



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

THE POLISH
REVIEW

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF POETRY: WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA'S "WIELKA LICZBA"

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Source: *The Polish Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2/3 (1986), pp. 137-147

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#) on behalf of the [Polish Institute of Arts & Sciences of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25778205>

Accessed: 18/03/2014 04:36

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JOHN FREEDMAN

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF POETRY: WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA'S *WIELKA LICZBA*

Wisława Szymborska's poetry is — above all — marked by a striking universality which allows for widely variant readings. In his review of Szymborska's 1976 collection,¹ *A Great Number (Wielka liczba)*, Stanisław Barańczak primarily stressed the sociological aspect of her poetry as it is revealed in her use of language. Her language and images, he argues, are nearly always concrete and situational. In his introduction to her 1977 *Poetry (Poezje)*, a retrospective collection, Jerzy Kwiatkowski, relying heavily on a vocabulary sprinkled with philosophical terminology, presents her primarily as an existentialist poet, though he does admit, "...that doesn't mean at all that Szymborska's poetry is some kind of theoretical treatise on the various possibilities of the means of being laid out in verse."² Czesław Miłosz, who once wondered whether she might be a poet of limited range, now also ranks her as a philosophical poet whose "conciseness is matched only by Zbigniew Herbert."³ Szymborska maintains a much more modest appraisal of her own works. When asked in a 1975 interview to comment on the critics' naming of her as an existential poet, she replied, "The label is flattering, but also disconcerting. I do not engage in great philosophy, only modest poetry."⁴ In fact, poetry itself — or to be more exact, the paradox of poetry's possibilities and limitations — is frequently the focus of Szymborska's work. She stated her creative approach to this in the same interview. After concurring with a dialog from Tacitus in

¹ Stanisław Barańczak, "Posążek z soli," in *Etyka i poetyka* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1979).

² "... To jednak nie znaczy wcale, że poezja Szymborskiej jest jakimś—rozpisany na wiersze—teoretycznym traktatem o różnych możliwościach sposobu istnienia," in Jerzy Kwiatkowski, Introduction to *Poezje* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1977), 13. All translations of critical comments are my own.

³ Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley: University of California, 1983), 485.

⁴ "Etykieta pochlebna, ale i kłopotliwa. Nie uprawiam wielkiej filozofii, tylko skromną," poezję, in Krystyna Nastulanka, "Powrót do źródeł" in *Sami o sobie*, (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1975), 305.

which he claims that poetry has exhausted itself and its further development is impossible, she indicates — one detects an ironic glint of a smile in the corner of her eye — that much poetry is now being written on this very subject. She goes on to say, “When I hear about a crisis in art or music or the theater, I am inclined to believe it. But in poetry, where I myself endeavor to do something, there is still a great deal to be said.”⁵ We will see that Szymborska has a great ability to create something of substance out of what seems to be nothing. Additionally, at least in her early work, she can also be a very personal poet. Such poems as “I Am Too Near” (“Jestem za blisko”), “Returns” (“Powroty”), and especially “Unexpected Meeting” (“Niespodziane spotkanie”), and “Born of Woman” (“Urodzony”) are examples of her lyrical poetry at its best, yet other such poems which are presumably “personal” in nature such as “Family Album” (“Album”) and “Laughter” (“Śmiech”)⁶ reach beyond the boundaries of the personal and acquire a universal significance.

The title poem from Szymborska’s *A Great Number* is a central work in her oeuvre for in it she combines many of the elements which characterize her poetic output as a whole. Despite Szymborska’s own concerns that the themes of her poetry may be too diverse,⁷ there are certain poetic concerns which recur in most of her best work. A close reading of her poem “A Great Number” will illuminate some of the most important of these.

