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CHARITY SCRIBNER

PARTING WITH A VIEW: WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA AND THE WORK OF MOURNING

In the years since Wisława Szymborska was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature much has been made of the “wit, wisdom, and warmth” of her poetry, and rightly so.¹ But little critical attention has been directed toward the questions about mourning which she articulates in her later work. In *Koniec i początek* [The End and the Beginning] (1993), Szymborska alights upon some of the same funerary terrains which Freud surveyed in his 1917 paper “Mourning and Melancholia.” Yet, whereas the mourner of Freud’s study covers over the gap that separates a griever’s insufferable pain and passes to the safe ground upon which mourning could be resolved, Szymborska allows the voices of these poems to fall deeply into this chasm, this cauldron of mourning.

An interminable work of mourning, Szymborska’s volume of poetry departs from Freud’s conclusion. Since Jacques Lacan, on the other hand, speaks of the failure immanent to mourning work in his Seminar VI, *Le Désir et son interprétation* [Desire and Its Interpretation] (1958-1959), his interpretive lens is more useful to a reading of Szymborska’s subtle elaborations on the subject of loss. In *Koniec i początek* Szymborska does not attempt to transcend grief via some successfully accomplished symbolization of mourning; instead, she respectfully encircles the voids revealed by intractable loss. To this end, she exploits the formal constraints of her practice to insist upon the impossibility of finishing a requiem. Szymborska does not invest her works with the content of things mournful, but rather develops a poetics which keeps the work of mourning in process, unfinished.

¹ In his essay celebrating Szymborska’s Nobel award, Stanisław Barańczak remarks:

We love her poetry because we instinctively feel that its author genuinely (though by no means uncritically) loves us, takes interest in us, will be always there to hear what we, human beings, have to say. . . . Wit, wisdom, and warmth are equally important ingredients in the mixture of qualities that makes her so unusual and every poem of hers so unforgettable.

(Stanisław Barańczak, “The Reluctant Poet,” *The New York Times Book Review*, October 27, 1996, p. 57.)

The Polish Elegiac Calculation

In order to move beyond the prevailing interpretations of Szymborska's work, and to appreciate the force of her later poetry, it is necessary to read it within the expanded field of Polish literary and visual culture. To this end, I shall first constellate Szymborska's "Pożegnanie do widoku" [Parting With a View] into a design with two other signal moments in Polish literary and visual culture: one, the cycle *Treny* [Laments] by the sixteenth-century poet Jan Kochanowski, the other, conceptual artist Mirosław Bałka's 1992 installation in documenta IX, titled *Sytuacja* [The Situation]. A comparison of these three works affords a clearer perspective of the sense of loss manifested in Szymborska's latest poetry while at the same time illuminating the economy of mourning and melancholia which defines a number of significant Polish works of art and literature. Then I shall trace the perpetual "circuit of mourning" which operates in a number of other poems from *Koniec i początek*.

Szymborska lived and worked in Cracow, where she spent nearly all her life. She was sixteen when the second World War broke out and twenty-one when it ended. As a student at the Jagiellonian University during the war, she witnessed hunger, terror, and the deportation and extermination of Jews and other Poles. She published her first poem in 1945, and her first collection of poetry in 1948; in the bleak years of the early fifties, she produced two more volumes, but has since virtually disowned these early works, suggesting that she considered these poems to have suffered too much from the exigencies of Socialist Realist cultural politics. To some extent, Szymborska represented other poets of her generation: writers who had wartime childhoods, were briefly compelled by the dictates of state socialism, but then, by the late fifties, grew discontented and resorted to devising a kind of covert or underground poetics in order to fend off the censor's gaze. Her 1957 volume *Wołanie do Yeti* [Calling Out to Yeti] signaled her departure from officially inspired themes, as it gave voice to her heterodox understanding of history and the relationships between humankind and society. The collection *Sto pociach* [A Million Laughs, A Bright Hope], published in 1967, marks the advent of her mature poetry writing and her new emphasis on free verse. Her poetry exhibits at once her playful inventiveness and masterful technical skill; it is rigorous in its intellect, but her critical imagination is both nimble and unpretentious.

In many of her earlier poems Szymborska writes of the serendipitous diversity of the natural world; she looks on with wonder. Lately, especially in *The End and the Beginning*, she showed a tendency to write in what Anna Węgrzyniakowa describes as an "elegiac tone."² Several of the poems from

² Anna Węgrzyniakowa, *Niema rozpusty większej niż myślenie: o poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej* [There is No Dissipation Greater Than Thinking: On the poetry of Wisława Szymborska] (Katowice: Towarzystwo Zachęty Kultury, 1996), p. 70.

these two volumes treat the problem of memory in the aftermath of a loved one's death: one, "Kot w pustym mieszkaniu" [Cat in an Empty Apartment], widely translated and disseminated after Szymborska's Nobel award, has been the focus of a fair amount of critical acclaim; another, "Parting with a View," has not received the same degree of sustained attention, despite the fact that it matches the force of the more celebrated poems. Above all, "Parting With a View" is a lament. As such, it should be read against the background of *Treny* [Laments] (1580) by the Renaissance humanist Jan Kochanowski. First published after the death of Urszula, the poet's beloved daughter, who died of illness as an infant, the cycle of verses would come to be seen as one of the masterworks of Polish letters. In fact, it still remains a standard component of literature curricula in Polish schools. When Kochanowski made public his requiem for his daughter, he took a certain risk. He had already established himself as a master of classical lyric form; in works such as *Odprawa posłów greckich* [The Dismissal of the Greek Envoys], he demonstrated his command of both the Polish idiom and the legacy of Greek and Latin tragedy, especially as they had been delivered down through the literary culture of the Italian Renaissance.³

