

## WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA AND MODERNISM IN POLAND

By Włodzimierz Bolecki

1

Let us start with a short calculation: Szymborska has published some 300 poems so far. And how many pages of commentaries have been published to those poems? If we take into account the several books, hundreds of reviews and dozens of articles, we would probably arrive at several thousand pages of commentary. We might then draw the conclusion that every poem by Szymborska has already been analyzed, interpreted or quoted several times over. In sum, everybody who writes about Szymborska must be repeating something that somebody else has already observed. I must therefore declare that I am indebted to every critic of Szymborska's work.

Now, let us look at Szymborska's work from a different angle. When characterizing the evolution of Polish post-war poetry, literary experts mention several authors whose works mark the most distinctive conceptions of poetic language. Years ago, Jan Błoński contrasted the poetry of Julian Przyboś (considered avant-garde) with that of Czesław Miłosz (considered post symbolic). Later on, Miłosz was regarded as in opposition to Miron Białoszewski (who was fascinated by the mechanisms of language). Today, such comparisons acquire new names. The turning-points in Polish poetry are said to be marked by Bolesław Leśmian, Julian Przyboś, Czesław Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert and Miron Białoszewski. How remarkable that this map of artistic extremes in Polish poetry does not include the name of Wisława Szymborska! And - moreover - nobody seems to be surprised.

This is the paradox with which I would like to begin.

Szymborska attracts critics by her masterly language and intellectual originality. But, at the same time, her work - on the artistic level - does not clearly contrast with any other types of poetry written in Polish, such as the work of the poets I have just mentioned. Seen from this perspective, Szymborska's work does not belong to any trend, group or school; neither does it form a homogenous poetic model. It cannot be located at the crossroads of any other types of poetry. Its place is to be found "in between" extreme artistic propositions, while - at the same time and all scholars agree on this - her poetry is wholly unique and cannot be compared to any other in Poland.

2

The subject of my lecture is Szymborska's place in the framework of Polish

modernism. For a historian of Polish literature, this will prove extremely complex for a number of reasons. Firstly, in Polish literary research there is still no well-rooted meaning for the term "modernism", and so every use of that word will provoke misunderstanding and controversy.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, in research on Polish poetry there are no patterns to which - given the topic as formulated - one might refer. Thirdly, Wisława Szymborska's poetry is alive, it is developing before our very eyes, and so every attempt to analyze it must presume a fragmentary and superficial approach. In the Polish scholarly literature on the subject there is only one book where Szymborska's work is shown in a broader comparative perspective. I have in mind the book by Arent van Nieuwerkerken, entitled *Ironic moralists*.<sup>2</sup> In this extraordinary work the author interprets the works of Cyprian Norwid, Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Stanisław Barańczak and Wisława Szymborska by referring them to the problems of Anglo-American modernism - especially that represented by Wystan Hugh Auden and Thomas Stearns Eliot. Nieuwerkerken's work is exceptional in Polish literary research, but at the same time it makes us realize a crucial problem: it is easier to write about Szymborska's links with Anglo-American modernism than with Polish modernism.

At this point somebody might well ask: is the difference so very great? Anglo-American modernism is commonly treated as a model for all other modernisms, so Polish modernism could simply be seen as one of its variants. My perspective is entirely different. I have already explained it in several articles, so I shall not repeat myself here. I would merely like to recall the main thesis.<sup>3</sup> Despite the common assumptions and concepts of modernism, the differences between national modernisms have often been greater than their similarities. This concerns especially the differences between eastern and western European modernism, which result from their different literary traditions, but predominantly from their distinct historical experiences. When trying to define the place of Szymborska's poetry in the framework of modernism in Poland, I take an entirely different path from that indicated by Nieuwerkerken in his eminent book. I shall not be arguing with his approach. My viewpoint will be complementary, although it will lead to different interpretative hypotheses.

### 3

In trying to define the place of Szymborska's poetry on the map of Polish modernism, we have to start from the essential fact that the starting point of her poetry is the experience of World War II and so-called socialist realism. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Włodzimierz Bolecki, "Modernism in Poland: The Troublesome Subject" in *Swedish-Polish Modernism. Literature - Language - Culture*, ed. by Małgorzata Anna Packalen & Sven Gustavsson, KYHAA Konferenser 56, Stockholm 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Arent van Nieuwerkerken, *Ironiczny konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu*, [*Ironic Moralists. Modern Polish Metaphysical Poetry In The Context of Anglo-Saxon Modernism*], Universitas.