The primary theme which we will focus on is the role of poetry itself, that is, on its capabilities and limitations. The poet selects isolated elements of reality for poetic illumination, discovering fresh perceptions of the world, in essence, giving meaning to the world by recreating it in verse. Her limitations consist primarily in the fact that the nature of poetry requires that it be selective in its choices of subject, thereby condemning to oblivion all that the poet either refuses or is unable to see. The poet’s power, then, is also her major weakness.

The first eight lines of “A Great Number” serve in one way or another to reveal the fundamental dichotomy which exists between masses and individ-

⁵ “Kiedy więc słyszę o kryzysie w malarstwie czy muzyce lub teatrze, skłonna nawet jestem w to uwierzyć, ale w poezji, w której sama usiłuję coś zrobić, jest jeszcze bardzo wiele do powiedzenia.” See note 4, page 301.

⁶ All of these poems can be found in *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems by Wisława Szymborska*, tr. Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire (Princeton University, 1981), with the exception of “I Am Too Near,” which can be found in *Postwar Polish Poetry*, ed. Czesław Miłosz (Berkeley: University of California, 1983). All translations of and references to other poems are from the Krynski/Maguire edition, unless otherwise noted.

⁷ “You spoke of the varied content of my poems—indeed, they are perhaps too varied. [...] It is simply that a great many things interest me.” (“Mówiła Pani o różnorodnej zawartości moich wierszy—istotnie są one chyba dość różnorodne. [...] Po prostu bardzo wiele rzeczy mnie interesuje”). See note 4, page 302.

uals. Such a contrast, as we will see, can be understood to exist on several levels. As Barańczak has shown, this may be seen as a discussion of the individual's struggle to protect his or her individuality against the deadening effects of society. From a different point of view it may be seen to be the poet's appraisal of her own artistic powers, limitations, and the very nature of what her art can do. Or it may be seen on a more abstract philosophical level where uniqueness and individuality are shown to be the only things which can stimulate imagination and intellect. Szymborska creates repeated images, both linguistic and imagistic ("[imagination] flitting through darkness like a flashlight beam" "[moja wyobraźnia] Fruwa w ciemnościach jak światło latarki"), or conceptual ("[my imagination] does not do well with great numbers" "źle sobie radzi z wielkimi liczbami"), which deepen the perception of duality and contrast between the disparate elements. 1.1 and 1.2 establish this opposition immediately by contrasting the four billion inhabitants of the earth with the individuality of the lyrical "I's" imagination. 1.3 and 1.4 further develop the gulf between them by indicating the inscrutability of great numbers and the fact that uniqueness or particularity is the only thing capable of moving the poet's imagination. Her use of the word "touch" to indicate the effect that uniqueness has on imagination implies a two-fold significance. Not only does uniqueness have the ability to intellectually touch imagination, but it also has the capability to "touch" it emotionally. Thus, while imagination "does badly with great numbers," it may become intimately involved with individual elements which are isolated and extracted out of them.

While this ability of imagination to comprehend uniqueness and individuality at least to some degree is perceived to be "positive" (i.e., productive), it is also greatly limited. Of all the potential "particularities" which exist unilluminated in the darkness, the imagination, like a flashlight, is capable of illuminating only the first face it comes upon at the edge of the crowd. A random choice, as it were. Many of Szymborska's poems deal with the nature of random selection as a concept important not only in poetry, but in every day life as well. Such poems as "The Terrorist, He Watches" ("Terorysta, on patrzy"), "Wonderment" ("Zdumienie"), and "There But for the Grace" ("Wszelki wypadek") all focus on this problem.⁸ As 1.7 and 1.8 indicate, the remaining "faces" in the crowd must remain in total

⁸ This concern of Szymborska's is not limited to her poetic work alone. She is also the author of numerous reviews of books on widely varying themes, and when asked whether she approaches her critical reading according to any organized plan, she replied, "No. Sometimes I select a book about butterflies or dragonflies, sometimes a brochure about renovating the home, while still other times I might pick up a school textbook." ("Nie. Czasem biorę książkę o motylach czy ważkach, innym razem broszurę o odnawianiu mieszkania, a jeszcze kiedy indziej sięgam po podręcznik szkolny"). See note 4, page 304.