Kochanowski's writings have been characterized as perfectly balanced and limpid; Czesław Miłosz calls them "pure breathing" and illustrates how Kochanowski's language seems to flow naturally, without any effort.⁴ The risk Kochanowski took lies in the fact that he wielded his mastery of classical lament forms in order to craft a highly personal and subjective literary work. While his cycle conforms to the formal constraints of the classical *epicedium* or *threnos* form, his choice of subject matter – a little girl, a person of scant world-historical importance – marks a significant departure from the tradition of classical elegies. Most of the poems in the cycle are composed in rhymed verses containing eleven syllables each; the last poem, titled "Lament 19, or: A Dream," exemplifies the formula of the Polish Alexandrine. Each verse in this particular lament consists of thirteen syllables marked by a *caesura* which occurs after the seventh syllable. But while Kochanowski preserved these metrical conventions, he deployed them in his own interests. His *Laments* can be read as a confessional in that they sing of his personal, familial despair. Until this cycle, the elegiac poetry which had been published by other Polish authors was composed exclusively to commemorate the deaths of statesmen and other prominent personalities. By making this departure, Kochanowski both conserved and violated elegiac conventions. Yet it is precisely through this sublation that his *Laments* transcend the standards of his epoch and enter into the domain of the most remarkable texts written in the Polish language.

³ Kochanowski, like his French contemporary Ronsard (1524-1585) was particularly influenced by the Latin poet of the first century BCE, Horace.

⁴ Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 60.

Szyborska parallels Kochanowski's interest in "the personal" in her own contemporary work, since her poetry distinguishes itself through its focus on the everyday event, on the small scale. Many of her poems read as litanies of the manifold tiny details which make up everyday life. Some inventory cast-off objects – buttons, pencils, scraps of paper; others catalogue and curate moments of plant and animal life – an overturned beetle, a reed bending in the breeze – events which usually take place only at the periphery of vision. This attention to mundane and quotidian details has precedent in Kochanowski's *Laments*; indeed, one of the most moving verses of his cycle describes the articles of clothing left behind after his daughter's death. Her surviving relics render her traumatic absence palpable.

What of the distance between "Parting With a View" and the *Laments*? There are more than four hundred years of Polish history which elapse between the publication of the two poems, four centuries which were punctuated by partitions, wars, the genocide of Jews and others, both during and after the German occupation of Poland, and the imposition and dismantling of state socialism. Yet the poems contain subtle differences which exceed a strictly historical analysis. In the *Laments*, Kochanowski writes of his process of mastering grief; he takes the reader through a series of healing stages: first the burden and sorrow of the child's death, then solace through the acceptance of loss, and ultimately a coda which combines moral conclusions and an affirmation of God's love. Szyborska, however, appears to harbor less confidence in the ability of poetry – or even language – to complete the work of mourning. Read closely, her latest poems can be seen to point towards the unmasterable traumas not only of personal grief but also of other, more public conflicts which erupt in the form of ethnic hatreds and terrorism.⁵

In parts fifteen and sixteen of the *Laments*, the bereaved father appeals to the mythical figure of Erato. He asks the deity to deliver him from his grief, lest he turn into stone like the mythical Niobe, who, consumed with sorrow after the deaths of her fourteen children, ossifies into a marble pillar atop Mount Sipylus. Kochanowski writes:

*Uspokójdźcie na chwilę strapioną myśl moje,
Póki jeszcze kamienny w polu słup nie stoje,
Lejąc ledwie nie krwawy płacz przez marmór żywy,
Żalu ciężkiego pamięć i znak nieszczęśliwy.*

In Stanisław Barańczak's and Seamus Heaney's English translation of the *Laments*, this passage is rendered as follows:

. . . cure me too! I'll turn, if I'm not healed,
Into a marble pillar in a field,

⁵ Examples include "Terorysta, on patrzy" [The Terrorist, He Watches], "Nienawiść" [Hatred], "Tortury" [Tortures], and "Jawa" [The Real World].

A monument to pain, a standing stone
That weeps and bleeds like living flesh and bone.

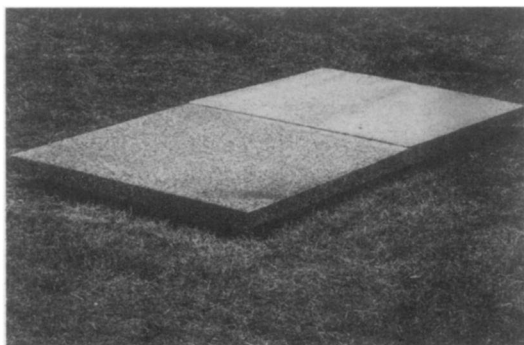
Kochanowski sees Niobe as eternally tormented. She is consumed with grief, filled with the pain of these fourteen deaths, and so rendered mute. A monument to pain, she is made of “deathless marble” [*marmór nieprzetrwany*]. Mortified beyond speech, all she can do is shed endless tears of grief. Niobe’s suffering lies in the fact that she cannot die away from her pain; as a statue she must live forever, petrified into a carapace which blocks all movement.