<sup>3</sup> See my article "Postmodernising Modernism" in *From Norwid to Kantor. Essays on Polish Modernism dedicated to Professor George Malcolm Hyde*, ed. by Grażyna Bystydzieńska and Emma Harris, Warszawa 1999.

former experience differed entirely between eastern and western Europe. The latter experience - socialist realism - was unknown to modernists in the West. Critics of Szymborska's poetry link both these experiences primarily to the writer's biography. When they analyze her two volumes of socialist-realist poems, they mention Szymborska's naivety and belief in ideology as a young woman. Szymborska herself does the same when, in a conversation with Wojciech Ligęza, she mentions how guilty she now feels to have published those poems. However, when interpreting modernism in Szymborska's poetry, this bears no importance whatsoever. The essential issue is: what consequences did Szymborska draw from both those experiences as a poet? My thesis is as follows: both these experiences have played a fundamental role in the poet's entire work. Without them, we would not be able to explain the most important elements of her worldview or her poetics. In referring to the war and socialist realism experiences I am not thinking about facts from the poet's life. I am interested only in what she herself has put into her poetry. In other words, I am interested only in the historical experiences presented in her poems. The choice of the poetics used to describe these experiences is what I call modernism in Szymborska's poetry<sup>4</sup>.

The 1950s and the following two decades are considered to be the end of west European modernism. However, it is during this period - precisely after the year 1956 - that Szymborska's poetry started to develop. This is yet another reason to perceive Szymborska's work in connection with the specificity of Polish modernism. So, what made up Szymborska's historical experience? Primarily the Holocaust, the experience of history as defeat, humiliation, bitterness, the experience of the world as a threat, the experience of the fragility of human life and of human depersonalization. Understood in this perspective, modernism in Szymborska's poetry is a response to that experience. In other words: the specific variant of modernism presented by Szymborska is the artistic and ideological consequence drawn by the poet from her experiences. Naturally, these experiences cannot be treated in isolation. They form an entity; they develop with time and are presented differently in different works.

I shall try to define Szymborska's modernism by considering the elements that make up her worldview. The experience of the Holocaust and of the war brought about the rejection of a religious worldview and of a belief in a personal God. In the poem "Night", in answer to the demand put forward by God to Abraham, the poet identifies herself with Isaac. Szymborska asks: "Where will I hide when the biblical God's eye rests on me as it rested on Isaac?"<sup>4</sup> From this moment onwards, God for her is but a metaphor. The biblical God is proud that he has created a "masterpiece": "heavens, seas, earth and animals"<sup>5</sup>. But - Szymborska responds sarcastically - God convinced Job of his faultlessness using different arguments, namely the two beasts: Behemoth and Leviathan ("Summary", 1962). Please note that this biblical metaphor concerns not only the Holocaust, but

---

<sup>4</sup> Philological translation.

<sup>5</sup> Philological translation.

Stalinist and all other crimes as well. And what does contact with such a world mean for the reader? This world evokes terror; it is filled with crimes, fear, fright, despair and unhappiness, therefore it is hard to consider it God's "masterpiece". The heroine of the poem is reminded of the cruelties of this world in her dreams, which are filled with anxiety and end in awakenings full of fear. In the poem "For my friends", the people who disappear suddenly - just as they did during the war and during Stalinist times - cry out in despair: "we are innocent!" In the poem "Notes From a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition", the heroine convinces the Yeti that crimes are not the only reality in the human world, and that not all words sentence people to death.<sup>6</sup> In the poem "Rehabilitation" Szymborska writes directly: poetry's failure is that its "words are incapable of bringing people back to life". If you want to survive, you should not have anything to do with the world - that is the message of the poem "Midsummer Night's Dream".

This real world is as terrible as "Bach played on a saw" - this is the punch line (ending) of the poem "Making up the world". If we then ask why Szymborska should be "making up the world", why she creates a "world in a state of correction" (the title of Ligęza's book<sup>7</sup>, the following answer is possible. Poetry is not only a play of the imagination, not only an indifferent game in poetic ontology, not only a "joy of writing" that consists in inventing virtual worlds, but a consequence of the horror of the real world.<sup>8</sup>

The first consequence which results from Szymborska's use of her experiences - and which at the same time creates a major difficulty in working on her poetry - is her refusal to treat those experiences as a subject. Instead of naming and describing the facts themselves, Szymborska chooses to create universal existential situations. The semantic weight of the poem is therefore placed on the poetic presentation of the situation, and not on the expression of the "I". Thus the creation of a poetic chronicle of her life has not become characteristic of Szymborska's art - in contrast to Białoszewski for example. Neither has Szymborska chosen - as Edward Balcerzan was to write - the "witness strategy", which was introduced into Polish poetry by Różewicz. Szymborska's variant of modernism is less personal. It is - as a worldview conception - an attempt to universalize experience. In Szymborska's poems everything that happens, happens simply to a human being. The "I" in Szymborska's poems is always an "I, human being", and not "I, Wisława Szymborska". This is why Szymborska's poems differ fundamentally from those of the other important poets of her generation: Białoszewski, Różewicz and Herbert. Szymborska's poems are not verified by the poet's biographic "I". Szymborska likes to use the poetics of the role, the poetics of the mask; she voluntarily applies the third person singular or plural and enjoys

