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WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA: NATURALIST
AND HUMANIST

Edyta M. Bojanowska, Harvard University

Wisława Szymborska (b. 1923), the author of nine slim volumes of poetry that span nearly half a century, is a foremost figure in contemporary Polish poetry. Her recognition was slow in the coming. Unlike such established giants of post-war Polish poetry as Czesław Miłosz or Zbigniew Herbert, until 1996 Szymborska had not earned a single book-length scholarly study either in Poland or abroad. Only recent years have brought a surge of interest.¹ While Polish articles represent an important step toward a scholarly analysis of Szymborska's poetry—and I will acknowledge their insights—they too often aim at holistic views of the poet's *Weltanschauung* in which the diversity of the poet's voices becomes lost ~~at the expense of textual analysis~~ (the most notable exceptions being the works by Barańczak, Balcerzan, and Ligęza). In an attempt to limit my scope, I will use the theme of nature as a point of entry into Szymborska's poetic world and through close readings of particular poems within this thematic group I hope to identify crucial aspects of Szymborska's poetics.

Szymborska's scant poetic output, her few translations of French poetry², and her numerous essayistic book review-feuilletons (Szymborska's idiosyncratic genre; most of them do not concern *belles-lettres*), is complemented by very few non-literary utterances on literature. The two significant instances include a preface to her selected poems (the only one she wrote) and a 1966 interview.³ This paucity of Szymborska's self-commentary increases its weight. It makes the concerns she chose to address and the attitudes she displayed particularly worthy of attention. For the purpose of this article, the metaphoric framework of the following passage from the poet's preface is especially revealing:

error
correct
in
reprint

I would prefer not to grant myself the right of writing about my own poems. The longer I engage in composing them, the lesser is my willingness and need to formulate a poetic *credo*—the more embarrassing and premature it seems. *I would feel like an insect that for unknown reasons chases itself into a glass box and pins itself down.*

Biology describes man as a creature that lacks specialization, seeing in that the guarantee of his further development. Allow me, dear Reader, to cherish the hope that I myself am an unspecialized poet, who does not want to link herself to any one theme and any one way of expressing things that are of importance to her. (emphasis mine)⁴

Szymborska's use of biological jargon in her account of herself as a poet might seem rather peculiar. Yet it exemplifies an abiding concern of Szymborska's poetic practice: the dialogue of the humanistic and the biological discourses.

This article will examine the "human interest" of Szymborska's nature poems, the analogies they draw and the contrasts they establish between nature and the condition of man. This thematic pairing often takes the form of striking juxtapositions in Szymborska's poems: she compares human beings to such unusual natural specimens as onions or dinosaurs. The philosophy/biology duality informs Szymborska's views of both nature and man. Man in her poetry is simultaneously a sapient creature and a primate. Nature too is a fusion of matter and idea, biology and philosophy. Her view of nature is essentially anti-romantic and anti-mystical: nature is not a projection of the lyrical self, nor does it represent a window to another world. Rather, it has an existence unto itself, material and independent. This empirical conception of nature drives Szymborska to concern herself with concrete, observable phenomena. According to her, any claims about the essence of humanity or man's place in the universe must be rooted in the physical, tangible repository of information that only a materialist and biological conception of nature can provide. In other words, Szymborska values nature as an epistemological resource, but only if it is examined empirically.

By expanding poetry's scope to include science as an inspiration and scientism as a method of lyrical investigation (she frequently structures her poems as reasoned arguments, either proving or disproving a thesis) Szymborska feels she is returning to poetry's ancient roots. As she explains in her 1966 interview:

In the beginning poetry could be anything. Crafted speech was used to express both feelings and the most basic information, ranging from prayers, through codes of *savoir vivre* and historical chronicles, to the rules of the art of writing . . . It is precisely from [poetry] that ever more numerous branches of science emerged. Poetry then began shrinking more and more, and as the most extreme consequence of this process there only remains writing poems about writing poems . . . I do not accept this. . . . It would be a good thing to recapture some of those territories from which poetry withdrew or was pushed out of. (301–2)⁵