At the end of this lament the speaker identifies quite explicitly with Niobe. Just as she has been turned to stone by her sorrow, the speaker also finds himself immobilized by grief. His body and the tomb collapse into one: *Ten grób nie jest na martwym, ten martwy nie w grobie./ Ale samże jest martwym, samże grobem sobie* [This tomb keeps no corpse; this corpse keeps no tomb:/ Here the room’s tenant is the tenant’s room]. The meaning of the line *ten grób nie jest na martwym* is complex. *Martwić* means to grieve, but it also means to mortify, to render inert. In this case the speaker literally encrypts himself in sorrow. This notion of mortification, of being buried under misery, couples together with one line from the passage cited above from “Lament 15”: *Żalu ciężkiego pamięć i znak nieszczęśliwy*. Striking here is what I call the “closedness” of the words Kochanowski chooses, that is, the texture and weight of the consonants and vowels he clusters together in words like *ciężkiego, pamięć* and *znak*. Indeed the word *ciężkiego* resonates throughout the whole line, not only because of its meaning – heavy – but also because of its phonetic characteristics. What is this heavy weight of grief? How can sorrow be marked, how can it become a sign of sorrow – *znak nieszczęśliwy*?

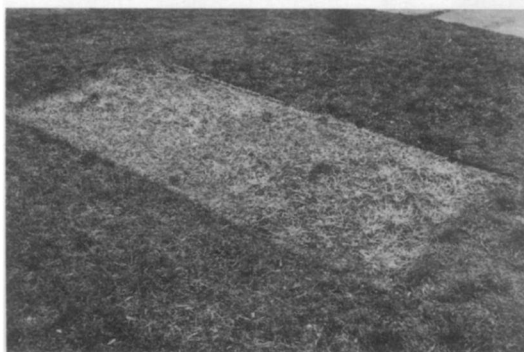
Another such sign or monument to loss has recently registered in the expanded field of Polish culture, if only briefly. Mirosław Bałka, a visual artist currently based in the town of Otwock, has exhibited (most notably in documenta IX in Germany in 1992) *The Situation*, a landscape project which makes concrete some of the dynamics of mourning within memory work. The project entailed two stages. The first, which lasted only briefly, consisted of two stone slabs, laid onto a patch of grass; Bałka then removed them, revealing the pale stains left on the lawn by the slabs. As Bałka recounts, his grandfather hewed more than four hundred tombstones over the course of his career as a stonemason. Before dying, his grandfather expressed the wish that his tombstone be made according to his own plans, ones which called for a monument that would have looked like the two stone slabs from the first stage of his project. The Bałka family, however, denied the grandfather this wish and instead ordered a more conventional tombstone to be made. Many years passed before Bałka recalled this and decided to make *The Situation*, a work which not only testifies to his grandfather’s sculptural imagination, but also underscores the tensions and fissures between remembering and forgetting. For the final element of *The Situation* series is an empty space which bears the



Mirosław Bałka



Situacja



temporary trace or stain left behind by both the removal or disappearance of the stone slabs as well as the end of the grandfather's life.

Kochanowski and Bałka present two stone slabs, two markers of pain and loss, but each implements the sign of sorrow differently. In *The Situation*, Bałka only goes so far as to index a kind of dumb grief, one which resists any kind of metaphor or transposition. Kochanowski moves beyond this muteness, this intense actuality of pain and loss, and tries to use poetry to transform intractable grief into the sort of mourning which can be spoken and lyricized. Kochanowski dwells only briefly on the linguistic impasses which can be presented by abject grief. He fears that, like Niobe, he will find no end to his misery. He writes: *Nieszczęściu k'woli a swojej żalości* [There is no end to my misery], and worries that he will be rendered as mute as the stone Niobe. But ultimately he recalls his faith that God will appease his pain with the merciful hands of time. For Kochanowski, time, the father of forgetfulness [*ojciec niepamięci*], will heal his aching heart.⁶ Kochanowski becomes a steward of Christian morality. In "Lament 19" he confidently asserts:

*A tak i ty, folgując prawu powszechnemu,
Zagródź drogę do serca upadkowi swemu
A w to patrzaj, co uszło rękę złej przygody;
Zyskiem człowiek zwać musi, w czym nie popadł szkody.*

And in the English translation:

You must accept, although your wound's still raw,
The rule and sway of universal law
And fill your heart with new peace, banish pain:
Whatever is not loss should be called gain.

The spiritual messenger tells the reader to forget his pain, literally to fence it off or exclude it from his heart. The mourner must heed the imperative to reject the lost love object so that his heart can be filled with a new peace. The speaker in the *Laments* wants to convince us that he has worked through his loss and brought his mourning to term by filling the vacuum in his life with some substitute. Christian faith becomes the placeholder of his deepest loss, that of his daughter.

