

SUBJECTIVE COURSE OF POLISH LITERATURE

On Wisława Szymborska

Essay by Michał Rusinek

Many years ago, I was frequently hitch-hiking around Europe. In Italy, drivers were always asking where we came from. When I answered that we came from Poland – they exclaimed: “Polonia! Boniek!”, because at that time, this football player was the most well-known Pole in Italy. I haven’t been hitch-hiking for a long time now, but it seems to me that for over a dozen years, Italians might associate Poland most of all with Wisława Szymborska. Anyway, Wisława Szymborska is one of the most recognizable Polish women not only in Italy, and her poetry – translated into several dozen languages – travels around almost the entire world, even though she herself didn’t like travelling.

What is the phenomenon of the popularity of a person who pursued probably the most elite and esoteric of all literary arts (in comparison to the egalitarian football)? It cannot be fully explained. Once, Szymborska received a letter from Texas, from a retired firefighter. He wrote that he’d never read poems (“firefighters rarely read poetry”), but once he read a fragment of her poem on the subway. Probably during the “Poetry in Motion” campaign. He wrote down her name, so difficult to pronounce for an American. He went to a bookshop and bought one of her books. He read it and decided to write only one sentence to her: “You wrote exactly what I was thinking my whole life, but I couldn’t express it”. This one sentence was, I think, more important for her than many insightful, academic reviews.

What is poetry for? It provides us with a language to describe the world and allows us to understand ourselves better within this world. It puts us off our thinking routines. In the ocean of empty chatter surrounding us everywhere, it gives us a word which is distilled, precise, and pure. Italians say that Szymborska brought to them a voice which they hadn’t had in their poetry before. Even now, when many years have passed since the poet died, her poetry books sell very well in Italy, and meetings devoted to her poems are well attended, also by young people. They believe that, for example, the poem “Writing a Résumé”, intended as a bitter satire on the socialist bureaucracy, speaks about their struggles with



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contemporary bureaucracy and their wait for the potential employers to react to their résumés.

Szyborska made her debut in 1945. According to the legend, when she was going to the office of “Dziennik Polski” daily with her first poem, she said to herself that if the editors accept it – she would become a poet, and if they don’t – she would illustrate books. She had a gift for it. She did illustrate one children’s book, “Mruczek a butach” by Adam Włodek, and an exercise book for English by the famous Jan Stanisławski, privately a father of her secondary school colleague. Later, by the end of the 1960s, she would start making collages, which she was sending to friends as postcards until the end of her life. But the editors accepted the poem, although they shortened it considerably. Its title was “I am Looking for a Word” – a wonderful title for a debut poem by someone who is still searching for their own means of poetic expression. But, first of all, the poem was already very mature, and secondly, it spoke about searching for a word to describe what people did to other people during the war and occupation. Szyborska belonged to the generation of poets whose youth was marked by the war. This theme appears rather rarely in her work, because – as she said herself – from the whole generation the best expression of this experience was given by Tadeusz Różewicz.

Even though her oeuvre belongs to the so called Polish school of poetry, and she is placed next to e.g. Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Różewicz himself, she – opposite to them – did not have any followers. She was a unique phenomenon, and her voice was established almost from the start. She was accepted as a member of the Polish Writers’ Association on the basis of a typescript of a poetry collection yet to be published. But then 1949 came, and socialist realism was proclaimed in Poland as the only literary style to pursue. Her collection didn’t contain such poems, so it wasn’t published. Whether it was rejected by the publishing house or it was Szyborska herself who decided it was not a good time to publish those poems – we don’t know. It was published, in accordance with her will, after her death, under the title “Black Song”. You can see the influence of avant-garde poets in it, but you can also hear the voice of mature Szyborska.

Her two first volumes of poetry – “That’s Why We Are All Alive” and “Questioning Yourself” – contain mostly socialist realist poems. Szyborska believed in the ‘new reality’, which communism began to build after the war. Even though she explained her motives



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many times and even though she changed her views rather quickly and started writing completely different poems – until the end of her life she was reproached for supporting the dictatorship. There is even a theory that her entire oeuvre after the first two volumes is an attempt to deconstruct what she wrote there.