The unquenchable curiosity that pervades her poems has also found expression in her book reviews, which for decades have been published

primarily in the literary weekly *Życie Literackie*.⁶ Claiming no scholarly expertise, digressing extensively, often abandoning the reviewer's stance altogether, Szymborska has surveyed a stunning range of works that includes home repair manuals and cookbooks, as well as works on psychiatry, history, biology, and geology. While some critics have noted in passing the stylistic similarities between Szymborska's reviews and her poetry, they have largely ignored the themes they share. Szymborska's reviews frequently function as postscripts to her poems: they recast or develop the issues she had previously worked out in her poetry (in all instances known to me the poems precede the reviews). Both often employ the same line of thought and rhetorical patterns. I will refer to these reviews in my discussion of Szymborska's poems.

Szymborska's nature poems center around four major themes: consciousness, perfection, evolution, and death. These themes will provide the framework for my discussion.

Consciousness

Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. . . . [E]ven if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this. Thus all our dignity consists in thought. (Pascal 66)

Pascal's famous notion of man as a "thinking reed" resounds throughout Szymborska's poetry. She shares Pascal's notion of consciousness as man's defining characteristic and plays with it in her "View with a Grain of Sand" [PB]. The poem ponders the idea that whatever names, values, states, or actions we ascribe to nature, they are all but outgrowths of our consciousness, human imputations, rather than nature's inherent characteristics. Nature remains unaware, as it were, of its own nature.

We call it a grain of sand,
but it calls itself neither grain nor sand.
It does just fine without a name,
whether general, particular,
permanent, passing,
incorrect, or apt.
Our glance, our touch mean nothing to it.
It doesn't feel itself seen or touched.
And that it fell on the windowsill
is only our experience, not its. (135)⁷

Although the poet does not doubt the real, material existence of the world, its aesthetic and sensual values exist, according to her, only in our perceptions of them:

The window has a wonderful view of a lake,
but the view doesn't view itself.
It exists in this world
colorless, shapeless,
soundless, odorless, and painless. (135)

The poem describes the pace of time as also a human invention, since the three seconds that have passed in viewing the landscape are “three seconds only for us.”

“View with a Grain of Sand” may be seen as an elaboration of Ruskin’s notion of pathetic fallacy, the poetic convention of endowing nature with human feelings, the overuse of which he criticized. Szymborska broadens the bounds of this “fallacy” to include the very *act of perceiving* nature. The poem underscores the idea that any observation is first and foremost an experience of the perceiving subject, and that the sole indisputable truth it conveys is the blueprint of the viewer’s perspective, his *ways of seeing*. The insistent focus on the human-specific lens foregrounds Szymborska’s exploration of the epistemological value of individual perception *vis-à-vis* objective reality.

Indeed, the poem questions the ability of human perception to accurately comprehend the world. Our perception yields refractions rather than reflections, cognitive skepticism being Szymborska’s and Pascal’s common trait. At the same time, our human viewpoint so thoroughly pervades and determines how we think about nature and verbalize our thoughts that occasional falsification is inevitable. The poem paints an image of human speech as a fossil that bears the imprints of our past cognitive blunders:

And all of this beneath a sky by nature skyless
in which the sun sets without setting at all
and hides without hiding behind an unminding cloud.
The wind ruffles it, its only reason being
that it blows. (136)

Scientific facts constitute an important underpinning of the poem. Science has demystified some of our cherished assumptions about nature. There really is no “sky,” there is only air. A “sunset” is only an illusion created by the earth’s rotation. Clouds cannot possibly “hide” the sun: they can merely intrude on our line of vision. Yet while deconstructing this non-referential idiom, the poet demonstrates its indispensability in describing the world. The impasse is not merely linguistic. The poem paints an image

of man’s complete alienation from nature: on the one hand—the inscrutable *Ding an sich*, on the other—man’s persistent, if quixotic, quest to comprehend it.