The formal means of the *Laments* reinforce the dynamics of memory work which operate in the poem. Before circumnavigating the muteness of grief, Kochanowski's subject signals the pain he holds within through the weighty, clustered words which come to him. In lines like *żału ciężkiego pamięć i znak*

⁶ From this point in the cycle, that is, in the last three verses, the meter breaks into new patterns. "Lament 17," composed of stanzas of eight syllable verse, presents metrics which are consistent with the many songs Kochanowski wrote throughout his life. Finally, "Lament 19: A Dream" [*Tren 19: Sen*], the last and longest poem of the cycle, reassumes an Alexandrine metrical pattern.

nieszczęśliwy [literally “the heavy weight of grief and the sign of sorrow”] Kochanowski creates patterns which, in contradistinction to those of Szymborska, have a closed character. At several critical junctures in the *Laments*, Kochanowski chooses words which sound clustered or blocked; it is as if the speaker were storing something in his body in the way that a melancholic would house his lost love object within. This stands in contrast to the phonetics of the following line from Szymborska’s “Parting With a View”:

*Nie mam urazy
do widoku o widok
na olśnioną słońcem zatokę*

And in the English by Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh:

I don’t resent
the view for its vista
of a sun-dazzled bay.

What stirs the reader here is the series of open or “oral” vowel sounds as opposed nasal ones.⁷ The vowels – a, o and u – suggest openness in the voice; in order to enunciate them, a speaker must open his vocal organs. As the speaking body is spoken through, it resonates like an emptied vessel, allowing tones to pass in and out of it rather than holding them within, as is the case in Kochanowski’s line.

One of the reasons why the openness of Szymborska’s line *Nie mam urazy*. . . is so striking is that it is here where the poem’s title figures quite explicitly. The doubling and repetition of the word *widok* emphasizes this. What the speaker wants to say would be more commonly expressed by saying *Nie mam urazy to widoku, że jest widokiem*, but instead Szymborska gives us *do widoku o widok*, meaning “I don’t resent the view for its vista” or “aspect,” that is, the spectacle of the view. This stanza bears further consideration, for it also makes critical statements about both the powers of sensory perception and the tension between absence (mental detachment) and material presence which manifests itself here and at other points in the poem. In the opening line the speaker (whom I will designate as feminine) claims that she does not reproach the spring for starting up again. As the poem unfolds, she goes on to recount the sight of a body of water and the things which surround it: clumps of alders, something newly or “freshly birdish” rustling in the reeds, a man and woman seated upon a fallen birch trunk. But with each invocation of these sights, she tries to register her detachment; that which is seen is described as being

⁷ The eight vowel sounds of the Polish language can be divided into three groups: 1. Front and back (depending on whether the front or back of the tongue is used to pronounce them), 2. High, mid and low (depending on how high the tongue is in relation to the top of the mouth, and 3. Oral and nasal (depending on whether the air stream passes through the mouth or the nose).

separate or separated from the speaker. Nevertheless, although she is outside of this picture, her absence is inscribed within the view; this inscription makes the image hers.

In the final verse she indicates that she apprehends the details of this view only “from afar.” Addressing an unnamed interlocutor, she remarks: *Na tyle Cię przeżyłam / i tylko na tyle, / żeby myśleć z daleka* [I survived you by enough, / and only by enough / to contemplate from afar]. As a result of both her solitude and the belatedness of her remembrance, she pronounces the one thing she will not countenance: in the absence of her interlocutor, she wants to refuse her own return to that memory. She underscores this desire for relinquishment and resignation by saying: *Przywilej obecności--/ rezygnuję z niego* [The privilege of presence--/ I give it up]. But even before this culminating point, Szymborska offers the reader hints that the speaking voice is one of detachment. Indeed, most of the stanzas commence with lines which aim to disclose the distanced remove of the speaker. For example, *Nie mam żalu do wiosny* [I don’t reproach the spring], *Nie sprawia mi to bólu* [It doesn’t pain me to see], *Rozumiem, że mój smutek / nie wstrzyma zieleni* [I know that my grief / will not stop the green], and, as I mentioned earlier, *Nie mam urazy / do widoku o widok*.⁸ In each of these cases Szymborska tries to negate any possible affect, indicating that the speaker *could* feel these things, but that she has resigned herself not to. Although she could carry on grieving, this would do nothing to make the world obey her mournful longing. The distanced remove which she desires can only be approached or encircled, but never accomplished. In a similar vein, her curious phrase *jacyś nie my* [some non-us] reinforces this sense of detachment by negating any sort of collective presence, such as the unity which was constituted by herself and the person who has been lost. The principles of negation come to the fore: in the effort to part with this view, she cannot avoid illustrating it for us.

Freud describes total detachment and resignation as central to the work of mourning. The speaker in “Parting With a View” embarks upon a process of reality testing, provisionally resuscitating her shards of memory, but unlike the model mourner in Freud’s 1917 study, she never completely severs herself from them. She most closely approaches this break towards the end of the poem, where she underscores the distance of the poetic voice from that which is seen, delivering a stanza of somber beauty:

*Niczego nie wymagam
od toni pod lasem,
raz szmaragdowej,
raz szafirowej,
raz czarnej.*

⁸ The phrase *nie mam urazy* means literally “I do not take offense.” The word *urazy*, in the nominative *uraza*, is related to the verb *urazić*, to offend or to injure.

And in translation:

I expect nothing
 from the depths near the woods,
 first emerald
 then sapphire,
 then black.

