rozpuszty większej niż myślenie: o poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej* (Katowice: Tow. Zachęty Kultury, 1996); Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata. O Wisławie Szymborskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1996).

been discussed as modernist (Bolecki), naturalist (Bojanowska<sup>3</sup>), in the context of English modernism (van Nieukerken<sup>4</sup>), in relation to objects and the idea of objecthood (Balbus, Shallcross<sup>5</sup>), as an example of the “importance of the unimportant” (Carpenter<sup>6</sup>), and of her conception of “the other” (Graf<sup>7</sup>), through translations (Barańczak<sup>8</sup>), in terms of the inadequacy of some critical interpretations (Głowiński<sup>9</sup>), and of the joy of reading (Stala, Karasek<sup>10</sup>)—to name just a few from a very long list of authors, themes and topics. However, the fact that this is a poetry clearly written by a woman, generally recognized by critics regardless of their gender and critical orientation, seems to have had little effect on the interpretation and appreciation of Szymborska’s work. This statement may sound surprising in view of Justyna Kostkowska’s recent observation that “the world recognition of Szymborska’s poetry should be seen as a cultural victory of feminism.” Yet it is evident even from the bibliography of Kostkowska’s article how little has been said so far about Szymborska from the feminist point of view. The critic supports her claim by emphasizing that Szymborska’s poetry “validates the significance of the individual, the particular, the private, and the subjective, all of which lie at the centre of feminist thought in general...”<sup>11</sup>

And here is where the problem begins. Though her poetry can (and should) be seen as a victory of feminism, Szymborska has not been hailed as a feminist

<sup>3</sup> Edyta M.Bojanowska, “Wisława Szymborska: Naturalist and Humanist,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 41.2 (1997): 199–223.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt van Nieukerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu* (Kraków: Universitas, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Stanisław Balbus, “Jesteś tylko jedną z rzeczy wielu” (“Ja” wobec rzeczy w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej), in Seweryna Wysłouch and Bogumiła Kaniewska, eds., *Człowiek i rzecz. O problemach reifikacji w literaturze, filozofii i sztuce*, (Poznań: Biblioteka Literacka “Poznańskich Studiów Polonistycznych,” 1999) 125–147; Bożena Shallcross, “Wisława Szymborska’s ding-gedichte” (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Bogdana Carpenter, “Wisława Szymborska and the Importance of the Unimportant,” *World Literature Today* 71.1 (1997): 8–12.

<sup>7</sup> Anastasia Graf, “Representing the Other: A Conversation among Mikhail Bakhtin, Elizabeth Bishop, and Wisława Szymborska,” *Comparative Literature* 57.1 (Winter 2005): 84–99.

<sup>8</sup> Stanisław Barańczak, “Amerykanizacja Wisławy, albo: O tym jak z pewną młodą Kalifornijką tłumaczyłem ‘Głos w sprawie pornografii’,” *Teksty Drugie* 4 (1991): 79–94.

<sup>9</sup> Michał Głowiński, “Szymborska i krytycy,” *Teksty Drugie* 4 (1998): 177–200.

<sup>10</sup> Marian Stala, “Radość czytania Szymborskiej,” in *Chwila pewności*, by M.Stala (Kraków: n.p., 1991) 133–158; Krzysztof Karasek, “Mozartian Joy: The Poetry of Wisława Szymborska,” in *The Mature Laurel. Essays on Modern Polish Poetry*, edited by Adam Czerniawski (Chester Springs: Dufour 1991) 189–199.

<sup>11</sup> Justyna Kostkowska, “‘To persistently not know something important’. Feminist science and the poetry of Wisława Szymborska,” *Feminist Theory* 5.2 (2004): 189.

writer, since she has not taken an overtly political stance and her writing does not adopt “a discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position.”<sup>12</sup> As Grażyna Borkowska noted as early as 1991, feminist categories—such as, for instance, “therapeutic strategies,” understood by the critic as a way of dealing with the crisis of consciousness and existential dilemmas by withdrawing into oneself, into one’s private world; by being in love or participating in sisterly solidarity—fail to provide a useful tool for analyzing Szymborska’s poetry.<sup>13</sup> At the same time Borkowska made the point (years before Kostkowska’s similar thesis) that Szymborska’s poetry “provides a critique of universal, abstract thinking, imposed by a restrictive, ‘patriarchal,’ order.”<sup>14</sup> But then she went on to say that although Szymborska is close to some of the practices of feminism and of deconstruction, “no formula—feminist or deconstructive—fully encompasses the richness” of her poetry. Furthermore, Kostkowska herself—while arguing that Szymborska’s poems present a point of view similar to the one commonly accepted in contemporary feminist scholarship—does not argue that Szymborska’s is a feminist poetry. What makes it possible for Kostkowska to relate Szymborska to feminism are the constraints of terminology imposed on the critic by the use of binary oppositions—in this instance the opposition between patriarchal and feminist scholarly discourse. It is thus important to go beyond the restrictive order of binary oppositions and point out that already in 1986 Toril Moi made a threefold distinction to categorize women in literature and culture, and moreover noted that “feminists have used the terms ‘feminist’, ‘female’, ‘feminine’ in a multitude of different ways.” She concluded that “a clear understanding of the differences between them” is crucial for understanding issues of contemporary feminist criticism, a view that despite the passage of years has lost none of its original validity.