Szymborska differs from Pascal with respect to the *value* of human consciousness. The French philosopher considers it a sign of greatness that man realizes his wretchedness, while a tree—though just as wretched—lacks this awareness (Pascal 29). In contrast, Szymborska’s position as evident in “View with a Grain of Sand” is essentially ambivalent. She carefully avoids asserting that consciousness *elevates* us over “consciousless” nature and merely notes it as a point of *difference*, which is in keeping with her anti-anthropocentric views. Szymborska does not concern herself in this poem with the question of whether a grain of sand is any worse off by virtue of not knowing its name or realizing where it fell.

She does take up this question in another poem, “The Apple Tree” [LN]. Szymborska’s choice of a tree in the context of the theme of consciousness is reminiscent of Pascal’s “wretched tree” metaphor, which might suggest that Szymborska’s polemic with Pascal is indeed intended. The apple tree’s lack of consciousness is conveyed, as in the previous poem, by a series of negatives. This lack, however, hardly implies a deficiency. The apple tree’s “conscious-less-ness” allows it to maintain freedom, peace, and a harmonious union with nature (incidentally, the diminutive in the poem’s title, “*Jabłonka*,” unlike its neutral equivalent “*jabłoń*,” has a homey, peaceful ring to it). By contrast, the poem’s human protagonist—encumbered by consciousness—feels “imprisoned” and restless. She revels in the soothing conscious-lessness of the apple tree that

. . . brims with flowers, as with laughter;
that is unaware of good and evil,
shrugs its branches about it;
that is no one’s, whoever may say mine about it;
burdened with the foreboding of fruit only;
that is uninterested about which year it is, which country,
which planet, and whereto it circles;
[. . .] carefree about whatever happens,
shivering with patience with each of its leaves . . . ⁸

The comparison of the tree with a human being hinges on a clever transformation of common idioms that usually refer to human emotions. For example, the tree shrugs its branches just as people shrug their shoulders. Yet this nonchalant gesture is juxtaposed with moral categories (“good and evil”), which for humans usually represent a cause for grave concern. The state of “shivering,” usually associated with fear, excitement, or anticipation, is combined here with a quite incongruous patience. Furthermore, the natural semantic pull of the word “foreboding” anticipates

an object that will signify something bad or harmful. Instead, the tree has a foreboding of fruit, of life. Thus the word “burdened,” which at first seems to denote psychological distress, returns to its original meaning of “encumbered with physical weight” when it becomes related to the expectation of heavy fruit. The context of fruit and expectation, in turn, draws attention to the root “-cięż-,” which the word “burdened” (*obciążona*) shares with the word “pregnancy” (*ciąża*). Thus within one line the initially negative ring of the word “burdened” becomes retuned twice: into a neutral and then positive tone. In sum, the tree’s lack of consciousness actually betokens a benefit. Even more—it recalls prelapsarian bliss: the apple tree is unaware of good and evil and inhabits “may paradise.” Grammatically speaking, the poem consists of one sentence without a predicate. Its main clause, interrupted by an extended description of the tree, expresses the speaker’s wish to remain in its shadow instead of returning home, since “only prisoners wish to return home.” As Wojciech Ligęza rightly notes, consciousness in Szymborska’s poetry appears as both a curse and a blessing (1993, 5). In “The Apple Tree” it appears as the former.

Interestingly, a poem that presents the opposite view, “In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself” directly follows “The Apple Tree” in the volume (LN). This proximity of the negative and positive views of consciousness may imply that the poet considers them inseparable and equally valid. “In Praise” contains an encomium to conscience, itself a corollary of consciousness, characteristic of humans but unknown in the animal world:

The buzzard never says it is to blame.
 The panther wouldn’t know what scruples mean.
 When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.
 If snakes had hands, they’d claim their hands were clean.
 . . . Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
 in every other way they’re light.
 On this third planet of the sun
 among the signs of bestiality
 a clear conscience is Number One.