As the speaker distances herself from her memories, the images darken and fade from sight; what was visible becomes eclipsed as the view passes from a field of color into obscurity. It is as if, despite the fact that the speaker outlived the interlocutor, she did not survive intact. In committing this memory to words, she lets the mnemonic gravure slip out of her body and into public space. This trace is visual, like an image which gets momentarily stained onto the retinal surface of the eye and then instilled into memory. It is also aural, as I argued earlier in the passage about the “openness” of this poem’s phonetics. The part of her which remains has been excommunicated from the picture, blackened out, and this is why, in this elegy, she is parting with the view, but yet not *fully parted*. She has not successfully broken the bonds which would pronounce the second and ultimate death of the lost object, the death of memory which would complete the work of mourning. Here Szymborska seems to evoke a remarkable line from Jacques Lacan’s Seminar XI: “Indeed, the picture is in my eye, but I am [also] in the picture.”⁹ “Parting With a View” raises critical questions about the sort of purity which Freud would attribute to accomplished mourning: the speaker of the poem continues an ambivalent relationship to the lost loved object, never succeeding to break cleanly from it.

Like Bałka’s *The Situation*, Szymborska’s “Parting With a View” balances precariously upon an axis of absence and presence. From this unstable position there emerges a paradox: the speaker of the poem reiterates that she refuses to return to the past, that she wants to part from the memory of a particular view. Yet through her practice she formalizes her mourning and

⁹ Although Lacan formulates this notion clearly – he states, *Le tableau, certes, est dans mon oeil. Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau* – translator Alan Sheridan falters here, rendering precisely the opposite meaning in his English version of “The Line and Light.” Sheridan writes, “The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am *not* in the picture” (italics mine) even though, a few paragraphs further when Lacan elaborates upon the subject’s assumption towards the image through the aperture of the anamorphic stain, he *does* seem to get Lacan’s point, since he translates *je me situe dans le tableau comme tâche* as “if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot.” See *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 89-91, and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan, (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 96-97.

actually inscribes the memory into literary history; she commemorates the view in a way that might well outlive her. This sort of paradox operates in much of Szymborska's poetry: she presents us with the insoluble dilemmas of language, but her only means to do this are *through* language. Indeed, it is her alertness to this "prisonhouse of language" which makes her such a remarkable poet. In "Pod jedną gwiazdką" [Under a Certain Little Star], which Szymborska first published some twenty years ago, she attests to the difficulties encountered when one tries to reconcile the materiality of language with the ephemeral flux of experience. She writes: *Nie miej mi za źle, mowo, że pożyczam patetycznych słów, / a potem trudu dokładam, żeby wydały się lekkie* [Take it not amiss, O speech, that I borrow weighty words, / and later try hard to make them seem light].¹⁰ This appraisal of the intractableness of language presages the concerns which emerge in Szymborska's recent elegiac poetry in *The End and the Beginning*. Like many of her contemporaries both in Poland and abroad, Szymborska assumes a critical position *vis-à-vis* the power of poetic language. As she encounters the enigmas of indecipherable grief in "Parting With a View," Szymborska indicates that language will only take us a certain distance. Since traumatic loss always extends beyond us, the terms generated to represent it remain inadequate, unmasterable, unbearably light. But this loss exists nowhere outside its linguistic representation; the trauma that eludes the grasp of language is engendered by the very failure to adequately represent it – this paradoxical dialectic of failure, perhaps, contains the very essence of poetry.

The Circuit of Mourning

Whereas "Parting With a View" addresses the limits of mourning rather squarely, Szymborska's poems "Rachunek elegijny" [Elegiac Calculation], "Niebo" [Sky] and "Jawa" [The Real World] enter into a more oblique relationship to the problem of the requiem. Through this obliqueness Szymborska suggests that, since mourning cannot be completed, poetry can do no more than encircle the place to which the griever returns. Like Lacan in *Desire and Its Interpretation*, in *The End and the Beginning* Szymborska traces the circuit of mourning and marks off the various phases which constitute it. "Elegiac Calculation," "Sky" and "Of the Real" trace their own orbit, within which mourning becomes desire; in these three poems Szymborska figures a form of poetics which moves through moments of estrangement, rejection and reincorporation, and, in doing so, thwarts any attempt at reckoning grief.

Four of the seven stanzas which make up "Elegiac Calculation" begin with the question "how many?"; here the speaker labors in vain to count up the

¹⁰ This translation is by Robert Maguire and Magnus Krynski, *Sound, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems by Wisława Szymborska* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

number of men and women, who, after shorter or longer lives, have “leaped from rushing time / and vanished, ever mournfully, in the distance.”¹¹ Szymborska counters each interrogation with a parenthetical remark which undoes the question, rendering it moot. Immediately after asking the reader to reckon how many have fallen out of the present and disappeared into the past, she questions her own question, doubting whether one can still “put stock” in the perspective which determines positionality in space and time. What is the formal effect of Szymborska’s repetition of these questions? Each one is fraught with doubt, even unanswerable; each one moves the poem a bit further along an algorithm that resists calculation. A striking example of this formal invention emerges in the following stanza:

Ilu
 (jeżeli pytanie ma sens,
 jeżeli można dojść do sumy ostatecznej,
 zanim liczący nie doliczy siebie)
 zapadło w ten najgłębszy sen
 (jeśli nie ma głębszego)--

And in English:

How many
 (if the question makes sense,
 if one can verify a final sum
 without including oneself)
 have sunk into that deepest sleep
 (if there’s nothing deeper)--

How could one verify mourning, this most final of sums, “without including oneself?” This undecidability has a reflexive function, for the poem excludes itself from the very process of mourning which it sets out to stage. Through the formal act of writing “Elegiac Calculation” [*Rachunek elegijny*] Szymborska enters herself into an equation of mourning that inherently resists resolution. This is reinforced in the final stanza. Although the speaker wants to call death an “endless silence,” she instead finds herself encountering the boundlessness of death; her linguistic orientation skews, leaving her to wonder if she can transpose mourning into any kind of metaphor.