obscurity. The poet's flashlight, her ability to illuminate, is weak ("fruwa") and can neither bring life to, nor give meaning to all those faces which remain somehow incomplete and unrealized since they cannot be incorporated into the poet's recreated world. By repeating the basic theme of these eight lines in different circumstances, the poet creates an organic set of correspondences which imbue certain words with added meaning within the framework of the poem. The world is divided into two disparate parts: the one vs. the many, and individual areas of illumination vs. darkness. Using the images which have been employed to this point, we can draw up the following correspondences:

mass	individual
dark	light
oblivion, non-thought, unregret	illumination

Each of these words carries a metaphorical meaning over and above its common lexical meaning. Thus, as we will see subsequently, poetry and memory will take their places in the second set of correspondences.

These first eight lines set the stage for a sort of internal polemic which will be waged within the poet's consciousness. Despite the fact that the poet's imagination "does badly with great numbers" and has the capability to "illuminate" individual manifestations of those great numbers, there has, as yet, been no judgemental implication on her part. However, the final three lines of the first stanza indicate that there is a dilemma in this dichotomous relationship which, if it does not go as far as a genuine moral struggle, at least takes on the character of mild regret.

In 1.9 the poet invokes the memory of Dante, telling us that even that poet was unable to do more than be selective. This is a sort of apology from the lyrical "I" which supports the idea that there is no intent to imply good or bad to what is written, but that such a break-down begins to force itself on the poet and reader alike. Included in this apology is the poet's regret—and self-justification—that imagination is unable to illuminate more, that it can only rely on happenstance and its own weak powers to bring to light what little it can. The invocation of Dante serves a two-fold purpose: First, that even a poet of Dante's supreme stature was subject to this law of randomness and limitation (i.e., so the present poet cannot be held morally or artistically responsible for this same insufficiency); and second, it is, of course, a thematic reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which throughout Hell, Purgatory and Paradise the medieval poet literally selects at random the faces which he will illuminate in poetic form, while leaving the vast majority of the rest to continue wandering lost in oblivion. He too, after all, occasionally apologizes to those souls he must pass over, knowing that each in his own way is worthy of poetic attention.

1.10 and 1.11 address this inadequacy with a rhetorical question. If even Dante was powerless before this illumination of poetry, and if one (presumably the poet) is not a Dante, what more can be expected even if one has the support of all the muses? The lines serve to heighten the sense of precariousness of the poet's role and the powers of imagination, which we may now begin to understand as a metonymical replacement for poetry. There is, then, a sense of powerlessness on the part of the poet which co-exists with the very real power of being able to recreated the world by perceiving it anew.

The first lines of the second stanza are an indirect and inconclusive reply to the rhetorical question which has preceded. 2.1 implies that the self-comparison with Dante is not of primary importance. The poet's aspirations to literary immortality through poetic recreation of the world is a premature concern, for, as she asks in 2.2, a more pressing matter is first to determine whether she is fully participating in life, and if so, is that itself sufficient. She does not define what she means by "sufficient," but it seems clear enough that the question posed here is whether living a full life is enough to give life meaning. 2.3 responds immediately: It has never been enough and it is even less so in the context of the modern world (Szymborska more laconically says "now"). Poetry, then, is not written to achieve immortality for the author, but is written to flesh out and give meaning to the life that the poet and her readers lead. Poetry is an integral part of life, for without it, life is impoverished of meaning. Szymborska has spoken of this in part in "Travel Elegy" ("Elegia podróżna"). Here the exotic wonders of the world encountered by a traveler are nearly inscrutable because the viewer has no way of preserving the experience. She writes:

All is mine but nothing owned,
nothing owned for memory,
and mine only while I look.