Pascal believed man to be great because he knows himself to be wretched. Szymborska’s poem gives Pascal’s idea a significant twist: man is great because he realizes that his actions cause *others* to be wretched, while piranhas and killer whales do not. Although the poem clearly applauds the human experience of pangs of conscience, as even the title suggests, Szymborska’s criticism of remorselessness sounds a muted tone, so characteristic of her poetry in general. To call a clear conscience “bestial” may imply fierce condemnation, but in the context of the poem it may also suggest a mere statement of fact: a clear conscience is characteristic of beasts, that is, animals (the Polish word “zwierzęce” functions more freely

on both these levels than its English counterpart). This tension between the idiomatic and literal meanings of words and phrases greatly contributes to Szymborska’s “muted” quality.

Temperamentally and ideologically, Szymborska is a poet of moderation and skepticism. She prefers understatement to confident assertion, ambivalence to resolve, doubt to dogmatism, concreteness to abstraction, particularity to typicality, and exceptions to rules.⁹ Moderation and skepticism also characterize her portrayal of nature and man, which maintains her typical dynamic of “on the one hand”/“on the other hand.” Her affinity with Pascal emerges here again, since he believed each thing partly true and partly false, and considered contradiction no more a sign of falsehood than lack thereof an indication of truth (54). Szymborska’s penchant for dwelling on contradictions to generally accepted truths and her refusal to commit herself entirely to one side of an issue inspires her extensive use of a “naive question” strategy, as Stanisław Barańczak has brilliantly observed. This technique “always brings the ‘dogmatic opinion’ down to the level of an individual exception that contradicts the general rule and by the same token renders it, if not invalid, then at least suspect” (1994: 264). I would add that Szymborska does not presume to propose new truths or to entirely deconstruct the ones she “naively questions.” Rather, she attempts to reconstruct a full picture, which for her—as for Pascal—includes at once the truth and falsity about each thing. Szymborska does not create her own version of the world, she merely “adds glosses ‘on the margin’ of the established version of reality” (Ligęza 1983, 89).

Is Nature Perfect?

The question of nature’s perfection, like that of human-specific consciousness, inspires such qualifying “glosses” in Szymborska’s poetry. The poem “The Onion” (LN) describes the eponymous vegetable as an impressive work of nature, perfect in its simplicity:

At peace, of a piece,
 internally at rest.
 Inside it, there’s a smaller one
 of undiminished worth.
 The second holds a third one,
 the third contains a fourth.
 A centripetal fugue.
 Polyphony compressed.
 Nature’s rotundest tummy,
 its greatest success story,
 the onion drapes itself in its
 own aureoles of glory. (120–1)

The essence of onionness that emerges in the poem consists in sameness and self-containment. The onion's multiple identical layers are described by a startlingly paradoxical metaphor of monophonic polyphony: "echo combined into chorus" [*echo złożone w chór*; B&C: "Polyphony compressed"].¹⁰ The poem also accentuates the onion's inward focus and utter self-sufficiency: it is "a centripetal fugue" that requires no external confirmation of its own greatness, since it "drapes itself in its own aureoles of glory." Szymborska taps the geometric connotation of the aureole (a halo) as well as its metaphoric one. The word is particularly fitting in its geometric aspect since both the aureole and the onion are round. In its metaphoric aspect, the image of the aureole as an emblem of saintliness resonates with the description of the onion as the height of nature's perfection.

The contrast between the onion and human beings is stated overtly in the poem:

Our skin is just a coverup
for the land where none dare go,
an internal inferno,
the anathema of anatomy.
In an onion there's only onion
from its top to its toe,
onionymous monomania,
unanimous omninuity. (120)

The rigorous and fair-minded poet recognizes the need of common terms for comparing the onion and man, hence she focuses on their bodily constitution. She juxtaposes the onion's simplicity to man's "internal inferno" and his tangled mass of bowels. The onion has no other constituent than itself: "Its innards don't exist./ Nothing but pure onionhood/ fills this devout onionist." In contrast, the human interior and exterior differ, and only a thin layer of skin covers the "foreignness" and "wildness" or "fierceness" inside (both implied by "*dzikość*"). The obverse of this physical description, however, is a more abstract plane of thought. Szymborska contrasts the idea of "onionhood" with the idea of being human in a philosophical sense. She juxtaposes the onion's simplicity to human complexity. Humans are ex-centric, rather than concentric; they are not sufficient unto themselves but need contact with the outside world for physical as well as spiritual sustenance. The onion is "an existence free of contradictions" [*niesprzeczny byt*] while human existence is ridden with contradictions. (Similarly, Pascal views man as a contradictory mixture of opposites: a brute and an angel [31].)