<sup>6</sup> "Yeti, crime is not all / we're up to down there. / Yeti, not every sentence there /

<sup>7</sup> Wojciech Ligęza, *Świat w stanie korekty. O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2001.

<sup>8</sup> All these examples - and there are more - come from the volume *Calling out to Yeti*, 1956.

stylizations - both in the construction of a poem and in her rhymes. In her conception, all such poetic figures are equally appropriate in describing universal human situations.

The second consequence resulting from Szymborska's use of her historical experience is her refusal to treat language as a medium in which humanness is revealed. Such was the assumption of all European avant-gardists. In the poem "Still" Szymborska describes Jews being sent to their death in sealed wagons. She calls this train a train of anonymous people crying, but the poem ends with her testimony: woken up at night, I hear silence banging at the silence. The poetic figure of "hearing the silence" appears in all of Szymborska's works and it is one of her most characteristic themes. What is important here is the sphere of meanings which is communicated but not expressed: the sphere of emotions and feelings, which are more important than the communication by language itself. In Szymborska's poems there are few dialogues or examples of so-called "live speech". In the poem "Museum" the greatest exhibits prove to be dead, because the feelings and moods that accompanied them when they were used by people have disappeared.<sup>10 9</sup> That is why themes such as a smile, look, emotion, sadness, astonishment, joke, grief and so on appear so often in Szymborska's poems. These themes are accompanied by the motif - well described by researchers, for example in the book by Dorota Wojda - of quiet speech, whisper, silence and similar behaviour - wordless but audible to the poet."<sup>10</sup> In this way Szymborska shows that the modality of human behaviour is more important than events, things, landscapes; more important than specific situations, dialogues or information contained in linguistic expression. Another variant of this theme is the motif of seeing the invisible: in the poem entitled "Transparency" ("Jawność"), for example, a moth sees the gleaming hearts of lovers in the dark. In this set of poetic motifs Szymborska refers to a major theme of modernistic literature: the problem of expressing the inexpressible. For the modernists - whether they were symbolists or members of the avant-garde - inexpressibility was a problem for the philosophy of language. In Szymborska's poems however, the problem of inexpressibility is not connected with the nature of language - I will return to this - but with the hidden dimension of the spiritual life of human beings.

The third consequence of historical experience in Szymborska's poems reveals itself in the least expected aspect of her worldview, namely in the poetic presentation of the evolution of life on Earth. Critics of Szymborska's work have long argued that reflection about the place of humans among other creatures is an original theme in her poetry. Szymborska renounces the anthropocentric view,

---

<sup>9</sup> "Here are plates but no appetite. / And wedding rings, but the requited love / Has been gone now for some three hundred years. / Here's a fan - where is the maiden's blush? / Here are swords - where is the ire? / Nor will the lute sound at the twilight hour. [...]", PNC, 30.

<sup>10</sup> See: Dorota Wojda, *Milczenie słowa. O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej*, Universitas, Kraków 1996; Stanisław Balbus, *Świat ze wszystkich stron świata. O Wisławie Szymborskiej*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1996.

makes humans and nature equal, and looks at humans from the perspective of animals, plants and objects. The poet is fascinated with the evolution of life on Earth, the evolution of living creatures and, among them, of humans - but not as individuals but as a species. However, in her poems the topic of evolution is filtered through the horror of human history. As an example, we might quote the popular poem "Breughel's Two Monkeys", in which we can see the poet's sympathy for the sufferings of animals - our little brothers - who feel and can be hurt just like humans. But in this poem the monkey - who is "clinking of his chain" (PNC, 15) - reminds the heroine of the history of humankind. In Szymborska's poems reflection about evolution and the place of humans in the chain of creatures is not only a problem of evolution, ecology or secular Franciscanism, but - literally - a reflection of human history marked by the individual's cruelty towards other individuals.

Naturally, I am not trying to say that Szymborska's work can only be explained by referring it to history. I merely mean that Szymborska's historical experience is contained - sometimes invisibly - in her sensitivity to anthropological questions as well as in her conception of poetic language. Before I present this last, let us consider more about the specific nature of Szymborska's modernistic worldview.