To place Szymborska’s poetry within Moi’s terminological framework<sup>15</sup> one should note that not only does Szymborska’s work transcend ‘feminist’ concerns, but that it does not follow the ‘feminine’ path as designated by the Polish patriarchal tradition (as analyzed by German Ritz<sup>16</sup>) for a woman poet:

<sup>12</sup> Toril Moi, “Feminist, Female, Feminine” in *The Feminist Reader*, edited by Catherine Bosley and Jane Moore (New York: Blackwell, 1997) 115.

<sup>13</sup> Grażyna Borkowska, *Szymborska ex-centriczna, Teksty Drugie 4* (1991): 56.

<sup>14</sup> “Stanowi konsekwentną krytykę myślenia uniwersalistycznego, abstrakcyjnego, narzuconego przez porządek restryktywny, ‘patriarchalny.’ (...) Żadna jednak formuła—ani dekonstrukcyjna ani feministyczna—nie wyczerpuje jej bogactwa.” Grażyna Borkowska, *Szymborska ex-centriczna, Teksty Drugie 4* (1991): 58.

<sup>15</sup> “[I]nitially... we distinguish between ‘feminism’ as a political position, ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics...” Moi 104.

<sup>16</sup> German Ritz, “Dyskurs płci w ujęciu porównawczym,” *Teksty Drugie 5* (1999): 117–124.

her poetic persona is neither a platonic (or demonic) lover nor a patriotic Polish mother (or lover).<sup>17</sup> In fact, standing apart from ‘feminist’ as well as ‘feminine’ models, Szymborska’s poetry presents a challenge to feminist criticism, no less so because it is an engaging example of the fulfillment of many of feminist postulates.

“Feminist” terminology seems to be precisely the problem that Szymborska’s critics are struggling with, quite frequently by means of omission. This is at least partly explained by the fact that feminism is still not fully recognized in Poland—where the majority of her critics come from—as a valid critical approach. As Małgorzata Anna Packalen has put it “an aversion to feminism is maintained not only by men, but paradoxically, by women also.”<sup>18</sup> It is thus not easy, given the profusion of theoretical stances and terms, to identify Szymborska’s poetry’s female persona in a language of current literary criticism. Trying to avoid the problem, critics state that “gender does not determine the shape of a literary work,”<sup>19</sup> or that while “women account for about half of the several billion inhabitants of the globe,” this “means absolutely nothing as far as poetry is concerned.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, they argue that it is not the sex or gender of the author that is of primary importance for critical analysis and interpretation, but how these categories are conveyed in a literary work.<sup>21</sup> And while it seems to be comparatively easy to comment on “feminist” or “feminine” aspects of writing, it is more difficult to describe in feminist terms the construction of a “female” poetic persona.

Terminological problems and confusions resulting from various feminist approaches—amplified by the fact that the Polish language does not, quite typically, according to Toril Moi, distinguish between “female” and “feminine”—make the use of categories employed by Szymborska’s critics (especially those writing in Polish) unnecessarily complicated and confusing, if at all appropriate. I shall thus follow the path of Włodzimierz Bolecki who declared “everybody who writes about Szymborska must be repeating

<sup>17</sup> Relations of Szymborska’s poetry to “patriarchal” models are discussed in my article “Kobieca perspektywa w poezji Szymborskiej—próba postfeministycznej refleksji,” *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2004): 79–90.

<sup>18</sup> Małgorzata Anna Packalen, “‘Komża i majtki’ czyli prowokacja tradycji w polskiej literaturze współczesnej,” *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2004): 173.

<sup>19</sup> “Płeć nie determinuje kształtu dzieła.” Grażyna Borkowska, “Metafora drożdży. Co to jest literatura/poezja kobieca,” *Teksty Drugie* 3–4 (1995): 38.

<sup>20</sup> “Kobiety stanowią mniej więcej połowę kilkumiliardowej ludności Ziemi, podobnie jest z mężczyznami, i z tego absolutnie nic dla poezji nie wynika.” Małgorzata Baranowska, “Szymborska i Świrszczyńska—dwa bieguny codzienności,” in *Sporne Postaci Polskiej Literatury Współczesnej. Kontynuacje*, edited by A. Brodzka and L. Burska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 1996) 17.

<sup>21</sup> See M. Homans *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*. Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson (New York: Princeton University Press, 1980).

something that somebody else has already observed. I must therefore declare that I am indebted to every critic of Szymborska's work."<sup>22</sup>

If Szymborska does not argue with or rebel against the patriarchal tradition, it is so not because she accepts it, but because she tends to ignore it. As Małgorzata Baranowska put it: "At times it seems that Szymborska's poetry hails from the future, when the struggle for a proper place for women (and thus for human beings in general—men or women) will be no longer necessary."<sup>23</sup> It may even seem that Szymborska, like Kristeva, rejects the female/male dichotomy as being primarily metaphysical, since "[w]hat can 'identity', even 'sexual identity', mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?"<sup>24</sup> It could, in fact, be argued that Szymborska epitomizes to a significant degree the new wave that Kristeva identified in the feminist movement (the "new generation of women"), in that her poetry manifests what Kristeva has called

[A] mixture of two attitudes—*insertion* into history and the radical *refusal* of the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time on an experiment carried out in the name of the irreducible difference.<sup>25</sup>