Confronting the countless deaths of those who have come before her, the speaker witnesses a failure of the Symbolic, the order of language and representation; she asks herself which distinctions still hold between men and women, which differences can be measured between a shorter life and a longer one, but she cannot supply any answers. In the first stanza Szymborska

¹¹ The original reads: *Ilu ich wskoczyło z pędzącego czasu / i w oddaleniu coraz rzewniej znika.*

wonders how many have “crossed that threshold” which separates the present of the living from the past of the dead, only to negate her question with the conjecture that there may be no such place after all. Her choice of the word “threshold” [*próg*] summons forth a rich series of associations for the Polish reader. While there exist both the threshold of consciousness in the lexicon of psychology, as well as the more mundane *progi rodzinne* of home, *próg* can also connote the idea of being brought to the brink of some state, be it not only manhood or womanhood, but also ruin, as in *na progu dojrzałości* or *na progu ruiny*. Still another association remains; one can also find oneself at death’s door (*na progu śmierci*). In “Elegiac Calculation,” however, this threshold begins to dematerialize, since, as a result of the “loss of reality” which follows upon a brush too close to death, the mourner’s faculties of discrimination start to founder. No longer secure in the differentials of the Symbolic, the mourner lapses into the order of the Imaginary, where differentiation blends into a phantasmatic unity. No point in asking “how many”; the many have congealed into the One. “Elegiac Calculation” finds no closure; aside from the repetition of parenthetical remarks which trouble and destabilize each question, most lines end with long dashes rather than periods. None conclude with question marks. The confrontation with death excommunicates the speaker from the symbolic order, it releases her to the formless depths of the prelinguistic Imaginary.

To Szymborska’s mind, it is not only the encounter with grief that marks the failure of language, but also the encounter with the universe in all its magnitude and complexity. In “Sky,” an ontological meditation on visual perception, the speaker contemplates the nebulousness of that which surrounds and constitutes the world. The translators have rendered the term *niebo* as “sky” in this poem, but, as in English, it carries a double meaning: not only the sky but also heaven or the heavens. Initiating the poem with this image of celestial expanse, Szymborska opens the way for questions about the troubled interface between the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Although most of “Sky” is composed in the present tense, Szymborska delivers the first line in the present perfect conditional: *Od tego trzeba było zacząć: niebo* [I should have begun with this: the sky]. When compared with the present tense and indicative mode of the rest of the poem, this line reads like an afterthought; one senses that the speaker does not know how to commence this poem, how to enter into a domain which has no beginning or end.

Immediately following this tentative introduction come two lines which could serve as alternative beginnings to the poem. Devoid of verbs or any defined agent, these lines provide terse, telegraphic descriptions of the way one sees or perceives the sky. Trying to describe the opening through which the viewer apprehends this endless expanse, Szymborska writes: *Okno bez parapetu, bez futryn, bez szyb. / Otwór i nic poza nim, / ale otwarty szeroko.* [A window minus sill, frame, and panes. / An aperture, nothing more, / but wide open]. For lack of a more secure term to designate the threshold between us (sentient beings) and the sky or infinite universe which surrounds us,

Szyborska hazards an attempt with the word “window.” Yet what she means is not exactly a window, nor is it quite an eye; it is rather an aperture lacking the defining limits of any material support. It is wide open, unbounded, a liminal transfer between the viewer and what lies beyond. For Szyborska, this beyond – the sky – is without beginning or end; it is also outside history. One need not look in order to see it, for it is everpresent [*wszecobecne*] “even in the dark beneath your skin.” Together all life forms make up this skyworld, from the lowliest animal to the most enlightened avatar. Pausing to describe a small mole, one of the countless beings which make up this menagerie, she mentions that this creature can be transported by the same rapt bliss which might possess any spirit. Choosing the term *wniebowzięty* [containing the root *niebo* and meaning “enraptured” or “blissful”] to modify the mole, Szyborska recalls the substantive *wniebowzięcie*, that is, sublation or, more literally, assumption into heaven, and so conjoins this small, blind thing with the transcendent body of her title, “Sky.” She implies that, given that the sky, in all its infinity, is also the very stuff of which we are made, any attempt to atomize the universe into discrete particularities would be futile. It cannot be separated into “patches” or “specks.” But the futility of this project – that is the project of language – is part of what Szyborska considers “the human condition.” This preoccupation with such questions links “Sky” to many other poems of hers; indeed, this expansive theme runs through and connects poems from the beginning right up until her latest efforts.