No sooner remembered than uncertain
are the goddesses of their heads.

(Wszystko moje, nic własnością,
nic własnością dla pamięci,
a moje, dopóki patrzę.

Ledwie wspomniane, już niepewne
boginie swoich głów.)

Memory alone, then, is not enough. As we see in "A Great Number," it is poetry—a form of creatively organized memory—which serves to preserve these elements of reality by recreating them in a new context, in a poem.

After establishing the primary function of poetry, the poet returns to her original theme of poetry's selective nature. 2.4–2.6 continue the poet's recognition of her limitation and echo her "apology" in the Dante line above. Although "choosing by rejecting" is the only possible way in which a poet can observe life, and thus hope to give it meaning, that does not absolve her of the "guilt" of omission forced upon her by random selection of subjects and objects for description which are far too great in number to all be included in her work. Ironically, by openly stating this limitation, and by mentioning the density, numerousness and insistency of that which is omitted, she does succeed to a certain degree in including that which she claims is beyond her powers to include.⁹

The overall implication of these lines is that life cannot become fully realized until it has been perceived by an artistic eye. This is the cause of the poet's remorse, since she realizes she is able only to give meaning to very small, randomly selected elements of the world. All that she is unable to incorporate into her poetic vision remains in a Dantean Limbo of unrealized being. Whether she means that all these "black masses" do not exist for her personally, but may exist for themselves, or whether she means that anything she cannot incorporate into her poetic vision does not exist at all is not clear. Presumably she intends to say that she is incapable of speaking for anyone but herself—her extreme subjectivity has already been well-established—and therefore her concern is with the world as it exists (or does not) in her own perceptions.

2.7 echoes 2.4, where the poet indicated that "there is no other way" to write verse but to select by rejecting. Here she recognizes the undesirability of her limitations ("losses indescribable" ["neopisanych strat"]) but still, these indescribable losses bring her a "little verse, a sigh" (wierszyk, westchnienie"). Her use of the diminutive for "verse" has a possible two-

⁹ Artur Sandauer has touched on this in his article, "Reconciled with History" (Pogodzona z historią) in *Poeci czterech pokoleń* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977): "Affirming that a subject doesn't exist, we give it an imaginary existence and reveal the process of its manifestation in imagination. [. . .] Even her individual sentences are so constructed that they negate, while simultaneously affirming," and, "A real entity may become literature, just as a literary entity may materialize in reality." ("Twierdząc, że przedmiot nie istnieje, powołujemy go do istnienia imaginacyjnego i ukazujemy proces jego powstawania w wyobraźni. [. . .] Nawet poszczególne jej zdania są tak skonstruowane, że negując, jednocześnie afirmują [295]," and, "Postać rzeczywista może wkraczać do literatury albo też—literacka materializować się w rzeczywistości [297]").

Szyborska herself has eloquently elaborated on the theme in other of her poems. "Gratitude" ("Podziękowanie") is a poem of "love" for those whom the poet does not love; "Atlantis" ("Atlantyda") describes a place of which the author knows nothing, but which through poetry, acquires a perceptible existence; "Station" (Dworzec") (see *The New Polish Poetry*, ed. Milne Holton and Paul Vangelisti [University of Pittsburgh 1978]) recounts everything that "happened" at a meeting which never took place.

fold interpretation. If we are to keep in mind the apologetic vision she has sometimes expressed to this point, her use of "wierszyk" here may be intended to minimize the importance of her poetic work in relation to all that she must leave unsaid. On the other hand, if we are to keep in mind that only through poetry is the poet able to attribute meaning to her world, the diminutive could be interpreted here as an endearing term. Similar is the case of "a sigh," which may be seen as a spontaneous expression on one hand of sorrow or regret, or on the other of relief. It would seem that both interpretations are not only possible, but necessary within the framework of the poem.