In her poetry Szymborska constructs models that ignore and transcend traditional, including patriarchal, dichotomies, and hence critical discourse rooted in the patriarchal language is bound to fail to describe her *oeuvre* adequately. Her poetic persona defines herself most of all as a human being who cannot be categorized exclusively or even primarily along gender/sex lines. Viewed against the homogeneity or simplicity of objects—such as, for example, an onion, in Szymborska's intricately ambivalent poem of the same name—humanity is understood as an internally complex phenomenon, vastly different from the simple non-human "other."<sup>26</sup> However, the non-human otherness helps us to understand who we are as (not gender-specific) "humans" by contrasting us with apparent "uniform simplicity":

<sup>22</sup> Włodzimierz Bolecki, "Wisława Szymborska and Modernism in Poland" (forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> "Chwilami wydaje się, że poezja Szymborskiej przybywa z czasów przyszłych, kiedy walka o miejsce kobiety, tym samym także miejsce człowieka-mężczyzny i kobiety—nie będzie już potrzebna." Małgorzata Baranowska 8.

<sup>24</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time" in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by C. Belsey and J. Moore (New York: Blackwell, 1997) 214–215.

<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time" 202.

<sup>26</sup> See the reflections on the relations I/Other in Szymborska's poetry in Anastasia Graf, "Representing the Other: A Conversation among Mikhail Bakhtin, Elizabeth Bishop, and Wisława Szymborska."

The onion, now that's another thing.  
 There is no inside to it.  
 Onionhood through and through  
 fills it with utmost onionism.

.....  
 In us otherness and wildness  
 The skin just barely covers,  
 Inferno inside internity,  
 Anatomy full of violence...<sup>27</sup> ("The Onion")

Differences between human beings and the "other" are not only biological (natural) but also cultural (man-made), i.e., constructed by people for their own specific reasons:

For our peace of mind, animals do not pass away,  
 but die a seemingly shallower death  
 losing—we'd like to believe—fewer feelings and less world,  
 exiting—or so it seems—a less tragic stage.<sup>28</sup> ("Seen from Above")

The very term "people" is dichotomous: there is this one and there is the other, there are stereotypical products of complex cultural processes and there are concrete human beings leading simple lives—as in the poem "Wrong Number" (Pomyłka) where the great and famous:

Above it all, in scarlet robes or nude,  
 ... view the nocturnal fuss as simply rude.  
 .....  
 And if some silly man calling from town  
 refuses to give up, put the receiver down,  
 though he's got the wrong number? He lives, so he errs.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Co innego cebula.

Ona nie ma wnętrzości.  
 Jest sobą na wskroś cebula  
 Do stopnia cebuliczności.

.....  
 W nas obczyzna i dzikość  
 Ledwie skórą przykryta,  
 Inferno w nas interny,  
 Anatomia gwałtowna... ("Wielka Liczba," tr. Bogdan Czaykowski)

<sup>28</sup> .....  
 Dla naszego spokoju, śmiercią jakby płytszą  
 nie umierają, ale zdychają zwierzęta  
 tracąc—chcemy w to wierzyć—mniej uczucia i świata,  
 schodząc—jak nam się zdaje—z mniej tragicznej sceny. ("Wielka Liczba," tr. Joanna Trzeciak)

<sup>29</sup> .....  
 Wyniosłe nieobecni, w szatach albo nago,

Human stereotypes (being themselves linguistic and thus patriarchal constructs) differ from real people—and Szyborska's interest is unwaveringly with the latter. By the same token she is on the side of women, since not many of them have been able to achieve the highest cultural status constructed according to patriarchal needs and rules. And whenever she revisits the "Great People" from the past, she gives women who made it into cultural memory (as, for example, Lot's wife or Cassandra) human faces. Free of the male gaze (i.e., patriarchy's portrayal of its heroes) they have the right not to be perfect, to err, and are not obliged to play by male-oriented rules, though in Szyborska's version (and this sets her apart from most feminists) they do not flaunt their female sexual identity either. The female "I" in Szyborska's poems is primarily a human being, a person not categorized by sex or gender. However, man is placed in her poems not at the "centre" of things but in the position of "the other," and categories constructed by him are no longer the only ones (or primary); they become one possibility among many. At the same time, neither is woman at the centre of her poetry as we might expect if we were to apply the logic of patriarchal dichotomies. The centre is occupied by a single "being" "temporarily of human kind." And it is this single, discrete emplacement ("a single being of human kind for now"<sup>30</sup>) that is of special importance to Szyborska.

I could have been someone  
 much less separate.  
 Someone from an anthill, shoal, or buzzing swarm,  
 an inch of landscape tousled by the wind.<sup>31</sup> ("Among the Multitudes")

Though primarily just an individual, a single human being, Szyborska's poetic persona is almost never a man.<sup>32</sup> Instead it is quite frequently presented as a woman. As a "gender free" construct (embodied in feminine nouns and feminine forms of the past tense) Szyborska is able to envision the stages that preceded this being's existence:

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zbywają nocny alarm z nieuwagą,  
 .....

A to, że ktoś tam w mieście już od dłuższej chwili  
 trzyma naiwnie słuchawkę przy skroni  
 nakręciwszy zły numer? Żyje, więc się myli ("Wszelki Wypadek"). Unless otherwise  
 stated, translations are by Stanisław Baranczak and Claire Cavanagh.