The poem's evaluation of the difference between the onion and man follows the logic of a "naive question." In all but the last two lines, the speaker expresses exaltation over the onion's perfect simplicity and irrita-

tion with man's execrable "internal inferno." However, this voice is ironically undermined by certain phraseologisms that expose its naive simple-mindedness. Already the poem's opening line strikes one this way: "The onion, now that's something else" [*Co innego cebula*]. The last stanza features an awkward solecism: "The onion, that I understand" [*Cebula, to ja rozumiem*]. These phrases betray a callow, gullible simpleton in his artless yet shallow admiration. The syntactic primitivism of the third stanza's first two lines contributes to this effect: "A contradiction-free existence, that onion,/ the onion, now that's a clever thing" [*Byt niesprzeczny cebula,/ udany cebula twór*].¹¹ It should be noted, however, that the conceptual and literary aspects of the comparison reveal great insight, ingenuity, and poetic craftsmanship, as lines such as "A centripetal fugue./ Polyphony compressed" exemplify. It is the judgment that associates perfection with simplicity that is ironized here. This ironic distance is made explicit in the poem's final lines:

We hold veins, nerves, and fat,
secretions' secret sections.
Not for us such idiotic
onionoid perfections. (121)

If the onion's characteristics are a mark of perfection, then such perfection is idiocy, the poem's finale announces. The assumption that nature is perfect becomes qualified in the process of the poet's "naive" investigation. Adam Zagajewski reminds us that the word "idiocy" particularly fits this context since it derives from the Greek *idios* denoting "singularity," "selfness;" an idiot is a person focused entirely on his own biological existence with no contact with the outside world (112). These are precisely the terms in which the onion has been described in the poem. The notion of perfection lingers already in the "penumbra" of the first stanza: "The onion is purely itself/ to the point of onionness" [*Jest sobą na wskroś cebula/ do stopnia cebuliczności*]. The phrase "to the point of" usually denotes an extreme form of some feature; in this particular context we would expect the word "perfection" to follow (Pol. "*doskonałość*" would also fit in the metric and rhyming schema of the stanza). Yet Szymborska withholds this word until the last line and replaces it here with a neologism "onionness," thereby frustrating our expectation of a word that would describe an extreme degree of the onion's integrity. The tautological effect is comparable to the sentence "John is himself to the point of johnness."

However, Zagajewski errs when he interprets the poem as Szymborska's assertion that man with his complexity and diversity is by default the perfect one. The poem does not exclude this possibility, yet such a conclusion remains beyond its scope. The poem merely suggests that if the onion were

to be an exemplar of perfection, then man should rejoice at his imperfection. While "The Apple Tree" nostalgically deplores man's dissociation from nature, the consciousness that he acquires at the cost of equanimity, "The Onion" celebrates his difference.¹²

Szymborska questions the notions of biologic determinism and the immutability and logic of the laws of nature. That nature may err and have its own glitches is shown, for example, in "Returning Birds" (NE). The poem subverts an unspoken premise that instinct ensures nature's smooth functioning by describing a premature return of birds from winter migration that proves fatal for them. This catastrophe invalidates the commonly upheld dichotomy between the infallible natural instinct and fallible human reason:

This spring the birds came back again too early.
Rejoice, O reason: instinct can err, too.
It gathers wool, it doses off—and down they fall
into the snow . . . (52)

The anthropomorphization of instinct in its act of erring (third line) accentuates its ironic juxtaposition with fallible human reason. The poem implies that instinct can fail animals just as reason can fail man, and nature may sometimes be no better than man. (Szymborska also appears as a moderate defender of reason in "Options," where she says "I prefer not to claim/ that reason is to blame for everything.")