“Calling Out to Yeti”, published during the so called thaw in 1957, is considered her proper debut. In that and the following 10 poetry books she does not write about humanity anymore, but about a single human being and their entanglements in the world. She is a poet of several, maybe over a dozen recurring themes. She is a poet of details on which she focuses, as if she was looking through a microscope. She doesn’t consider man to be the “lord of all things”, but often in the centre of her attention there is an object, an element of nature or an animal. She’s interested in the role of chance in our life, she’s interested in all kinds of possible worlds, she’s interested in memory and the tricks it plays on us. If she writes about history, it’s never an abstract history, but always a history of somebody or something. She’s capable of being curious about the world. She avoids large quantifiers.

Probably the most interesting of her post-Nobel volumes is “Colon”, published in 2005. The colon is not a title of a poem, but the last word – and at the same time the last character – in the final poem of the volume; a self-referential poem entitled “In Fact Every Poem”. It speaks about how poems are created, what is the minimum number of ingredients they need: “it’s enough if within eyeshot/ an author places temporary hills/ and makeshift valleys”. You can use this poem to teach poetics, descriptive and normative. It ends very characteristically: “if in black on white .../ question marks are placed,/ and if in response,/ a colon:”. Those are the punctuation marks of poetry. The first is the mark of doubt and curiousness. It rules dialogue; sentences which do not contain the only proper truths, but encourage others to speak their truth. And the other one, the one from the title, is a key to Szyborska’s poetics, because after it comes her favourite figure of enumeration: “Wednesday, bread and alphabets ... Roses”, “chairs and sorrows,/ scissors, tenderness, transistors, violins,/ teacups, dams and quips”. After the colon, that which is particular can appear, that which is available to our senses, countable – and true because of that. Her previous volume “Moment” ended with the poem “Everything”: „Everything –/ a bumptious, stuck-up word./ It should be written in quotes./ It pretends to miss nothing,/ to gather, hold,



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contain, and have./ While all the while it's just/ a shred of gale". Details are the opposite of everything.

In those two important poems, closing two following poetry volumes by Szymborska, there appear two opposite stylistic figures: *distributio* and enumeration. We use the first one when we have the view – or at least an illusion of the view – of the whole, within which we enumerate parts it consists of, all of them. It's a figure which believes in perspective, which allows us to see everything and boast about it. It's a figure of monographs, academic discourse and cognitive optimism. Whereas enumeration is the figure of chaos. It's a sequence of randomly selected objects, a kind of juxtaposition. Szymborska seems to say that we have no right to use the perspective of *distributio* and impose order upon the world in this way. The perspective we were given is one allowing us only to enumerate, to describe the particular. Poetry is not an encyclopaedia trying to encompass the world in its totality. Poetry encompasses the world in the multitude of its details – always at random, in fragments, temporarily and casually. That's why the colon should be its punctuation mark.

But the basic figure of her poetry is irony, i.e. the figure of distance. It allows us to look in a different way not only at the world, but also at the language, which it uses to speak about the world. An ironist is not a satirist, he's not a mocker. An ironist is someone who not only looks at the world around him, but also at himself looking at the world around him – because there's no irony without self-irony.

Irony is also a figure of vigilance against everything we got used to because of convenience; against the so called common sense, which is a category dulling vigilance; against every fundamentalism and self-righteousness; against the atrophy of curiousness, which should always accompany us; curiousness about the miraculous ordinariness of the world. Szymborska writes: „I might have been myself minus amazement,/ that is,/ someone completely different”. In one of the interviews she clarified her understanding of irony: “My irony is mundane, it is ... democratic. There is a lot of compassion in it, from which I do not exclude myself. I try not to put myself above others, I want to talk to them as an equal, I don't want to tell them what to do”.

In 1996, the Swedish Academy awarded Wisława Szymborska the literary Nobel Prize “for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality”. She received the news about the Nobel in Zakopane, in



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the residency house “Astoria”. At once journalists came there and wanted to convince her to give an interview. And she didn’t like interviews. More, it was a form of contact with the readers the least liked by her. She believed you have to think longer over many things, and interviews – especially for TV or radio – didn’t provide such an opportunity.