<sup>30</sup> pojedyncza osoba w ludzkim chwilowo rodzaju, ("Przemówienie w biurze  
 znalezionych rzeczy," tr. Joanna Trzeciak)

<sup>31</sup> Mogłam być kimś  
 o wiele mniej osobnym.

Kimś z ławicy, mrowiska, brzęczącego roju,  
 szarpaną wiatrem cząstką krajobrazu. ("Chwila")

<sup>32</sup> The only exception to this is her poem "Relacja ze szpitala."



I'm not sure exactly where I left my claws,  
 who wears my fur, who dwells in my shell.  
 My siblings died out when I crawled onto land  
 and only a tiny bone in me marks the anniversary.<sup>33</sup> ("A Speech at the Lost and Found")

Although gender is not of paramount importance in Szymborska's poems, she plays with the grammatical gender of the Polish language quite frequently. For instance nouns that in Polish are categorized by gender are naturally either masculine (*człowiek* "man," a human being) or feminine (*istota* "creature," a living individual<sup>34</sup>)—but both words are used in Szymborska's poems with similar irony. Gender marked distinctions, when they do appear, occur on a different level. Although never spelled out clearly, it is apparent that in her poetry those who are evolving into beings only temporarily human (she is, after all, "momentarily of human kind") go through a metamorphosis that is associated commonly with women. For example: "leaping out of one's skin" or "taking leave of one's senses"<sup>35</sup> ("A Speech at Lost and Found"). The implication is that we have become human not so much because of male heroism and greatness, and not because of (male) rationality but rather in consequence of (female) "hysterical" behaviour. It is not some carefully planned historical processes, but coincidence ("przypadek")—one of Szymborska's key expressions—that best explains human history and the history of human beings. Szymborska's view of the world is thus a feminist one, although, as has been said, the poet herself can hardly be called a feminist as she is not taking a political or ideological stance. Her feminism may be described as viewing the world from "female," domestic, "marginal" perspectives, which, to everybody's surprise, turn out to be not only obvious, but widely accepted. Let us quote here another observation of Grażyna Borkowska:

What determines Szymborska's originality, at least at first glance, is the characteristic positioning of the poetic "I." Her voice often astonishes and surprises, since it reaches us from unexpected places, from the corner of a room, from behind the stage, from a museum glass-case, from the gutter of a large city, from within a dream, or deep water. Szymborska's poetry is a humble gloss on the margins of the great book of the world, the sixth act of a play, the reverse of a painting.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Nie wiem nawet dokładnie, gdzie zostawiłam pazury,  
 kto chodzi w moim futrze, kto mieszka w mojej skorupie.  
 Pomarło mi rodzeństwo, gdz wypelzłam na ląd,  
 i tylko któraś kostka świętuje we mnie rocznicę.  
 ("Wszelki Wypadek," tr. Joanna Trzeciak)

<sup>34</sup> In Polish "osoba" and "istota"—nouns used frequently by Szymborska—are grammatically feminine in gender, a fact that is also significant in this context.

<sup>35</sup> "wyskakiwanie ze skóry" and "odchodzenie od zmysłów."

<sup>36</sup> "Tym, co przynajmniej na pierwszy rzut oka decyduje o oryginalności poezji

In other words, it is a voice coming from places marginalized by patriarchal traditions—or, following Kostkowska's comments, "patriarchal" scholarship—and thus symbolically belonging to women. Let us also add here that Kristeva prefers to see 'femininity' as a *position* and—according to Moi—in Kristevian terms 'femininity' would be defined as "that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order."<sup>37</sup> And, perhaps paradoxically—and paradox is another key feature of Szymborska's poems—these "marginalized" perspectives turn out to be of greater interest than the "centre," which symbolically belongs to men.

Answering the question "Where is she?" Helene Cixous constructed a set of binary oppositions:

Activity/Passivity  
Sun / Moon  
Culture/ Nature  
Day / Night

Father / Mother  
Head / Heart  
Intelligible / Palpable  
Logos / Pathos

...Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized... Through dual, hierarchical oppositions. Superior/Inferior.<sup>38</sup>

In Szymborska's poetry hierarchies that ignore inherited values, viewing and taking measure of the world from a domestic and private angle (which for centuries have been undervalued and associated with an inferior, female position) achieve an equal, and perhaps even a higher status than in Cixous's patriarchal models. A woman in Szymborska's poetry does not feel inherently inferior, and thus she has no need of changing her place in the symbolic order. Though she understands how the patriarchal tradition places man and woman, she does not

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Szymborskiej, jest specyficzne usytuowanie podmiotu lirycznego. Głos poetki często zadziwia i zaskakuje, ponieważ dochodzi z miejsc nieprzewidzianych—z kąta sali, zza kulisy, z muzealnej gabloty, z rynsztoków wielkiego miasta, z wnętrza snu, z głębokiej wody. Poezja Szymborskiej to skromna głosa na marginesie wielkiej książki świata, szósty akt dramatu, rewers malarskiego obrazu." Grażyna Borkowska, "Szymborska ex-centriczna," *Teksty Drugie* 4 (1991): 58.

