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Wisława Szymborska and the Importance of the Unimportant

*I am no longer certain
that what is important
is more important than the unimportant.*

— “No Title Required”

By BOGDANA CARPENTER For the second time in sixteen years, a Polish poet has been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. This is not a coincidence: the decision of the Swedish Academy to bestow the world's most prestigious literary award on Czesław Miłosz in 1980¹ and on Wisława Szymborska in 1996 is tribute to the exceptional vitality and prominence of contemporary Polish poetry. More than anyone else, it is Czesław Miłosz who gave Polish poetry its international visibility, both as a poet and translator and its enthusiastic promoter in America. It is Miłosz's seminal anthology *Postwar Polish Poetry*, first published in 1965, that contained—together with twenty other poets—the first English translations of Szymborska's verse. But Miłosz's significance is even deeper, and lies in the impact he has had on the shape of postwar Polish poetry. More than any other twentieth-century poet, Miłosz has created a model and a yardstick against which younger poets have to measure themselves. Wisława Szymborska is the one who has done so with the greatest success.

To most readers outside Poland, Szymborska's Nobel Prize came as a surprise. Long recognized in her native country as a leading voice in contemporary poetry, Szymborska has not achieved the same popularity in the English-speaking world enjoyed by other poets of her generation such as Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Miron Białoszewski. Not a political poet (though some of her early poems were written according to the precepts of socialist realism), Szymborska drew little attention at a time when Western interest in Eastern Europe had a largely political motivation. She defied the “mold” used to describe literature “behind the iron curtain.” However, a number of English translations of

her poetry had appeared: Miłosz's anthology was followed in 1981 by the translations of Magnus Kryński and Robert Maguire, published as *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems*;² Adam Czerniawski brought out *People on a Bridge*³ in England in 1990; and in 1995 there appeared the comprehensive collection *View with a Grain of Sand*, a set of award-winning translations by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh. It is only with this most recent publication that Szymborska's poetry came fully into the view of the English-speaking audience.

In contrast, Szymborska's reputation in Poland has been steadily growing ever since her third volume, *Wotanie do Yeti* (Calling Out to Yeti), appeared in 1957. The publication of each successive volume—*Sól* (Salt; 1962), *Sto pociech* (No End of Fun; 1967), *Wszelki wypadek* (Could Have; 1972), *Wielka liczba* (A Large Number; 1976), *Ludzie na moście* (1986; Eng. *People on a Bridge*), and *Koniec i początek* (The End and the Beginning; 1993)—has been an important poetic event, winning the author an ever-widening audience. Szymborska's ability to speak in simple language has made her poetry accessible and attractive to an unusually broad spectrum of readers.

Paradoxically, Szymborska's very simplicity and directness present the greatest challenge to a critic, and probably also account for a relative dearth of studies about her poetry. The analytic language of literary criticism often seems powerless and inadequate when dealing with these deceptively transparent poems; it is heavy-handed and clumsy in comparison with the lightness and agility of the poetic lines. Attempts at description and analysis frequently end in a frustrating realization of failure and the necessity to go back to the poems themselves, to let the poet speak with her own voice and defend herself against the awkward approximations of the critic. An important and integral part of her poetics, Szymborska's apparent ease conceals a conscious and determined effort. Her simplicity is careful, a result of struggle, and is hard to trace since the poet covers her tracks: “I borrow weighty words, / then labor heavily so that they may seem light.”⁴

Szymborska is a poet of philosophical reflection. Like most Polish poets of her generation, she avoids

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personal effusions and an emotional tone. Absent as a person, she is nevertheless strongly present as a voice—a voice which is unmistakably her own and impossible to confuse with that of any other poet. It is a voice of a Cartesian consciousness and of a cognitive subject, a voice that narrates and at the same time reflects upon the meaning and implications of its own narrative. Often the very structure of Szyborska's poems reproduces the cognitive process, and the poems become a direct and unrheterical form of "thinking aloud."

It has come to this: I'm sitting under a tree
beside a river
on a sunny morning.
...
And since I'm here
I must have come from somewhere,
and before that
I must have turned up in many other places. (175)

They may search memory, as in "May 16, 1973": "One of those many dates / that no longer ring a bell. // Where I was going that day, / what I was doing—I don't know" (199). Most often, they pose a question: "Maybe all this / is happening in some lab? / Under one lamp by day / and billions by night?" (201).

