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The Poetry of Wislawa Szymborska

by PAULA BONNELL

Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska offers us everything: she's easy to read, and writes on universal themes in an unmistakably original voice. She's also funny. Two books of translations of her poetry are now available: **Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems**, translated by scholars Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire, which collects nearly half of Szymborska's mature work, and **Selected Poems**, translated by Grazyna Drabik, Austin Flint, and Sharon Olds, which renders forty Szymborska poems in English that crackles with life.

Szymborska is immensely popular in Poland. Her seventh collection, **A Great Number** (1977), was a best seller, its 10,000 copies selling out within a week. She is also, as Slavic specialists Krynski and Maguire tell us, "one of the three best" post-World War II Polish poets (she was born in 1923), the others being Tadeusz Rozewicz and Zbigniew Herbert. "But many readers," Krynski and Maguire continue, "have come to assign primacy to Szymborska."

At first reading, Szymborska's poems look like deft, quick sketches in clear, unadorned black and white. "Writing a Curriculum Vitae" gives plain instructions on resume writing that seem as apt here as in Poland:

Change landscapes into addresses
and vague memories into fixed dates. . . .
Of all your loves, mention only the marital,
and of the children, only those who were born. . . .
State price rather than value, . . .
show size, not where one is going.
Enclose a photo with one ear showing.
What counts is its shape, not what it hears.

What does it hear?
The clatter of machinery that shreds paper.

(Drabik/Flint)

Szymborska's work is not as simple as it may look, however; sketches like this one gather force as we read poem after poem. Her wry self-portrait confirms that this legerdemain is intentional:

Do not hold it against me, speech, that
I borrow words weighed with pathos,
and then try hard to make them seem light.

(Drabik/Olds)

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Though often amused and ironic, her voice can also be resilient, as in her explanation to Yeti, the abominable snowman, of life below the snowline:

Down below, Yeti,
lies Wednesday,
an alphabet, bread,
two plus two is four. . . .

We inherit hope,
a gift of forgetting.
Look how we are giving birth
in the ruins.

Yeti, we have Shakespeare.
Yeti, we play the violin.
Yeti, at dusk we light lamps.

– “From an Expedition Which Did Not Take Place”
(Drabik/Flint)

Few of Szymborska's poems allow us to locate her precisely in Poland because she speaks of so many things internationally available – tranquilizers, museums, travel, films; she even begins a poem called “A Happy Love” with the question, “Is it normal, / is it serious, is it profitable?” At the same time, Szymborska is reticent about biographical detail; we know little more than that she translates French poetry, is an active book reviewer, often of non-fiction, and that she has been a sponsor of the “Flying Universities,” which criticized Party scholars' distortions of history and literature. Indeed, Szymborska has the uncanny ability to project her voice almost anywhere. In “Astonishment,” for example, a poem that reminds me of Elizabeth Bishop's “In the Waiting Room,” she speaks from that innermost recess in which suddenly occurs a realization of one's self; separate, yet like others, inexplicably possessing consciousness and identity:

Why as one person, and one only?
Why this one, not another? And why here?
. . . Instead of always, and as all?
As all insects, and all horizons? . . . Why –
. . . do I sit and stare into a dark corner,
just as it looks up, suddenly raising its head,
this growling thing that is called a dog?

(Drabik/Olds)

Or her voice may be that of an anonymous traveler noting:

We call it a grain of sand.
But it doesn't call itself grain or sand.

From my window there's a lovely view of the lake,
but the view doesn't see itself.
To the view, this world is without color,
shape, sound, smell, pain.

– “A View with a Grain of Sand”
(Drabik/Flint)

“The island called Here is everywhere,” a character tells us in her “Parable” (Krynski/Maguire). Feeling free to move to any time in history, Szymborska speaks of the remote and mythical past, as in “Atlantis,” “Lot’s Wife,” and “Monologue for Cassandra,” or of the historical past, as in “Classic,” a sketch of a composer’s life in which:

All that is not a quintet
will be, as the sixth, blown away.
All that is not a chorus of forty angels
will become silent as a dog’s whine or a gendarme’s belch.

(Drabik/Olds)

With each new stance she adds another essential bit to her world view. From no spot can she move the earth, but she can move us with the way she sees it. Dramatically, she repeats virtually nothing because she draws on such a wide range of situations as occasions for her poems. Thematically she extends her range with each new occasion, and in ways that are all her own. Most of her work employs a free verse which invents its own figures. In “The Acrobat,” for example, the repetition of the last word of a line at the beginning of the next is like the end and the resumption of the acrobat’s contact with the trapeze, thereby capturing flight between the lines. This makes for a caught breath, just as an acrobat’s flights would. And it translates well, as does the device she uses in several poems (“Any Case,” “Clothes,” “Portrait of a Woman”) in which she assembles sentences with multiple subjects and verbs, the alternate and contradictory versions intermingling to suggest, simultaneously, the variety of individual experience and the universality of its essential elements.