<sup>37</sup> Moi 111

<sup>38</sup> Helene Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," in *The Feminist Reader. Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by C. Belsey and J. Moore (New York: Blackwell 1997) 91.

feel that the place of man is any better than the one assigned to woman. That is why the female persona of her poems treats man with (female) irony:

This adult male. This person on earth.  
 Ten billion nerve cells. Ten pints of blood  
 pumped by ten ounces of heart.  
 This object took three billion years to emerge.<sup>39</sup> (“A Film from the Sixties”)

In fact, irony in her poetry seems to be directed mostly (if not exclusively) at man. Whenever Szymborska ironically talks about people in general, she not only uses the masculine noun *człowiek*, but also describes these human beings in a way that directs us primarily to the male individual of the species:

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.<sup>40</sup> (“A Million Laughs, A Bright Hope”)

And here is how man is seen from a domestic perspective:

Tomorrow he will give a lecture on homeostasis  
 in megagalactic cosmonautics.  
 For now he's curled up, fallen asleep.<sup>41</sup> (“Returns”)

Szymborska's female irony (as, for instance, in the above-mentioned “A Film from the Sixties”) is born out of the contrast between a home-based view of man and the expectations he has to live up to in the world “outside.” These expectations are primarily professional or work-related, but Szymborska sometimes goes beyond these and refers to the artificiality and pretence of the behaviour of the entire “male-made” world:

... statesmen have to smile.  
 Their pearly whites mean they're still full of cheer.  
 The game's complex, the goal's far out of reach,  
 the outcome still unclear—once in a while,  
 we need a friendly, gleaming set of teeth.<sup>42</sup> (“Smiles”)

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<sup>39</sup> Ten dorosły mężczyzna. Ten człowiek na ziemi.  
 Dziesięć miliardów komórek nerwowych.  
 Pięć litrów krwi na trzysta gramów serca.  
 Taki przedmiot powstawał trzy miliardy lat. (“Sto Pociach”)

<sup>40</sup> Z tym kółkiem w nosie, w tej todze, w tym swetrze.  
 Sto pociach bądź co bądź.

Niebożę.

Istny człowiek. (“Sto Pociach,” tr. Magnus J. Kryński and Robert A. Maguire)

<sup>41</sup> Jutro wygłosi odczyt o homeostazie  
 w kosmonautyce metagalaktycznej.

Na razie zwinął się, zasnął. (“Wszelki Wypadek,” tr. by Magnus J. Kryński and Robert A. Maguire)

In other words what is considered “high” and “public” and thus “male” can also be seen as simplistic and hilarious (if not outright ridiculous), as is demonstrated by the following lines: “dentistry turned into diplomatic skill / promises us a Golden Age tomorrow.”<sup>43</sup> No, one certainly cannot treat the male (or the patriarchal world) with absolute seriousness.

At the same time one cannot ignore completely the rules of patriarchy given the fact that they influence humanity. The patriarchal model includes male heroism for which the woman pays a price (see, for instance, the poem “Pieta”); alternately, she becomes a sort of attendant exhibit in a museum devoted to the heroic man. Szymborska’s poems do not question the heroic model, as heroism is an integral part of the cultural construct called “man,” especially in the Polish patriotic tradition.<sup>44</sup> She expects her readers to know and understand this tradition, but the perspective from which it is viewed in her poems is unusual: it is the perspective of ordinary, everyday life. This is well illustrated by the poem “In Broad Daylight” (“W biały dzień”), in which the heroic death of a poet (in this case Krzysztof Baczyński, who perished during the Nazi occupation of Poland) provides a context for Szymborska’s reflection on how we fail to appreciate the miracle of non-heroic, everyday life with its ordinary happenings and things.

Sometimes someone would  
yell from the doorway: “Mr. Baczyński, phone call for you”—  
and there’d be nothing strange about that:  
that it’s him, that he is standing up, straightening his sweater  
and slowly moving toward the door.

At this sight no one would  
stop talking, no one would  
freeze in mid-gesture, mid-breath  
because this commonplace event would  
be treated—such a pity—  
as a commonplace event.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Mężowie stanu muszą się uśmiechać.  
Uśmiech oznacza, że nie tracą ducha.  
Choć gra zawiała, interesy sprzeczne,  
wynik niepewny—zawsze to pociecha,  
gdy uźębienie białe i serdeczne. (“Wielka Liczba”)

<sup>43</sup> Stomatologia w służbie dyplomacji  
spektakularny gwarantuje skutek... (“Wielka Liczba”)

<sup>44</sup> See Małgorzata Fidelis, “‘Participation in the Creative Work of the Nation’: Polish Women Intellectuals in the Cultural Construction of Female Gender Roles, 1864–1890,” *Journal of Women’s History* 13.1 (2001): 108–125.

<sup>45</sup> Czasem ktoś od progu wołałby:

For Szymborska life is made of ordinary, even trivial things, of the presence of feelings (as in the poem “Museum”), as well as the ability to make mistakes: “He lives, therefore he errs” (“Wrong Number”); in short, it is everything that the patriarchal tradition categorizes as marginal or irrational and thus typical of women. And even when life means struggle, conflict, it turns out, ironically, to be “merely” a “battle” with a dress:

The crown has outlasted the head.  
The hand has lost out to the glove.  
The right shoe has defeated the foot.