Szyborska's reflection rarely takes the form of categorical statements, and this is especially true of her later poetry. Reluctant to provide definitive answers, the poet prefers a margin of uncertainty. It is the initial premise of Descartes's formula, the "dubito" that describes best her philosophical attitude. But unlike the French philosopher, the Polish poet is unwilling to cross the threshold of uncertainty and step into the bright light of certitude: "certainty is beautiful, / but uncertainty is more beautiful still," she admits (197). Szyborska's reluctance is not the result of a lack of moral determination, but rather an expression of openness. It is an awareness that truth is complex and ambiguous, that reality is thick and consists of a myriad details, all of which need to be taken into account. In Szyborska's version of the well-known biblical story, Lot's wife looks back not only out of curiosity but with a number of different motives: regret, fear, anger, shame, the desire to go back. The poet shuns the didactic clarity of the biblical account in favor of a more tentative conclusion, but one closer to the complexity of psychological truth: "It's not inconceivable that my eyes were open. / It's possible I fell facing the city" (102).

In another poem Szyborska praises ignorance: "We're extremely fortunate / not to know precisely / the kind of world we live in" (213). What appears to be an ironic, tongue-in-cheek statement has in fact a deeper meaning, for the choice of ignorance is tan-

amount to an acceptance of the human condition, together with all its temporal, spatial, and cognitive limitations. It is a choice of the human over the inhuman, the concrete over the abstract, the particular over the universal. Szyborska's island of Utopia, where "all is elucidated" and dominated by "Unshaken Confidence," is uninhabited. Footprints point toward the sea, "As if all you can do here is leave / and plunge, never to return, into the depths" (128). Written in the 1970s, the poem can be read as an allusion to communist ideology and a depiction of the totalitarian state. It functions beyond its political context, however, and expresses the author's dislike of easy solutions and categorical assertions. Avoiding anything that might smack of dogmaticism or didacticism, Szyborska prefers to conclude her poems with an admission of ignorance or doubt: "I am," she says, "a question answering a question" (174).

This philosophical option explains also her predilection for paradox, a stylistic figure that undermines accepted truths and leaves questions open. For example, "To change so that nothing changes," reads a line from the poem "A Feminine Portrait." Elsewhere we find: "You expected a hermit to live in the wilderness, / but he has a little house and a garden, / surrounded by cheerful birch groves, / ten minutes off the highway. / Just follow the signs" (114). In "Elegiac Calculations," a metaphysical poem about death, each statement is followed by a parenthetical clause in the conditional mode.

How many of those I knew
(if I really knew them),
men, women
(if the distinction still holds)
have crossed that threshold
(if it is a threshold)
passed over that bridge
(if you can call it a bridge)—

The poem concludes on a note of uncertainty: "I've been given no assurance / as concerns their future fate" (188).

One of the most striking features of Szyborska's poetry is that reflections are prompted not by abstract ideas but by concrete and ordinary experiences: the sight of the sky, sitting on the shore of a river, looking at a painting, a visit to the doctor. Like Białoszewski, although in a different idiom, Szyborska extols the everyday and the ordinary: her "miracle fair" is made up of barking dogs, trees reflected in a pond, gentle breezes, and gusty storms—the world "ever-present." At the theater she is moved by a glimpse of actors caught beneath the curtain more than by tragic tirades. The very triviality of these experiences betrays a philosophical *parti pris* on the part of the poet, who questions and

at the same time reverses the accepted opinion of what is important and what is unimportant. The usual hierarchies are stood on their head. Is the death of an insect less important than our own? Only if seen from "high above," that is from a human perspective, according to which "important matters are reserved for us" (103). Metaphysics are not above everyday reality, and need not be sought in the "starry night" of the philosophers; they pervade every aspect of our existence. In a series of paradoxes, Szymborska questions the division into the high and the low, the meta- and the physical, the earth and the sky.

Even the highest mountains
are no closer to the sky
than the deepest valleys.
There is no more of it in one place
than another.
The sky weighs on a cloud
as much as on a grave.
A mole is no less in seventh heaven
than the owl spreading her wings.
The object that falls in an abyss
falls from sky to sky. (173)

In Szymborska's poetry, reality is "democratized," and "anniversaries of revolutions" are much less prominent than "ants stitching in the grass" and "the pattern of a wave." Szymborska pitches ontology against history and politics, the private and the individual against the public and the collective, and here she reveals a deep affinity with Czesław Miłosz. Common and humble reality is put forward at the expense of history and politics: "Even a passing moment has its fertile past, / its Friday before Saturday, / its May before June. / Its horizons are no less real / than those that a marshal's field glasses might scan" (175).