2.8 and 2.9 continue the same ambiguity since both contain equally possible variant readings. In 2.8 the poet tells us that her response to a "clamorous calling" is a whisper. The Polish "gromkie powołanie" may mean "calling" both in the sense of vocation, or in the sense of a "call to arms." Once again, in reference to the Dante lines, the former possibility is perfectly permissible. In terms of the second possibility, this line would seem to contain a rather overt sociological statement that the poet will not heed boisterous demands to choose as subjects for her poetry that which is demanded by fashion, culture, ideology, etc. Her insistence on answering in a whisper would seem to be her refusal to join Majakowski's intemperate oath to "shout at the top of my voice" about subjects which have been chosen for her. This line may be read in still a third way on the more abstract level which has been noted previously: Against the thunderous call of seemingly endless reality which remains hidden in oblivion, the poet's response is barely but a whisper. This may be the poet's further recognition that she is unable to do anything but resurrect infinitesimally small amounts of that reality from oblivion, and must leave the vast majority to wallow in unknowing. In 2.9 the poet maintains a characteristic ambiguity about whether she is unwilling or unable to give expression to everything she must pass over in silence: "tego nie wypowiem" may be translated as "I will not say" (cf. Krynski/Maguire) or "I cannot say."

2.10 invokes the Polish proverb of the mountain which gives birth to a mouse. Once again the poet repeats the major visual and conceptual image of the poem: the great and the small. But for the first time she recognizes the positive, or at least necessary, qualities of the "great." That is, while only in the miniscule, the separate elements, chipped off from the enormous block of "mass" (oblivion) is life comprehended and given meaning, its existence in turn is unthinkable and even impossible apart from the massive, overwhelming whole.

2.11 continues, but transforms, the image which is created in the previous line. Sand, here has three functions: 1) an endless, unbroken expanse; 2) the enormity of numbers of grains of sand in comparison to the size of a paw's scratch in them; 3) the impermanence of sand, its changeability. For the first time the poet introduces the word "life" into the poem. Significantly,

rather than compare it with something great and exalted, she equates it with the miniscule, temporary, incomplete images which have predominated in the poem to this point.

There now arises another paradox in the images and concepts of the poem, the two sides of which do not necessarily cancel each other out. Earlier, smallness and individuality were portrayed as "positive" in relation to enormity and mass. Here, however, one tends to see the image of life as merely a scratch or two in sand as a "negative" quality which is characterized by insignificance, temporality and impermanence. It would seem that both elements are present and intended by the poet. In other words, it is just that very smallness and temporality of life which allows it to become a subject of art, thereby achieving for it an "immortality" or "permanence" which is not naturally a part of it. Meaning can be imparted to this wistful thing (life) because of its very smallness, isolatedness, individuality, since it is capable of being isolated from the ungraspable mass of which it is a part. Nonetheless, the primary impression left by this line is a sense of frustration and perhaps loss, brought on by a realization of the smallness of life.

Until this point in the poem all images with the exception of the reference to Dante have been either strictly poetic or abstract. In the third stanza, however, the first "realistic" or tangible images are introduced. But they are not presented in a realistic manner, for they are introduced by means of a dream-state.

Once again, 3.1 repeats the basic theme of isolation/individuality. The poet's dreams—like her imagination, and thus her poetry—are not peopled "as they should be." (Compare the "lack of population" in her dreams with the four billion people on the earth in 1.1). Again the poet has created a poetic image which may justifiably be interpreted in more than one way. This confusion is caused by her use of "as they should be." It is conceivable that this is a reference to 2.8 where she insisted that she is not susceptible to the pressures of a "great call" or "calling." If this is so, 3.1 is a further statement of rebelliousness on the poet's part. But the "should be" may also be interpreted as an expression that even that level of poet's "creativity" (dreams), which one might expect to be free from the selectivity of her "waking" talent, is subordinate to that primary principle. That even her subconscious and unconscious thoughts must be selective implies that the necessity of limitation in any sort of perceptive process is fundamental. The concept of dreams certainly is a reference to the idea of imagination in the first lines of the poem, and now by extension and allegory, to poetry.