As for me, I am still alive, you see.  
The battle with my dress still rages on.<sup>46</sup> (“Museum”)

In poems where the poetic persona clearly identifies herself as a woman, irony is replaced by “mirthful pity” (“wesola litość”). However, this is not the only way in which Szymborska metes out different treatment to women and human beings in general. As a human being her persona is primarily a biological creature. As a woman she is aware not only of the previous stages of her biological evolution but also of being a historical/cultural construct.<sup>47</sup> She visits Troy as the beautiful Helene, understands Lot’s wife or becomes the mythological Cassandra. She recollects female personas, which contributed to the construction of the cultural image of woman, understands them and can impersonate female cultural icons as well as “common” women from the past. In the poem “Landscape” (“Pejzaż”) she speaks as the woman in the picture:

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“panie Baczyński, telefon do pana”—  
i nic dziwnego w tym nie byłoby,  
że to on, i że wstaje, obciągając sweter  
i bez pośpiechu rusza w stronę drzwi.  
Rozmów na widok ten nie przerywano by,  
w pół gestu i w pół tchu nie zastygano by,  
bo zwykle to zdarzenie—a szkoda, a szkoda—  
jako zwykle zdarzenie traktowano by. (“Ludzie na moście”)

<sup>46</sup> Korona przeczekwała głowę.  
Przegrała dłoń do rękawicy.  
Zwyciężył prawy but nad nogą.

Co do mnie, żyję, proszę wierzyć.  
Mój wyścig z suknią nadal trwa. (“Sól”)

<sup>47</sup> History is an important category for Szymborska’s poetry—especially in light of Kristeva’s opinion of the role of the “new” generation of women. See my “Źródło ucisku czy warunek istnienia? O historii jako terytorium kobiety (w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej)” in *Rozumienie historii we współczesnej literaturze polskiej*, edited by H. Gosk and A. Zieniewicz (Warszawa: Elipsa, 2006) 413–429.

I don't know the games of the heart.  
 I've never seen my children's father naked.  
 I don't see the crabbed and blotted draft  
 that hides behind the Song of Songs.  
 What I want to say comes in ready-made phrases.  
 I never use despair, since it isn't really mine,  
 only given to me for safekeeping.<sup>48</sup>

Szyborska's female persona comprises not only of famous or typical women of the historical past, but also those from her own past, especially from her childhood. She is able to look back at herself from the perspective of a mature person and see in herself "the other," as in the poem "Laughter" ("Śmiech"):

The little girl I was—  
 I knew her, naturally.  
 I have a few photos  
 from her brief life.  
 I feel a mirthful pity  
 for several little verses.  
 I remember a few events.<sup>49</sup>

Difference in age translates into difference in position and hence also in perspective. In this sense the temporal "centre" (distinct from the special—marginal, unexpected positions from which her poetic voice usually comes) is always "here" and "now," fluctuating as the authorial poetic persona gets older. With time it is not only childhood but also various stages of womanhood that become a territory open to new meanings and reflections. In the poem "Ze wspomnień" ("From My Recollections," which appeared in the volume *Chwila* [A Moment]) looking back at herself becomes a reflection on the relationships

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<sup>48</sup> Nie znam zabawy w serce.  
 Nie znam nagości ojca moich dzieci.  
 Nie podejrzewam Pieśni nad Pieśniami  
 o pokreślony zawiły brudnopis.  
 To, co chcę powiedzieć, jest w gotowych zdaniach.  
 Nie używam rozpaczy, bo to rzecz nie moja,  
 a tylko powierzona mi na przechowanie. ("Sto Pocięch")

<sup>49</sup> Dziewczynka, którą byłam—  
 znam ją, oczywiście.  
 Mam kilka fotografii  
 z jej krótkiego życia.  
 Czuję wesołą litość  
 dla paru wierszyków.  
 Pamiętam kilka zdarzeń. ("Sto Pocięch," tr. Magnus J.Kryński and Robert A.Maguire)

among women of various generations, relationships that are conditioned by their view of man:

I thought: I will phone you,  
Do not—I will say—come yet,  
They are forecasting several days of rain.

Only Agnes—the widow—  
Welcomed the beauty with a smile.<sup>50</sup>

Inasmuch as “descriptions of herself in a former state” are a recurrent feature of Szymborska’s poetry—similar to the ironically-sentimental reflections about girls as women-to-be (for instance in “Chwila w Troi” [“A Moment at Troy”] or “Mała dziewczynka ściąga obrus [“A Little Girl Pulls the Table-Cloth Down”]—it seems that Szymborska rarely views another woman as “the other.” The poem quoted above is an exception in this respect, but it may also be a foreshadowing of something new in her poetry. However, the language—or more precisely—the irony used by jealous women to talk about “the other woman” has been present in her poems for a considerable period of time. Szymborska has achieved a mastery of using this “female idiom”<sup>51</sup> in her poem “Hatred” (“Nienawiść”): “Look how spry it [i.e., hatred] still is” (“Spójrzcie jaka wciąż sprawna”), which sounds like an overheard fragment of a conversation between two women. However, the ironically marked tone of what would appear to the male gaze as malicious gossip and jealousy—stereotypically attributed to women in patriarchal society—is not used to discredit women but rather to mock patriarchal stereotypes. It is an artistic device, one more way to play with the patriarchal tradition and its evaluation of women.