For Szymborska, man's life is short and marked by suffering and death. No historical event can alter or has altered this basic existential condition: "Nothing has changed. / The body still trembles as it trembled / before Rome was founded and after, / in the twentieth century before and after Christ" (151). On the contrary, history has only added to human suffering through wars and oppression. In her early and well-known poem "Breughel's Two Monkeys" she wrote:

This is what I see in my dreams about final exams:
two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill,
the sky behind them flutters,
the sea is taking its bath.
The exam is History of Mankind.
I stammer and hedge.
One monkey stares and listens with mocking disdain,
the other seems to be dreaming away—
but when it's clear I don't know what to say

he prompts me with a gentle
clinking of his chain. (3)

History is not a manifestation of the human spirit, or an extension of the individual and man's projection into time, but a force inimical to man. A deeply humanistic poet, Szymborska sees history as the principal source of evil. Disrespectful of human life, it fails to account for the number of its victims, as it "rounds out skeletons to the nearest zero" ("A Hunger Camp at Jasło"). It provides fertile ground for hatred, as in the poem "Hatred": "Gifted, diligent, hard-working. / Need we mention all the songs it has composed? / All the pages it has added to our history books? / All the human carpets it has spread / over countless city squares and football fields?" (182).

The sharpest edge of Szymborska's irony is reserved for politics. In an age which she ironically describes as "political," everything becomes "food" for politics.

To acquire a political meaning
you don't even have to be human.
Raw material will do,
or protein feed, or crude oil,
or a conference table whose shape
was quarreled over for months:
Should we arbitrate life and death
at a round table or a square one. (150)

A pacifist, Szymborska sides with ordinary people against history: "I prefer the earth in civilian clothes. / I prefer conquered rather than conquering countries. / . . . / I prefer Grimm's fairy tales to the first pages of newspapers" ("Possibilities").

Szymborska has a deep respect for reality and a sense of wonder at its diversity and inexhaustible richness. This once again brings her close to Miłosz: "So much world all at once—how it rustles and bustles!" (79). This is accompanied by a realization that there is a disparity between the unlimited vastness of reality and the limitations of the poetic imagination: "Four billion people on this earth, / but my imagination is still the same" (95). The mathematical value of π comes closer to expressing the infinite richness of the universe than does the poetic imagination: "It can't be comprehended *six five three five* at a glance, / *eight nine* by calculation, / *seven nine* or imagination, / not even *three two three eight* by wit, that is, by comparison" (129). Art can seize only individual facts and existences, a fraction of reality.

On the hill where Troy used to be
seven cities have been discovered.
Seven cities. Six too many
for a single epic poem.
What can be done with them? What can be done?
The hexameters are bursting.
(*"Population Census"*)

The poet describes her own imagination as one that is moved not by “large numbers” but by what is particular, by that which can be described only in the singular. Even her dreams, she concedes, are not populous and “hold more solitude than noisy crowds.” With a touch of irony, she speaks of herself as “a mouse at the foot of the maternal mountain,” as a “jester” who prefers “Thursday over infinity” (119). Poetry, marked by insufficiency and imperfection, is a selection, a renunciation, a passing over in silence, and a “sigh” rather than a “full breath.” Like anyone else, the poet is unable to step outside her own “I,” her own particular existence. Being herself, she cannot be what she is not: “My apologies to everything that I can’t be everywhere at once. / My apologies to everyone that I can’t be each woman and each man. / I know I won’t be justified as long as I live, / since I myself stand in my own way” (92).

Faced with a task that is impossible, Szyborska makes a choice—to describe what is immediate and accessible, the ordinary and the small: “Inexhaustible, unembraceable, / but particular to the smallest fiber, / grain of sand, / drop of water — / landscapes” (19). After all, every particle reflects the whole, every drop of water contains the entire universe: “A drop of water fell on my hand, / drawn from the Ganges and the Nile, // from hoarfrost ascended to heaven off a seal’s whiskers, / from jugs broken in the cities of Ys and Tyre” (28).

In the opposition between reality and art, life and intellect, the poet declares herself on the side of reality and life. Ideas are most often pretexts to kill, a deadly weapon whether under the guise of an artistic experiment (“Experiment”), a political Utopia (“Utopia”), or ideological fanaticism (“The Terrorist, He Watches”). Even poetry is “a revenge of a mortal hand” (“The Joy of Writing”). Szyborska sides with reality against art and ideology, and this choice situates her in the mainstream of postwar Polish poetry alongside Miłosz, Herbert, and Białoszewski.

Despite its familiarity and ordinariness, Szyborska’s poetry is neither relaxing nor comforting. It is permeated by a consciousness of death, temporariness, and human vulnerability.