At the middle of “Sky” Szyborska presents the reader with a certain synonym for the sky: she calls it an abyss or *przepaść*. Caught once again by the constraints of language, Szyborska must rely on the Symbolic in her attempt to communicate to the reader something which, to her mind, defies linguistic transposition. Although there are no discrete “objects” since they, too, are composed of sky, Szyborska implies that we believe in our perceptions of them and, out of a profound need to make meaning of the world, attribute to them the properties which will isolate them from the unity of the Imaginary and set them into a specific place on the signifying chain. The speaking voice in this poem also considers itself to be made of the same infinite celestial nothingness: the speaker eats the sky, the speaker excretes the sky, the speaker is constituted by it. It cannot be delineated or separated from the sky. Szyborska writes: *Rzecz, która spada w przepaść, / spada z nieba w niebo* [The object that falls in an abyss / falls from sky to sky]. Made of nothingness, any object, animate or inanimate, cannot really fall into or out of an abyss, for it would only be falling “from sky to sky.”

Together abyss and matter make a “wholeness” [*całość*] which exceeds any means of representation. Given the impossibility of seeing and knowing this totality, however, the only provision for the speaking subject is to try to divide up this abyss, to break it down into separate bodies of “sky” and “earth.” Yet Szyborska adds that, while such symbolic schemas are “not the proper way to contemplate this wholeness,” the oppositional logic they offer allows the subject to situate himself and report his coordinates within a signifying matrix.

While this binary opposition of sky and earth may be nothing more than a construction, at least it allows the speaker to fix himself in space and time, even if only provisionally. For Szymborska's speaker, such a division makes one crucial offer: it lets her "go on living / at a more exact address" where she can be reached promptly if she is sought. Her coordinates consist of two "identifying features": rapture and despair [*Moje znaki szczególne / to zachwyty i rozpacz*]. Yet even as these terms plot the speaker onto the grid of the Symbolic, the meanings of the signifiers "rapture" and "despair" exceed the very order of language which would register them. Like the space which opens out onto the measureless sky at the beginning of the poem, these two terms operate as conduits leading from the subject fixed in language to the amorphous expanse of the Real, an abyss pulsating with agonies and ecstasies.

Whereas in "Elegiac Calculation" and "Sky" Szymborska concentrates on the estranging sense of disbelief which would – in Lacanian terms – cause the subject to drop out of the grid of the Symbolic and enter into the phantasmatic unity of the imaginary, in "Jawa" she underscores the passage of the mourner from the Imaginary to the Real. (Although Barańczak and Cavanagh have translated the title "Jawa" into "The Real World," I shall refer to it by an alternative title, "Of the Real," since the notion of *jaw* calls to mind a nightmarish encounter in which the subject exits from everyday reality.) Following this trajectory into the Real, Szymborska arrives at the point which Lacan considers the second station of his circuit of mourning: the point of rejection, where the mourner labors to "kill off" any residual recollections of the lost object. Szymborska begins "Of the Real" by distinguishing the imaginary world of dreams from what she takes as the order of the Real, remarking that, while dreams can be interrupted or dispelled, the Real is unimaginably dense. Because the images in dreams are murky and ambiguous [*mętne i wieloznaczne / są obrazy w snach*], they can be interpreted in many ways; several of the terms Szymborska uses to express this concept merit closer attention. Instead of employing the word *wyobrażenie* (a conceptual representation of an image, a figment) to describe the images which figure in the world of dreams, she selects the term *obraz* (a picture or painting, a materialized image). Whatever correspondence Szymborska might posit between these two levels of representation and consciousness, the field of the Real, in contradistinction, cannot be mapped onto the signifying schemas of the imaginary and the Symbolic. She maintains that "the real means the real" [*Jawa oznacza jawę*]; referring only to itself, the Real bears no relation to the Imaginary or Symbolic which could be signified or concatenated in a meaningful way. Of interest here is Szymborska's use of the word *oznacza*, translated by Barańczak and Cavanagh as "to mean," which carries several meanings: derived from the verb *oznaczać*, it has the connotations "to mark or indicate," "to denote," or "to delineate." All that the Real can designate, for Szymborska, is itself; it resists the drive to make metaphor. Her choice of the term *oznacza* is striking, because it refers back to another related term from the previous sentence, *wieloznaczne* or "ambiguous," the modifier that she uses to

describe the diverse images which illuminate dreams. Both these terms are built upon the morpheme *znak* or “sign,” but from this common root they diverge into separate meanings. Whereas images from dreams are multiply-signed or polysemic (*wieloznaczne*), the Real can only *a-sign* (*oznacza*) or designate one thing: itself.

Because of this self-referentiality, the Real will always elude any attempt to decipher it. Szymborska calls her Real a puzzle or a riddle, a bewildering enigma which only becomes charged with meaning when juxtaposed to the Imaginary or Symbolic. The term she uses to connote this enigma is *świętsza zagadka*, an expression which Barańczak and Cavanagh aptly translate as “a tougher nut,” conferring a meaning quite close to the Lacanian notion of the “hard kernel” of the Real: *Do snów są klucze. / Jawa otwiera się sama / I nie daje się domknąć* [Dreams have keys. / The real opens on its own / and cannot be shut.”] Real objects do present themselves to us from out of the Real, first being rendered concrete, then precipitating down [*sypią się z niej, wypadają*], in the form of all manner of material objects – report cards, stars, headless caps. Although these things, when worked or linked together, form a kind of rebus, it is one which could never be solved or mastered. (*Powstaje z tego rebus / nie do rozwiązania.*)