Irony, generally accepted as one of the characteristic features of Szymborska’s poetry, is not a pose adopted by the poet or imposed on her by cultural stereotypes; it is an extension of the way in which she speaks of herself in her “earlier (or former) stage.” Such irony becomes an important element in Szymborska’s idiolect, and is used to describe people and elements of the world around her, including the culture she inherited:

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<sup>50</sup> Ja pomyślałam zadzwonię do Ciebie,  
jeszcze na razie—powiem—nie przyjeżdżaj,  
zapowiadają właśnie kilkudniowe deszcze.

Tylko Agnieszka, wdowa  
przywitała piękną uśmiechem.

<sup>51</sup> Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton and Linda Regan write that “Creating and giving meaning to language in order to document the reality of women’s lives has been a constant theme within feminist praxis.” See their article “Beyond Victim or Survivor: Sexual Violence, Identity and Feminist Theory and Practice,” in *Sexualizing the Social. Power and the Organization of Sexuality*, by Lisa Adkins and Vicki Merchant (London: Houndmills 1996) 77–101.

You'd better go back  
where you came from.<sup>52</sup> ("Laughter")

In this poem a paradoxically simple reference to an "ordinary woman" ("zwyczajna kobieta") characterizes her as somebody on the margins of "high" culture. However, it would be difficult to define what Szymborska understands by "an ordinary woman."<sup>53</sup> A woman is for her a "changeless fluidity," someone who is "out there," who must be "open to choice" ("do wyboru"), as in the poem "Portrait of a Woman" ("Portret Kobiety"):

Naïve, but gives the best advice.  
Weak, but takes on anything.  
A screw loose and tough as nails.  
Curls up with Jaspers or *Ladies' Home Journal*.  
Can't figure out this bolt and builds a bridge.  
Young, young as ever, still looking young.<sup>54</sup>

But a woman is also someone whose body is subject to changing fashions and models of beauty. In the poem "Rubens' Women" ("Kobiety Rubensa")—a prime example of the poet's command over poetic language and her ability to create a linguistic orgy—Szymborska, noticing the absence of "skinny sisters" ("chude siostry") in the painting, says:

The thirteenth century would have given them a golden backdrop.  
The twentieth, a silver screen.  
But the seventeenth has nothing for the flat-chested.  
For even the sky curves in relief—  
curvaceous angels, a curvaceous god—<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Najlepiej żebyś wróciła,  
skąd przyszałaś. ("Sto Pociach," tr. Magnus J.Kryński and Robert A.Maguire)

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of feminist problems with the definition of "women" see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), especially chapter 1, "'Women' as the subject of feminism."

<sup>54</sup> Naiwna, ale najlepiej doradzi.  
Staba, ale udźwignie.  
Nie ma głowy na karku, to będzie ją miała.  
Czyta Jaspersa i pisma kobiece.  
Nie wie, po co ta śróbka i zbuduje most.  
Młoda, jak zwykle młoda, ciągle jeszcze młoda. ("Wielka Liczba")

<sup>55</sup> Trzynasty wiek dałby im złote tło.  
Dwudziesty—dałby ekran srebrny.  
Ten siedemnasty nic dla płaskich nie ma.

Albowiem nawet niebo jest wypukłe,  
wypukli aniołowie i wypukły bóg—"Sól," tr. Joanna Trzeciak)



Woman and her role in this poem is a function of the visualizations of the female body, which belong to the sphere of art and are thus evaluated according to the same aesthetic criteria as other works of art. One could argue that viewing the female body in such a way is directly connected with the feminist critique of patriarchy,<sup>56</sup> however in Szyborska's case there are no such negative implications, as art is full of similar visualizations of bodies that are holy (deities, Madonnas, saints), and thus of highest value and importance. It is thus typical of Szyborska to first pursue feminist ideas and then to "deconstruct" or transcend them by using unconventional connotations and perspectives.

It is also characteristic of her to focus on nonexistence, which is hardly surprising in view of the troubles that all kinds of feminisms have had with definitions of femininity, including the idea of materialist feminism according to which women are a social rather than a natural category defined by their relation to men and thus lacking "self-identity,"<sup>57</sup> or, if we recall Lacan's statement (often quoted by feminists) that "a woman does not exist." It is only natural that in the world of the "non-existing woman" things that did not happen would have the same value as those that did. A good example of this is the poem "The Railroad Station" ("Dworzec"), devoted to a "nonarrival," but the opening line of the poem "Nothing nothinged itself for me as well" should be also mentioned ("Nicość przenicowała").<sup>58</sup> The creation and use of the sphere of non-existence and the ability to employ negations as a way of indicating non/belonging (as who you are is as important as who you are not) are very interesting features of Szyborska's poetry. Since every absence implies the idea of presence, non-existence expands to include the absence of discrete realizations of stereotypes and clichés (individuals and stereotypes don't match). That is why the family described in the poem "Album" consists of members who elude stereotypical categories, and when sentimental clichés of looking back at family snapshots appear in one of her later poems, they occur in the description of the first photograph of Adolf Hitler. Stereotypes—and there is no doubt that they were shaped by patriarchy and that we have inherited them with patriarchal culture—prevent us from seeing things as they are; moreover at times they run counter to common sense. "True Love" ("Miłość szczęśliwa") Szyborska writes "... couldn't populate the planet in a million years, / it comes along so rarely."<sup>59</sup> In

<sup>56</sup> See for instance Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 6.1 (Spring 1980): 1–25.

