

“WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA: A POET FOR OUR TIMES”

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Call to Gather: “Some People Like Poetry” by Wislawa Szymborska
Some people—
that means not everyone.
Not even most of them, only a few.
Not counting school, where you have to,
and poets themselves,
you might end up with something like two per thousand.

Like—
but then, you can like chicken noodle soup,
or compliments, or the color blue,
your old scarf,
your own way,
petting the dog.

Poetry—
but what is poetry anyway?
More than one rickety answer
has tumbled since that question first was raised.
But I just keep on not knowing, and I cling to that
like a redemptive handrail.¹

Sermon

Wislawa Szymborska’s personality is quite different from other poets whom I have focused on in sermons. Unlike Walt Whitman, for example, Szymborska is not prone to churning out anonymous reviews and biographies designed to make her appear super-human. Indeed, she is downright modest compared not only to Whitman but to anyone. She attributed her 1996 Nobel Prize for Literature to sitting on the right sofa: she sat on the same sofa two previous Nobel winners sat on just before winning their prizes.² Also unlike Whitman, she doesn’t see the poet as a heroic icon. She’s a little more realistic about the poet’s place in the world. Listen to a couple lines from a poem in which she

¹ Wislawa Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected 1957-1997* translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1998), p. 227.

² <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/poetry/story/0,6000,343414,00.html>.

compares poets to boxers: “O Muse, where are *our* teeming crowds?/Twelve people in the room, eight seats to spare...”³

And unlike Marge Piercy, she hasn’t written an autobiography. To my knowledge there also hasn’t been a biography written about her. I suspect this is because she is a very private person. After she won the Nobel Prize she couldn’t wait to shrink back from the limelight. She generally avoids literary gatherings. I think more than anything she is shy.

So we don’t know much about her. For the most part today, we’ll have to let her poetry do the talking. This should work fine because her poetry speaks for itself. It certainly speaks to me.

Here’s what we do know about Wislawa Szymborska. She was born in western Poland in 1923. In 1931 she moved to Krakow, where she has lived ever since. During the Nazi occupation of Poland, she attended illegal classes and joined an underground theater troupe. Her first poem—“I am Looking for a Word”—was published in 1945. Her early poems were undistinguished—by choice but mostly for self-preservation she tried to conform to the “social realism” required by the Communist Party censors. In fact, she disclaims her early work. A disaffection with the Communist rulers of Poland and an easing in censorship in 1957 opened the door for her to write real poems.

This all presents an interesting context for her poetry. In Nazi-controlled and then Soviet-controlled Poland, she saw a lot of horrible things. For seeing the very worst of the twentieth century, she could hardly have had a better spot. Here’s a poem she wrote in the waning years of the twentieth century. It is about what was supposed to happen in the once promising century, and it’s about what really happened:

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.
It will never prove it now,
now that its years are numbered,
its gait is shaky,
its breath is short.

Too many things have happened
that weren't supposed to happen,
and what was supposed to come about
has not.

Happiness and spring, among other things,
were supposed to be getting closer.

Fear was expected to leave the mountains and the valleys.
Truth was supposed to hit home
before a lie.

A couple of problems weren't going
to come up anymore:

³ Szymborska, p. 51.

hunger, for example,
and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect
for helpless people's helplessness,
trust, that kind of stuff.

Anyone who planned to enjoy the world
is now faced
with a hopeless task.

Stupidity isn't funny.
Wisdom isn't gay.
Hope
isn't that young girl anymore,
et cetera, alas.

God was finally going to believe
in a man both good and strong,
but good and strong
are still two different men.

"How should we live?" someone asked me in a letter.
I had meant to ask him
the same question.

Again, and as ever,
as may be seen above,
the most pressing questions
are naive ones.⁴

In her speech awarding the Nobel Prize to Szymborska, the Swedish Academy member Birgitta Trotzig talked about how post-war Polish poetry emerged as “a sewage treatment plant for mutilated and contaminated language.”⁵ What a wonderful metaphor! In the Nazi and the Soviet propaganda, what was false became true. Two plus two equaled five. The language was mutilated and contaminated by manipulation and falsehood—almost beyond repair. Szymborska and other Polish poets, first underground and then above ground, took the language that had been so assaulted and manipulated by the Nazis and the Soviets, and cleaned it up—just like a sewage treatment plant handles another kind of human waste. The main thing they did was tell the truth. Just telling the unvarnished truth was a revolutionary act—and it was a sign of hope. Undoubtedly these truthful words helped chip away at the Soviet tyranny in Poland, the place where the Soviet Empire first began to crack. It's important to understand that Szymborska's

⁴ Szymborska, pp. 198-199.

⁵ <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1996/presentation-speech.html>.

poetry started with what Trotzig called an “experience of catastrophe, the ground caving in beneath her.”

Though her poetry is grounded in the catastrophes of the twentieth century, it doesn't get stuck there. Her poetry is not just full of horror and anguish—though she does that well. She brings to her poetry what one critic calls a “warm and non-malicious irony.”⁶ She also brings a playful, humorous quality to it even as she looks at the world and all its problems with such very clear and honest eyes. I think this is what I like best about her poetry. Even as it tells the truth about life, I have to laugh.