For Szymborska, speech and representation are products of the human mind which “without us” would not exist: dreams, despite their apparently phantasmatic character, are actually “not crazy,” since they are produced and therefore ultimately decodable) by the human mind. It is the Real, clinging to the current of every random event and incident with its obstinate grip, which is truly wild (or *szalona* as Szymborska has it), an adjective shot through with the same ecstatic frisson of Lacan’s *jouissance*. Dreams function to smooth over traumas and seal the gaps through which the Real threatens to erupt. While dreaming, we can even resuscitate loved ones who have died, keeping them alive within our hearts and minds. Szymborska writes: *W snach żyje jeszcze / nasz niedawno zmarły, / cieszy się nawet zdrowiem / i odzyskaną młodością* [In dreams our recently deceased / are still alive, / in perfect health, no less, / and restored to the full bloom of youth]. The Real, however, allows for no such whimsy; it lays the corpse in front of us, not even blinking an eye. (*Jawa kładzie przed nami / jego martwe ciało, / Jawa nie cofa się ani o krok.*) Szymborska’s speaker “sees in the flesh” (*widzi na jawie*) the Real in all its facticity.¹²

What is the nature of this encounter with this unthinkable dead weight? In *Desire and Its Interpretation* Lacan posits that the griever’s shock casts him back into the order of language, where he will belatedly search for ways to signify his loss. Here the subject departs from the station of rejection and presses on to the third moment of the mourning circuit, where he returns to the

¹² Of the many Polish constructions incorporating the term *jaw*, some of the more relevant to my argument are: *wydobyć na jaw* (to unearth, exhibit, or expose); *sen na jawie* (waking dream); and *z jawa* (ghost, ghostly).

symbolic identification which already foiled him at the station of estrangement. In this third moment – what Lacan calls reintegration – the mourner engages in the symbolic routines and rituals of mourning, and so evades his horrified disgust of the Real. The collective prescribes such rituals in an attempt to fill the gaps riven into the symbolic order with an amalgam of dirges. “Of the Real” also casts the reader out of the abyss of horror and back into the republic of language, but it does so in a more forceful way. In this poem Szymborska marks out the void which survives the object without consigning the subject to the endless spirals of symbolization. The symbolic activity of mourning may be interminable, the subject may not ever really dissolve his link to the lost object, but in *The End and the Beginning* it still remains possible to delimit this impossibility itself. The voices which animate Szymborska’s poems enact a critical parting or separation – not *from the object* (as is the case in Lacan’s circuit), but rather *from the elegiac mode* in which a phantasmatic afterlife of that object could be sustained. Such a cut terminates what might be the infinite, repetitive symbolization of melancholia. This means that the third term which unsettles the dyad of melancholy and mourning is ultimately the poetic lament itself, as Szymborska demonstrates, for her lament does not release the lost object, but remains faithful to it, without lapsing into the vicious circle of the elegy. Through the formal means of speech, the subject (either the poet or the reader) moves beyond mute melancholic lethargy. *The End and the Beginning* transposes loss into an action, the action of circumscribing loss in speech.

An Unfinished Requiem

If Freud refused to recognize the impossibility of an elegiac calculation in his 1917 study, perhaps a brief letter, written towards the end of his career, suggests that he later came to amend his thesis from *Mourning and Melancholia*. Twelve years after publishing that study, on the ninth anniversary of his daughter Sophie’s untimely death, he wrote his condolences to his colleague Ludwig Binswanger, who himself was grieving a son’s death. Referring to this “deeply moving news,” Freud concedes that, although the most acute state of mourning will eventually subside, the mourner can never be consoled, for he will never find an equivalent substitute for that which he has lost. And this is the sign of real mourning, he writes, the mourning that becomes love. He assures Binswanger with these parting words:

No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.¹³

¹³ Sigmund Freud, “Letter to Ludwig Binswanger, April 12, 1929,” in *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, edited by Ernst L. Freud, translated by Tania and James Stern, (New York: Basic Books, 1960), p. 386.

Whereas the melancholic remains fixated upon the fascinating image of the past, the mourner imagined in *Mourning and Melancholia* reduces the lost object to its signifier, paying respect to this loss through the symbolic rituals of mourning. Yet, as Freud intimates in his letter of solace, neither of these conditions are truly adequate in the wake of real loss. The fidelity to which Freud alludes in this passage is what Lacan would have called the impossible kernel of the object, that which was in the (lost) object "more than the object itself." Here, however, we approach a limit of Lacan's theoretical imagination. Although Lacan does posit that the mourner should merely encircle the resistant core of the lost object, his vision remains a tragic one: the ultimate act entails accepting that nothing can refill the void -- no image, no ritual. It is precisely fidelity, as a mode of memory, which structures Szyborska's unfinished requiems.

Paradoxically, fidelity to the lost object's impossibly resistant core pledges allegiance to redemptive potentials that were only latent in the past. If fidelity to that which remains irrepresentable opens a channel to another future, the refusal to renounce the past sustains the hope for an alternative. *The End and the Beginning* attests to this third mode of memory, the fidelity which takes equal distance from both melancholia and finished mourning. At its most fundamental, Szyborska's parting does not constitute a gesture of resignation; it cuts out an aperture through which to view the expanse of a redemptive future.