Nothing’s a gift, it’s all on loan.
I’m drowning in debt up to my ears.
I’ll have to pay for myself
with my self,
give up my life for my life.
. . . .
Every tissue in us lies
on the debit side.
Not a tentacle or tendril
is for keeps.
The inventory, infinitely detailed,

implies we’ll be left
not just empty-handed
but handless, too. (206)

Not only do we live on credit, but life is a constant improvisation, a rehearsal in an unfamiliar setting, a play without a script. What is more, the rehearsal is also the only performance we are granted, and all our actions—regardless how tentative—acquire the permanence of a perfective tense: “And whatever I’ll do, / will turn for ever into what I’ve done” (“Instant Living”).

In Szyborska’s world, man is alone and distinct from the world of nature and objects; the division between the human and nonhuman world is unbridgeable, as in “Conversation with a Stone.”

I knock at the stone’s front door.
“It’s only me, let me come in.
I want to enter your insides,
have a look round,
breathe my fill of you.”

“Go away,” says the stone.
“I’m shut tight.
Even if you break me to pieces,
we’ll all still be closed.
You can grind us to sand,
we still won’t let you in.” (30)

The ontology of objects is beyond man’s reach, and giving them anthropomorphic features is a misunderstanding. Consciousness is a human attribute; nature is unaware of itself. The sense of time, place, and purpose, colors, shapes, sounds, and names are products of human consciousness alone.

We call it a grain of sand,
but it calls itself neither grain nor sand.
It does just fine without a name,
whether general, particular,
permanent, passing,
incorrect, or apt.

Our glance, our touch mean nothing to it.
It doesn’t feel itself seen and touched.
And that it fell on the windowsill
is only our experience, not its. (135)

There is a contrast between nature’s pure externality and its lack of self-awareness, on the one hand, and man’s tortured consciousness on the other: “Our skin is just a coverup / for the land where none dare go, / an internal inferno, / . . . / In an onion there’s only onion / from its top to its toe” (120). Because it lacks consciousness, nature is spared existential despair and metaphysical anxiety, and seems to us to be edenic. The communication between man and the external world is one-way, from human consciousness toward external reality, from man to objects. But the two realms remain distinct and strange to each other.

Szyborska's poetry is one of existential terror, but what makes it even more terrifying is that it avoids spectacular decorations and a tragic tone. Szyborska's tone is matter-of-fact, constantly kept in check: "if joy, then with a touch of fear; / if despair, then not without some quiet hope" (144). The tragic content is attenuated by humor, wit, and an abundance of verbal games and puns: "Life, however long, will always be short. / Too short for anything to be added" (144). The situations are trivial, and the effect is often a result of contrast between the triviality of the scene and the metaphysical dimension of the event.

A dead beetle lies on the path through the field.
Three pairs of legs folded neatly on its belly.
Instead of death's confusion, tidiness and order.
The horror of this sight is moderate,
its scope is strictly local, from the wheat grass to the
mint.
The grief is quarantined
The sky is blue. (103)

Death is banal and inscrutable in its mystery. The room of a suicide gives no clues to the man's tragedy.

I'll bet you think the room was empty.
Wrong. There were three chairs with sturdy backs.
A lamp, good for fighting the dark.
A desk, and on the desk a wallet, some newspapers.
A carefree Buddha and a worried Christ.
Seven lucky elephants, a notebook in a drawer.
You think our addresses weren't in it? (122)

In one of her most popular and finest poems, "Cat in an Empty Apartment," the poet describes

grief—and the sense of emptiness after the death of someone close—from the perspective of a cat.

Die—you can't do that to a cat.
Since what can a cat do
in an empty apartment?
Climb the walls?
Rub up against furniture?
Nothing seems different here,
but nothing is the same.
Nothing has been moved,
but there's more space.
And at nighttime no lamps are lit. (189)

Wisława Szymborska is not a prolific writer, and her poetic oeuvre consists of only some two hundred poems. Each poem, however, is a masterpiece. In crystalline and carefully wrought language, with a tone that is unpretentious, this poetry speaks to everyone and is about everyone. The ostensibly "unimportant" questions it poses prove to be the only questions that truly matter.

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¹ On Miłosz, see *WLT* 52:3 (Summer 1978), pp. 357–425, and *WLT* 55:1 (Winter 1981), pp. 5–6.

² Wisława Szymborska, *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems*, trs. Magnus J. Kryński and Robert A. Maguire, Princeton (N.J.), Princeton University Press, 1981. For a review, see *WLT* 56:2 (Spring 1982), p. 368.

³ Wisława Szymborska, *People on a Bridge*, tr. Adam Czerniawski, London, Forest Books, 1990. For a review, see *WLT* 66:1 (Winter 1992), p. 163.

⁴ All quotations referred to by page number come from Wisława Szymborska, *View with a Grain of Sand*, trs. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1995. Citations without page references are my own translations.