Szymborska's interest in nature leads right to the core of the problems related to modernism, these problems being a source of the worldview crisis that also triggered modernism. The naturalists of the 19th century reduced human beings to nature and the knowledge about humans - to the science of nature. The modernists' revolt was violent. Its aim was to show the difference between humans and nature, between objects and social institutions. Good examples of two different kinds of such revolt are the works of Bolesław Leśmian and Czesław Miłosz. Leśmian replaced naturalism with metaphysics and empiricism with transcendence. In his poems human beings are part of nature - not in the biological sense though, but in the philosophical. For Leśmian, drawing on the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, nature is pure existence. In Miłosz's work things are different. Miłosz has long been fascinated - and terrified at the same time - at the prospect of identifying social life with Darwinism. His work reveals different stages in the renouncement of such identification. Miłosz arrives at the affirmation of nature as an objective being and at admiration of its non-human beauty. In this context, Szymborska's conception might appear shocking. The poet returns to the problems that the modernists had set aside, and which had fascinated natural scientists in the 19th century. The last Polish poet before Szymborska to be fascinated with evolution was Adam Asnyk (1838-1897). However, it is precisely from this distant perspective that one can better perceive the modernistic variant of this question in Szymborska's work, as well as its originality. The poet rejects a naturalistic perspective but maintains an admiration for natural science.

<sup>11</sup>Contrary to the modernists of the first half of the century, Szymborska is not

---

<sup>11</sup> All Szymborska's critics stress this issue.

terrified but fascinated by nature. At the same time though, natural science fascinates Szymborska precisely because it allows her to understand the phenomenon of human difference. In Szymborska's poetry we do not find Miłosz's dilemmas: the dramatization of the contradiction between nature, ethics and aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> Leśmian's symbolist worldview, however - one that anthropomorphized and sanctified nature - is just as alien to her. In this sense Szymborska's way of returning to the modernistic problem is typical of modernism of the 20th century.

Neither is there a place in Szymborska's poetry for the problem of the relativity of cognition or of the relativity of knowledge and its tools, such as language. This problem, so characteristic of early modernism, is absent from the poet's work. In Szymborska's work - paradoxically - scientific knowledge about nature leads to poetic knowledge about human beings. It does not lead to the opposition of nature and humans, or to the subordination of humans to nature, but to the description of the astonishing ontological difference which appeared during evolution on Earth - or even in the universe. A miracle has happened - Szymborska says. Not a biblical miracle, but a miracle of nature: during evolution human beings appeared - something that natural laws do not explain. During evolution human beings, so to speak, "happened", they are, then, accidental creatures. We do not know why and for what purpose nature has allowed itself such a "freak", but thanks to this we understand that in nature and its evolution there is nothing obvious. From the perspective of scientific knowledge about nature - Szymborska says - human beings are inexplicable. Nature created humans as beings endowed with imagination. It is, however, thanks to their imagination that humans are able to imagine that all things may be "unnatural". Consequently, they can imagine that everything could be different from what it is. Paradoxically then, human beings, as a result of the evolutionary process, question that very evolution. Human existence is a contradiction between the identity of nature, where everything is what it is, and the possibility of difference, shown to humans by their imagination. Natural order and human social order are two entirely separate worlds, but it is the second - the human one - that is strange, unnatural, because it is historical. In Szymborska's work the human being is an interference in the natural order, but at the same time it is only thanks to nature that humans know who they are. In this way Szymborska overcomes the problems that the modernists of the first half of the 20th century - such as Leśmian or Miłosz - could not handle, just like the poets of the Polish avant-garde who had entirely dismissed nature from their worldview and saw humans only in relation to technology; or like Witold Gombrowicz, for whom an individual human being exists only in relation to other individuals.

I have been discussing so far the modernistic determinants of the poet's

---

<sup>12</sup> "From Fascination to Revulsion. Nature in the Writings of Czesław Miłosz" in Czesław Miłosz. A Stockholm Conference. September 9-11, 1997, ed. by Nils-Ake Nilsson, KYHAA Konferenser 26, Stockholm, 1992.