3.2 repeats the main theme in different terms and also furthers the possible sociological reference, which has been noted above, by pitting the masses against individuality.

The remainder of stanza three (3.3–3.7) examines the poet's dreamworld and relates the primary elements of a single dream, all the while continuing

the themes that have been established in the first two-thirds of the poem. 3.3 not only begins the "narration" of the dream, but is also a reference to the powers of dream (and thus as we have noted, of poetry as well) to overcome reality. That is, dream, memory, poetry and imagination all have the power to reverse or overcome the logical demands of life as we know it. They have the power to violate natural laws, thus creating their own new natural laws and a universe unto themselves.¹⁰

3.4–3.5 continue the theme of isolation and individuality in the images of the single hand and the empty house. The hand is even further isolated in that the poet does not give us the slightest clue as to whom it belongs. This hand has been severed from the whole organism, so to speak, just as the poet must always perceive only incomplete elements of reality broken off from the whole. Whether this is a hand of the long dead visitors trying to enter the empty home or the hand of the poet who will exit that house two lines later is unclear and probably beside the point. What is important is that the "handle" signifies a door handle which allows access to this "empty house, overgrown with the attachments of an echo" ("Obrasta pusty dom przybudówkami echa"). Echo here is certainly a metonymical replacement for memory and in turn, we can probably say, for poetry.

3.6–3.7 continue the dream image and make a final statement of the poet's freedom and independence. The valley into which she runs in "no one's" because it is empty, unpopulated, unlike the modern world in which she must live (a reference again to the poem's first line). And being quiet and unpopulated as it is, it is anachronistic because its emptiness has an almost primordial quality to it. One senses that the poet runs into this quiet, empty valley with a sense of joy if not even relief. The valley seems to symbolize for her escape even from her own past (the long dead visitors of 3.3) and her own poetic work (assuming we are correct in calling "echo" of 3.5 a replacement for poetry). On one level, this quiet empty valley, then, is for her the clean slate on which she has the opportunity to create a new poetic universe. On a more realistic level it is a place where she can go to be away from expectation, prejudice and the cumbrances of her past and the modern populated world.

¹⁰ Szymborska elaborated on this idea in an earlier poem, "Memory at Last" (*Pamięć nareszcie*), in which she wrote: "Memory at last has what it sought./My mother has been found, my father glimpsed./I dreamed up for them a table, two chairs. They sat down./Once more they seemed close, and once more living for me." (*Pamięć nareszcie ma, czego szukała./Znalazła mi się matka, ujrział mi się ojciec./Wyśniłam dla nich stół, dwa krzesła. Siedli./Byli mi znowu swoi i snowu mi żyli*). Memory and dream, then, have the power to create, or at least recreate, life. To bring into being a new world, a new reality. Not only are memory and dream related to art in that the poem itself serves as the medium for expressing the dream memory, but the final two lines of the poem draw a direct correlation with the art of painting: "I woke up. I opened my eyes./I touched the world as if it were a carved frame." ("Zbudziłam się. Otworzyłam oczy./Dotknęłam świata jak rzeźbionej ramy"). The "real" world, then, is only the frame which holds within it the greater reality of dream, memory, art and poetry.

The final two lines transfer us back to the poet's waking state. Now, instead of subjectively perceiving the dream-state, she objectively views it from the outside. The quiet valley into which she ran while in the dream-state is reflected in the expanse ("przestrzeń") of 4.1. This idea of reflection is even graphically illustrated in the final words of the poem which are phonological mirror-images of each other: "we mnie—nie wiem." Both the expanse of the waking state and the valley of the dream-state are reminiscent of the darkness of 1.5 which is vast, amorphous and unformed until its minute component parts are illuminated by the poet's meager flashlight. Thus, the darkness which existed outside the poet earlier, now exists within. There has occurred a *rapprochement* between the outer and inner universes. But, as she states in the poem's final words, she does not know where this inner space comes from. The mystery of her raw creative material remains, despite the fact that she has succeeded earlier in giving it at least a certain meaning through selective perception of it through poetry.