In a letter to the secretary of the Swedish Academy Sture Allén she wrote: “It is with an emotion that is difficult to express that I received the news that the Swedish Academy awarded me with the Nobel Prize in Literature. No writer creates for herself, but rather has the desire to share her emotions and thoughts with even the smallest group of readers, who understand and value her for specific reasons. My creative ambitions never reached far and never aspired for international honours and awards. Therefore, I consider the fact that my poetry has been honoured with an award of the highest prestige in the world as a beautiful and astonishing gift of fate. This is a great joy not only for me, but for my native country as well. Thank you!”.

When Irish poet Seamus Heaney received the literary Nobel a year earlier, Szymborska breathed a sigh of relief. The chance of another European poet receiving the prize in the following years was very slim. Friends joked that Szymborska was probably the only poet in the world who didn’t want to receive the Nobel Prize – because she was afraid of the commotion the award would bring into her life. Heaney gave an interview to Jacek Żakowski in which he congratulated Szymborska. But he also warned her about problems awaiting her now: “The biggest problem is mail. After receiving the verdict a huge flood starts. You need to establish an office. You need to have a secretary answering thousands of calls. Between announcing the verdict and the new year the flood will submerge your apartment and block your telephone, and the fax machine will work 24/7. Everyone you’ve met since almost your birth will write, call, send telegraphs and faxes. Friends from school, kindergarten, backyard, everyone ... will reappear as if by some miracle. As if you went to Heaven. As if you suddenly appeared in an abstract centre of your entire life. As if you stood in a huge stadium full of more or less familiar, friendly human faces”. The interview ends with characteristic words: „Poor, poor Wisława”.

A year later Szymborska wrote a letter to him: “Luckily, the ‘Nobel year’ is behind me. When a year ago you wrote what I should expect and you shared your own experience, I suspected you exaggerated a little. But no, you were absolutely right – confusion, noise,



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not a moment of peace, unexpected duties, travels, heaps of letters, lots of calls, trouble and distress. That time was not good for writing, or even reflection, and that's what we live for. I hope you're working in peace now and write your beautiful poems”.

She was writing to her friends at that time: “I'm like a cat, petted to death. Here, they want me to drive some nails into banners, there, they want to award me some title, or name some school after me... I say 'no' to everything – I want to be a regular person as soon as possible, and not a 'personality'”. She dreamed about going back to normal, about writing poems.

One of the responsibilities of the Nobel Prize winner is preparing and giving a lecture. It also wasn't her favourite form of contact with the public; contrary to many Nobel Prize winners, she had no experience in the academy. She was a poet and a translator. She wrote poems and feature articles on books, in a column entitled “Optional Reading” (published as a whole only after her death, in 2015). On 7 December 1996, Wisława Szymborska gave a lecture which was the shortest in the history of the award, but at the same time widely commented upon. One fragment was about lack of knowledge:

“This is why I value that little phrase ‘I don't know’ so highly. It's small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended. If Isaac Newton had never said to himself ‘I don't know’, the apples in his little orchard might have dropped to the ground like hailstones and at best he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto. Had my compatriot Marie Skłodowska-Curie never said to herself ‘I don't know’, she probably would have wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families, and would have ended her days performing this otherwise perfectly respectable job. But she kept on saying ‘I don't know’, and these words led her, not just once but twice, to Stockholm, where restless, questing spirits are occasionally rewarded with the Nobel Prize. Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating ‘I don't know’. Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift that's absolutely inadequate to boot. So the poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paperclip by literary historians and called their ‘oeuvre’ ...”.



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There are two important themes in this fragment: connection between literature and science and lack of knowledge as a force driving towards knowledge or interpretation, even if temporary and makeshift. Lack of knowledge which awakens curiosity, so important for the poet.

She disliked appearing in public. But she disliked even more when, in her presence, an actor or an actress read her poems with “stage exaggeration”. In such cases, she preferred to read herself. And she read exquisitely. Not only because her poems were written for reading – even if not aloud, even if just in one’s head, but always with respect for breath. In both older and more recent recordings, you can hear her distinctive, resonant voice, not hurrying anywhere and devoting the proper amount of attention to each word. Interpreting, but just a little, in such a way to make it sound like a part of a conversation.