In the poem, “Still,” she takes the Polish proverb that a big cloud gives a small rain and indicts her country with it:

In sealed box cars travel
names across the land
The name Nathan strikes fist against wall, . . .
the name Sarah calls out for water for
the name Aaron that’s dying of thirst. . . .

A cloud of people moved over the land,
a big cloud gives a small rain, one tear,
a small rain – one tear, a dry season.
Tracks lead off into black forest.

Cor-rect, cor-rect clicks the wheel. Gladeless forest.

(Krynski/Maguire)

We recognize this world, so populous, in which chance and human error mar and hurt, yet the forces of laughter and the imagination remain:

In my dreams . . .

I speak fluent Greek,
and not only with the living.

I drive a car
which obeys me.

I float through the air as is proper,
that is, all by myself.

I am but need not
be a child of my time.

– “In Praise of Dreams” (Krynski/Maguire)

One last illustration of Szymborska’s concentrated power. The final lines of “Any Case” are simple:

Listen –
how quickly your heart is beating in me.

(Drabik/Olds)

This heartbeat is simultaneously that of the “you” (anyone) who could just as easily be “me” (oneself), that of the lover whose heartbeat is so close after lovemaking as to beat in one’s own body, and that of the fetus whose doubly embodied pulse is the pulse of human survival.

These two books overlap to some extent: they have twenty-four poems in common, which may be a result of the translators’ mutual ignorance of each other’s work or of their common identification of important poems. In quoting, as in reading, I have preferred the Drabik/Olds and Drabik/Flint renditions to the Krynski/Maguire versions in every instance, although the Princeton translators have an occasional moment that surpasses the equivalent line in the *Quarterly Review* translators’ work. Though they share the goal of accurate re-creation rather than free translation, the two works differ markedly in felicity. Szymborska uses a mixed diction, drawing on the language of “rhetorical or poetic discourse” and on “extreme colloquialisms, even in the same line,” as Krynski and Maguire point out in their thoughtful introductory essay. However, the scholars’ efforts to reproduce this mixture in English sometimes result in what seem excessive archaicisms – “hence,” “befallen,” “sandal latchet,” “Taken from the window will be the aloe pot.” And at times their work seems not to have completely made the transition to English, as when they give us “worriment,” “scarce justice,” and “because I myself am an obstacle to my self,” which Drabik and Olds translate: “because I stand in my own way.” By contrast, the Drabik/Olds and Drabik/Flint renderings are fluent, idiomatic English that reads naturally; they have rhythm. All too often the Krynski/Maguire language sounds translated.

I am somewhat mystified that Krynski and Maguire virtually exclude Szymborska’s love poetry from their collection. (In their introduction, they carefully calculate that love figures in “barely one-ninth of her total output.”) Fortunately, the American reader is not deprived of that ninth: five love poems and one vivid *mise en scene* of lovers’ mutual misunderstandings are among the most dazzling poems in the *Quarterly Review* collection. In “Dream,” “I am Too Near,” “Shadow,” “Drinking Wine,” “Nothingness Turned Over,” and “In the

Tower of Babel," American poet and co-translator Sharon Olds demonstrates her gift, akin to Szymborska's own, for the direct shot to the heart. Throughout the *Quarterly Review* collection, the grace and muscle of the lines argue strongly for the translation of poetry by poets. And the meaning, syntax, and even word order in the *Quarterly Review* version differ little from those of the Princeton version.

In fact, Krynski and Maguire sometimes surprisingly and inaccurately depart from the Polish where Drabik, Flint, and Olds stick close. In one poem Szymborska uses a line from a Polish folk song which Krynski and Maguire note would literally translate "a little red apple / cut four ways." They choose, however, to substitute the cloying "Roses are red, violets are blue, / sugar is sweet, and so are you," which utterly lacks the brevity and pure simplicity of the original. (The Drabik/Flint rendition is "A red apple is divided / into halves.") Or consider the translation of Szymborska's title alluding to anonymity and common humanity, *Any Case*. All agree on the literal meaning of the Polish words, the title of Szymborska's recent volume, taken from a striking poem about chance and human survival. Krynski and Maguire translate this as *There But for the Grace*, which introduces the idea of a divine scheme in which the distribution of hardship and blessings makes at least divine sense. Szymborska makes no such claims. Divine providence is antithetical to her vision of our life on "the third planet from the sun" where one's "killed in action . . . wanders . . . through the darkness which is never extinguished" as she says in "Dream" (Drabik/Olds).

But these are minor quarrels with a major contribution: Krynski and Maguire's volume is a handsome and thorough presentation in English of a major European poet. They have provided many appurtenances: collages by the poet, facing-page Polish and English, a sixteen-page introduction discussing Szymborska's life and work to date, notes on thirty-two of their translations, and a bibliographical note. The poet who emerges from the *Quarterly Review* collection is one who makes poetry of love, science, and politics; in the Princeton collection, she does it with history and philosophy. Two different mirrors, together they show us much of Wislawa Szymborska, a poet who speaks importantly to our times.