We have seen that "A Great Number," representative of much of Szyborska's work, touches upon several of her common themes: 1) The element of chance or fate, that is, the random quality of the universe, and, more importantly, the random quality of the poet's perception of it; 2) The potential endlessness of the universe, its vastness which cannot be comprehended in its entirety, but can only be comprehended by perceiving selected minor elements of it; 3) As a corollary, the importance that microscopic elements of the universe play in making up reality: Thus, at least on perceptual grounds, meaning is possible only because of smallness, individuality and solitude; 4) Poetry as a means to achieving what understanding is possible. Poetry is a repository for and preserver of life's individual elements. Consequently, poetry is the surest element for giving meaning to the things and experiences of life, at least insofar as meaning can be found to exist at all, and insofar as it can be grasped by the poet.

Such qualities make Szyborska in many ways an heir to the tradition of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, both in terms of his concept of "the concrete entity" ("istnienie poszczególne") and his attitude toward the illuminating capabilities of art. The opening lines from her "Wonderment" are a striking rephrasing of Witkiewicz's own wonderment as to "Why am I this and not another being, why am I in this time and not another?"

Why to excess then in one single person?
 This one not that? And why am I here?
 On a day that's a Tuesday? In a house not a nest?
 In skin not in scales? With a face not a leaf?

(Czemu w zanadto jednej osobie?
 Tej a nie innej? I co tu robię?
 W dzień co jest wtorkiem? W domu nie gnieździe?
 W skórze nie łusce? Z twarzą nie liściem?)

Szymborska, however, is content to ask the questions alone, content to phrase them in such a way that they take on a significance of their own, content to make of them art and poetry. As Witkacy perceived art to be the final means to self-understanding after the collapse of religion and philosophy, Szymborska seems to say in her poetry that only the artist's eye has the capability to make sense of the world construct. While there may be no hidden *a priori* meaning to be discovered in the phenomena that surround us, meaning can be attributed to the things and experiences of the world by questioning and rephrasing them in a clever and "beautiful" way. It is at this point that Szymborska's poetry achieves a certain affinity with that of her contemporaries, Tadeusz Różewicz and Miron Białoszewski, perhaps even more so than with Zbigniew Herbert and the other "moralists." Like Różewicz, she is skeptical of her powers at the very same time that she recognizes their importance. Echoing the same apology which she expresses in the Dante lines of "A Great Number" she writes in "Under a Certain Little Star" ("Pod jedną gwiazdką):

I apologize to coincidence for calling it necessity.
 I apologize to necessity just in case I'm mistaken.
 Let happiness be not angry that I take it as my own.
 Let the dead not remember they scarcely smoulder in my memory.
 I apologize to time for the muchness of the world overlooked per second.

(Przepraszam przypadek, że nazywam go koniecznością.
 Przepraszam konieczność, jeśli jednak się mylę.
 Niech się nie gniewa szczęście, że biorę je jak swoje.
 Niech mi zapomną umarli, że ledwie tlą się w pamięci.
 Przepraszam czas za mnogość przeoczonego świata na sekundę).

Like Różewicz, she both affirms and negates at the same time: negates by what she says, and affirms by the fact that she says it. But in such lines she goes beyond Różewicz's minimalism and achieves something akin to Białoszewski's latent spiritualism, wherein the bare-bones images of stoves reduced to "grey naked holes" seem to grow out of Różewicz's bankrupt world of ruin, somehow renewed and imbued with a new significance. Szymborska's is a poetry of healing which, while understanding the unpleasant nature of the disease, nevertheless finds reason to rejoice.