<sup>57</sup> See Lisa Adkins and Vicki Merchant, "Introduction," *Sexualizing the Social* (London: Macmillan Press 1996) 1–15.

<sup>58</sup> Translated by Joanna Trzeciak.

<sup>59</sup> *Przenigdy nie zdołałaby zaludnić ziemi, zdarza się przecież rzadko.* ("Wszelki Wypadek")

.....właśnie taka, jaka jest,

short, it is reality and not its stereotyped version that is important for our existence.

Another example is the poem "First Love" ("Pierwsza miłość"), about which the poetic persona can only say unconventionally: "coś się między nami działo/ I podziało" (Something has passed between us /And passed away). It is not the cliché of eternal love that makes this first love special, but the fact that it passed away completely:

Precisely the way it is,  
Capable of what others cannot be capable of yet,  
Unremembered,  
Not even dreamt of,  
Domesticates death for me.

It is significant that this playing with clichés appears primarily in poems devoted to love, in which, by the way, Szymborska challenges the patriarchal tradition of poetry by women. In Szymborska's early poems<sup>60</sup> love frequently equals its absence; the poems are about the inability to achieve it—and not just in its ideal form:

I am too close for him to dream about me.  
I'm not flying over him, not fleeing him  
under the roots of trees. I am too close.  
Not with my voice sings the fish in the net.  
Not from my finger rolls the ring.<sup>61</sup> ("I am too close for him...")

In her later poems love has no need of high words and is characterized mostly by the miracle of everyday existence:

But it just so happens that I am with you.  
And I really see nothing  
ordinary about it.<sup>62</sup> ("Nothing nothinged itself for me as well...")

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potrafi, czego tamte nie potrafią jeszcze,  
niepamiętana,  
nie śniąca się nawet,  
oswaja mnie ze śmiercią. ("Chwila")

<sup>60</sup> I refer here only to Szymborska's poems published after 1957, as the poet herself did not (until very recently) include her "immature" poetry in authorial "collected" editions—for instance "View with a Grain of Sand" (1996).

<sup>61</sup> Jestem za blisko, żeby mu się śnić.  
Nie fruвам nad nim, nie uciekam mu  
pod korzeniami drzew. Jestem za blisko.  
Nie moim głosem śpiewa ryba w sieci.  
Nie z mego palca toczy się pierścionek. ("Sól," tr. Joanna Trzeciak)

<sup>62</sup> A mnie tak się złożyło, że jestem przy tobie,  
I doprawdy nie widzę w tym nic

Love in Szymborska's poems is not the passion that unites young people, it is not tempestuous emotion, but the quiet being together with another person; it is a mature feeling of a mature person. In her love poems Szymborska uses the lyrical "you," which unlike the lyrical "we," allows her not to lose her own personality, and while keeping her own "I," leaves room for respecting the separate entity of the "I" of the beloved man. At the same time—unlike the pronoun "he"—it does not put the loved man in a position of "the other."

This lyrical "you" appears in Szymborska's poetry quite late—and achieves its full voice only in poems written after the man she loved died. While in "I am to close for him" she uses the pronoun (talks about) "him" and addresses her readers, in "Parting with a View" she achieves the effect of intimacy by creating a space for her beloved (the only addressee of this poem) by calling him "you":

I've survived you just enough  
but only enough,  
to reflect from afar.<sup>63</sup> ("Parting with a View")

The female voice in Szymborska's poetry is neither a battle cry nor a whisper of submission, as it often is in patriarchal contexts. It is the voice of a woman who feels—as a person and as a culturally shaped entity—equal to man ("if the distinction still holds"—"Jeśli ten podział pozostaje w mocy"<sup>64</sup>). She does not fight, nor yet does she surrender. It is furthermore the voice of a woman who knows that even if history belongs to heroes, "after every war / someone has to clean up" ("Po każdej wojnie ktoś musi posprzątać"), and who, while coming from patriotically oriented Polish culture, at the same time accepts the fact that people must be able to forget, to let go, instead of constantly creating veteran clubs.

Those who knew  
what was going on here  
must make way for  
those who know little.  
And less than little.  
And finally as little as nothing.<sup>65</sup>

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zwyczajnego.

Translated by Joanna Trzeciak

<sup>63</sup> Na tyle Cię przeżyłam

i tylko na tyle,

żeby myśleć z daleka. ("Koniec i Początek")

Translated by Joanna Trzeciak

<sup>64</sup> "Rachunek Elegijny" ("Elegiac Calculation")—*Koniec i Początek*.

<sup>65</sup> Ci, co wiedzieli

o co tutaj szło,

muszą ustąpić miejsca tym,

co wiedzą mało.

Szyborska's voice is also the voice of someone who does not have to take a political stance to change social reality, for she can make a difference by taking no part in patriarchy just as historically the "non-existing" female persons took no part in formulating the clichés of the world they inhabited. In Szyborska's case taking no part means also to "actively" ignore the logic and limitations imposed by the prevalent symbolic order, to insert women as the creators of everyday life into culture and history on their own terms and to give them their own voice. If this is the reason why critics have found it difficult to grasp the essence of her self-confident womanhood and have had problems adequately categorizing her poetry, then they only testify to her poetic and intellectual achievement.

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I mniej niż mało.  
I wreszcie tyle co nic. ("Koniec i Początek," tr. Joanna Trzeciak)

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