A poem was a conversation for her, an encouragement to talk more, always an opening, never a categorical placement of a full stop. It was always about something – important, painful, interesting, paradoxical, funny, meaningful. Sometimes topical, but she was the least satisfied with those poems. Her topics needed time to rest, to wait awhile. Szymborska didn’t remember titles of her poems, but she remembered their subjects. When she was selecting poems to read at public meetings, she would say for example “the one on the terrorist”, “the one on happy love”, “the one about the cat”.

She didn’t write books of poetry. She wrote poems. When there were about twenty of them – she arranged them, sometimes throwing one out; she was coming up with the title, but only at the very end. The volume “Here” was at first to be called “Details” [Polish: ‘Szczegóły’], but she changed the title when she realized how unfortunate it would sound when someone entered a bookshop and said: “Have you already seen ‘Szczegóły’ by Szymborska?”.

She came up with only one title before having the poems ready, “Enough”. It was to be the title of her last book of poetry. For a while it was supposed to be the title of “Here”, but Szymborska realized she wanted to write more, that probably there would be another volume. When she returned home from the hospital, two months before she died, I brought her a folder with printouts of her last thirteen poems. She didn’t want to arrange them anymore. After a moment, she gave me the folder back without a word. It would become “Enough”. An unfinished volume, published after her death by a5 publishing house.



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It wasn't easy to speak with her about writing, inspiration, poetic vein. She dreamed phrases she later wrote down. She put them in a black notebook, which I found on her desk once, when she went to Zakopane. Judging from the style of writing, she had to start the notebook by the end of the 1960s, beginning of 1970s. She wrote down ideas for poems, titles, phrases, rhymes, metaphors. She crossed out the ones she already used. Some had to wait for a long time: one of the early entries is "To Ecclesiastes: why do you say that everything already was, when even you wasn't". There's no poem with this motif. But she probably used it – quarter of a century later – to write her Nobel lecture: "I sometimes dream of situations that can't possibly come true. I audaciously imagine, for example, that I get a chance to chat with the Ecclesiastes, the author of that moving lament on the vanity of all human endeavours. I would bow very deeply before him, because he is, after all, one of the greatest poets, for me at least. That done, I would grab his hand. "There's nothing new under the sun': that's what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were born new under the sun. And the poem you created is also new under the sun, since no one wrote it down before you".

The notebook is now deposited in the archive of Wisława Symborska Foundation. The Foundation was established in accordance with the poet's will. It presents a poetry award, gives scholarships and aids, and it oversees the poet's oeuvre. In 2023, on the 100th anniversary of Szymborska's birth, thanks to the Foundation a critical edition of her collected poems will finally be published.

And now, when I look through the notebook and at the uncrossed poetic ideas, I think how many more poems could have been created.

Fragments of poems and the Nobel lecture translated into English by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak



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Appendix

Some key terms related to the life and work of Wisława Szymborska

COLLAGES – “cut-and-paste-cards”, in Polish “wyklejanki”, which Szymborska was sending to her friends since the 1960s. They were an expression of her wit and at the same time of her artistic talent;

DELIGHT, DESPAIR, LOVE, DEATH, METAPHYSICS (WITHOUT RELIGION) – some of the most often recurring themes in Szymborska’s poetry;

DETAIL – a key element of the stylistic figure of enumeration used by Szymborska. Enumeration is a figure of chaos, describing the particular, always at random, in fragments, temporarily and casually, never as a whole or totality;

HUMOUR – a key tool used by Szymborska in her poetry, closely related to irony and distance; wit and humour were also clearly visible in less “serious” aspects of her art, i.e. limericks and collages;

IRONY (& SELF-IRONY) – the basic figure in Wisława Szymborska’s poetry, the figure of distance. An ironist is someone who not only looks at the world around him, but also at himself looking at the world around him – because there’s no irony without self-irony;

LIMERICKS – a five line, usually humorous form of verse, which Szymborska claimed was her favourite genre of poetry;

SOCIALIST REALISM – a political and aesthetic doctrine introduced by the communist government in Poland in 1949, proclaiming culture and art as a tool used to help spread the communist ideology and power. It forced artists to either abandon their own voice and create works in accordance with the imposed rules or to stop publishing at all;



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