world-view. It is now time to discuss their consequence for poetic art, for the poetics of Szymborska's poems. In 1956 Szymborska could choose between several artistic possibilities for writing down her experience. The didacticism of her early socialist-realist poems was based on a strong opposition between good and evil, between justice and injustice. After 1956 this didacticism could have led to the choice of a similar poetics with moral and philosophical theses formulated directly, as in Mieczysław Jastrun's book of poems entitled *Rot Ash* (*Gorący popiół*, 1956). Szymborska could also have chosen Różewicz's variant of modernism - that is the destruction of language and the annihilation of poetic art as a response to the experience of the 20th century. In 1956 another variant was also possible - one opposed to Różewicz's conception, but a different type of linguistic poetry. But Szymborska could also have chosen Herbert's variant - the tradition of classicism and the presentation of historical experience in the form of allegories based on biblical or mythological themes. It would seem Szymborska was tempted by such poetics: the proof is her piece written in prose and entitled "Synopsis", which is a paraphrase of the biblical story about Job. If we look at these possibilities for writing poetry from the perspective of literary tradition, we could say that in 1956, in order to present her historical experience, Szymborska could have chosen either the tradition of the avant-garde (with its complex metaphors and puns), the classical tradition, or the surrealist tradition - in its grotesque or expressionist variant. In 1956 all these traditions were among the most important components of modernism in Poland. But Wisława Szymborska - as we know - did not choose any of these traditions. She created an entirely different variant of modernism, in the domain of the poetics of the poem and of poetic language. And it is this variant that I would like to present in the final part of my study.

To put it as succinctly as possible, Szymborska's poetics meant the rejection of three major assumptions of Polish modernism at that time. It was the rejection of: 1) linguistic experiment; 2) experiment in genre, consisting in crossing the borderline between literature and non-literature, and 3) the rejection of the compositional experiment - that is of splitting a literary work into parts linked only by association. Szymborska thus rejected the aesthetic ideas which had been introduced into modernism by the avant-garde movements of the first half of the 20th century and which were still playing an important role at the end of the 20th century. As there is no space here for in-depth analysis, I shall state outright that one of the most important problems of modernism, that of the radical distrust of language, is alien to Szymborska. This makes her decidedly different from the poets of the New Wave. Szymborska rejects the idea of "language under suspicion", and by this - all the variants of the modernistic questioning of language and - what might be more important - she rejects the negation of the autonomy of literature, which was one of the main ideas of late modernism in Poland in the second half of the 20th century. But what did Szymborska offer instead? Her artistic answer - in the perspective from which I am presenting it, of course - is paradoxical. By rejecting the ideas of radical modernism, Szymborska formulated - not directly, of

course, but in her literary practice - a new understanding of several important ideas of Polish modernism. These were, for example: the idea of the poem as a closed construction, which is expressed by the punch-lines that conclude almost all of her works; the idea of simplified language, deprived of complex metaphors, but at the same time a language essentially different from the contemporary language; the idea of philosophical poetry, expressed by the numerous aphorisms in her poems, not by lectures or treatises, which are absent from Szymborska's poems - unlike Miłosz's, for example. By rejecting the possibilities contained in surrealist poetics, Szymborska declared herself for rational poetry. This is illustrated by the enumeration of arguments in her poems, which function as a kind of poetic analysis and as stages in a quasilogical discourse that her poems become. Finally, in Szymborska's poetry, we can cite the idea of the author's poem, that is one where we hear the author's voice but where Szymborska's subjectivity is not revealed. This type of poem - in my opinion - sets aside the problem of subjectivity, central to the modernists. I cannot, however, analyze this interesting issue here.

A particularly distinctive characteristic of Szymborska's modernism is her breaking with the conception of "critical art", which was the basis of poetic conceptions beginning with the prewar avant-gardes and embracing both the New Wave and the poetry of the nineties. Szymborska questioned the need for programmatic assumptions and autocomentaries in poetry, introducing instead an irony that embraces all aspects of creation. We have then: irony as a mode of expression in the poem, irony embracing the poetic act, functioning as a form of practicing art, as well as autoirony applied to the author herself. As an example of this autoirony we can quote limericks and other kinds of nonsense poetry. Szymborska's laughter is a refined form of her poetic art.

In trying to define the place of Szymborska's poetry in modernism we might arrive at the following thesis. Szymborska's work because of its distance from the more radical artistic propositions of Polish modernism, such as the work of Leśmian, Aleksander Wat, Miłosz, Różewicz, Białoszewski or Barańczak - is an exceptional manifestation of this very modernism. Exceptional, because it throws light on the radicalism of other propositions. Exceptional, because it casts a bridge between them in the least probable places. Exceptional, because, in a way which - at this point - is still almost invisible, it reinterprets the most important artistic conceptions in Polish poetry of the 20th century. Exceptional, because it shows that today modernity in poetry means maintaining a distance from any idea of modernity. And above all because it shows that there is nothing in the universe more modern than the Earth and the people on it. And that in poetry there is nothing more modern than constant surprise that something like a human being might be possible.