Here's a poem that illustrates this well. It's called “Life While You Wait.” I can relate to the ironic truth the poem contains about life: we don't have the opportunity to rehearse our role ahead of time!

Life While-You-Wait.
Performance without rehearsal.
Body without alterations.
Head without premeditation.

I know nothing of the role I play.
I only know it's mine, I can't exchange it.

I have to guess on the spot
just what this play's all about.

Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.
I can't conceal my hayseed manners.
My instincts are for hammy histrionics.
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.
Extenuating circumstances strike me as cruel.

Words and impulses you can't take back,
stars you'll never get counted,
your character like a raincoat you button on the run—
the pitiful results of all this unexpectedness.

If I could just rehearse one Wednesday in advance,
or repeat a single Thursday that has passed!
But here comes Friday with a script I haven't seen.
Is it fair, I ask
(my voice a little hoarse,
since I couldn't even clear my throat offstage).

You'd be wrong to think that it's just a slapdash quiz

⁶ <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/poetry/story/0,6000,343414,00.html>.

taken in makeshift accommodations. Oh no.
I'm standing on the set and I see how strong it is.
The props are surprisingly precise.
The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.
The farthest galaxies have been turned on.
Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere.
And whatever I do
will become forever what I've done.⁷

This certainly captures the feeling I have on plenty of days! How many days, for example, contain a surprise that comes from out of nowhere and upends not only that day but weeks and months and maybe even years? How often things happen for which we are completely unprepared!

And here's another poem that couches clear-eyed truth about the human condition in wonderful, wry humor and irony:

"A Contribution to Statistics"

Out of a hundred people

those who always know better
--fifty-two,

doubting every step
--nearly all the rest,

glad to lend a hand
if it doesn't take too long
--as high as forty-nine,

always good
because they can't be otherwise
--four, well maybe five,

able to admire without envy
--eighteen,

suffering illusions
induced by fleeting youth
--sixty, give or take a few,

not to be taken lightly
--forty and four,

living in constant fear
of someone or something

⁷ Szyborska, pp. 169-170.

--seventy-seven,

capable of happiness
--twenty-something tops,

harmless singly,
savage in crowds
--half at least,

cruel
when forced by circumstances
--better not to know
even ballpark figures,

wise after the fact
--just a couple more
than wise before it,

taking only things from life
--thirty
(I wish I were wrong),

hunched in pain,
no flashlight in the dark
--eighty-three
sooner or later,

righteous
--thirty-five, which is a lot,

righteous
and understanding
--three,

worthy of compassion
--ninety-nine,

mortal
--a hundred out of a hundred.
Thus far this figure still remains unchanged.⁸

Another aspect of Szyborska's poetry that speaks to me is her relentless understanding that none of us really knows very much about anything. This is a basic part of the human condition, though many of us are tempted to pretend otherwise. In her

⁸Szyborska, pp, 263-264.

Nobel lecture, she talked about how much value she places on the little phrase “I don’t know.” This phrase is small, she said,

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 stopped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto...

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...⁹

In her poem “Utopia,” she depicts Utopia as an island where you know everything:

Island where all becomes clear.

Solid ground beneath your feet.

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.

The Tree of Understanding, dazzlingly straight and simple,
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.

The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

Echoes stir unsummoned
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.

⁹ <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1996/szymborska-lecture.html>.

Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.¹⁰

So this is the true nature of life: it is unfathomable. We may pretend we're living on the all-knowing island, but that is pure fantasy. We can't live there. No one can really live there, no matter how much we might like to.

Finally, Szymborska brings to her poetry an appreciation for the good in life. This good can even be found even in life's catastrophes. "My identifying features," she writes in one poem, "are rapture and despair."¹¹ She leavens the despair with rapture as well as humor. She does this especially by noticing and celebrating the miracle in the ordinary. She pays attention to ordinary language and to the ordinary world. In her Nobel lecture, she noted that in poetry

nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud
above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all,
not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world.¹²

Nothing is usual or normal. Nothing—or nobody—is to be taken for granted.

I'll close with one of my favorite poems, "Miracle Fair," which celebrates the miracle in the ordinary:

The commonplace miracle:
that so many common miracles take place.

The usual miracle:
invisible dogs barking
in the dead of night.

One of many miracles:
a small and airy cloud
is able to upstage the massive moon.

¹⁰ Szymborska, p. 173.

¹¹ Szymborska, pp. 232-233.

¹² <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1996/szymborska-lecture.html>.

Several miracles in one:
an alder is reflected in the water
and is reversed from left to right
and grows from crown to root
and never hits bottom
though the water isn't deep.

A run-of-the-mill miracle:
winds mild to moderate
turning gusty in storms.

A miracle in the first place:
cows will be cows.

Next but not least:
just this cherry orchard
from just this cherry pit.

A miracle minus top hat and tails:
fluttering white doves.

A miracle (what else can you call it):
the sun rose today at three fourteen a.m.
and will set tonight at one past eight.

A miracle that's lost on us:
the hand actually has fewer than six fingers
but it's still got more than four.

A miracle, just take a look around:
the inescapable earth.

An extra miracle, extra and ordinary:
the unthinkable
can be thought.¹³

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¹³ Szyborska, pp. 216-217.