Malfunctioning instinct is also a subject of one of Szymborska's review-feuilletons. She discusses a book about lemmings, whose "hormonal fate" leads them, when their lairs become overcrowded, to a mass exodus to the sea in which they drown. She supports her argument about the drawbacks of instinct with the example of migrating birds:

The instinct that makes them fly away in the fall and travel sometimes several thousand kilometers *only appears* to aid and preserve the birds' safety. If finding a good feeding ground in a milder climate were the only goal, many bird species could finish their arduous flight much earlier. Meanwhile, these insane creatures fly further, over the mountains, where, caught in a storm, they crash against the rocks . . . Merciless selection is not always nature's goal: there are disasters in which the weak and the strong specimens die side by side. (*Lektury* 1992, 39)

She also mentions a certain species of geese which experience the migration instinct before they are fully fledged. They embark on their journey on "foot" and become prey for predators. "A bird is a lunatic unconscious of its lunacy"—concludes Szymborska, again as if echoing Pascal.

Most of "Returning Birds" focuses on demonstrating that these animals have no physical defect that could inspire their creator, nature, to "take them off the market." The poem eulogizes nature's creative ingenuity and craftsmanship. The birds' death

. . . doesn't suit their well-wrought throats and splendid claws,
their honest cartilage and conscientious webbing,
the heart's sensible sluice, the entrails' maze,
the nave of ribs, the vertebrae in [a] stunning [row *en suite*],
feathers deserving their own wing in any crafts museum,
the Benedictine patience of the beak. (52)

In view of such mastery and accomplishment,¹³ the premature demise of the birds is inexplicable. Nature, then, can also be senseless, "irrational," even by its own standards. It is interesting that not a hint of the accusation of cruelty enters the poem. In her discourse with nature Szymborska adopts nature's own logic—just as in "The Onion" she describes man on the vegetable's terms—which is why her denunciation proves so damaging. The poem explores a paradox: if nature indeed concerns itself with the survival of the fittest individuals and species, who most successfully adapt to the environment, how can one explain the senseless death of these marvelous creatures, the fit and the less fit alike? It is nature's wastefulness rather than cruelty that inspires the poet's censure: "This is not a dirge—no, it's only indignation." The dead bird falls upon a stone that views life as "a chain of failed attempts." The poet rejects this view as "archaic" and "simpleminded," an inappropriate way of thinking about life. Thus it becomes clear that her concurrence with nature has been only rhetorical.

Besides, the birds represent nature's *successful* attempt. Their intricacy is described in terms of craftsmanship and artistry. Their cartilages and webbing are "honest" and "conscientious," (the words used in the Polish usually describe artisans), their feathers merit "a wing in any crafts museum." Their rib cage resembles a church nave, their spine—rooms *en suite*, in the doorway-path of which there runs a spinal cord.¹⁴ The perfection of the birds' bodily design inspires a biblical comparison: "[a]n angel made of earthbound protein,/ . . . with glands straight from the Song of Songs." And finally, a literary simile appears: "its tissues tied into a common knot/ of place and time, as in an Aristotelian drama." In short, nature has certainly succeeded in its creative attempt; the birds' premature death betrays an error.

However, Szymborska does not propose that nature's misgovernance should cause man to gloat over his superiority. Nature in many ways is wiser than man, as the poem "Psalm" (LN) demonstrates. "Oh, the leaky boundaries of man-made states!" exclaims the poet in the opening line, and lists examples of how nature violates the borders established by humans. Clouds, sand, pebbles, and birds pass through them with impunity. So do innumerable insects, like an ant that "between the border guard's left and right boots/ blithely ignor[es] the question 'Where from?' and 'Where to?'" The tone of pretended indignation at such ostentatious disrespect of man-made enclosures escalates in the poem:

Oh, to register in detail, at a glance, the chaos
prevailing on every continent!
Isn't that a privet on the far bank
smuggling its hundred-thousandth leaf across the river?
And who but the octopus, with impudent long arms,
would disrupt the sacred bounds of territorial waters?

And how can we talk of order overall
when the very placement of the stars
leaves us doubting just what shines for whom? (99–100)

The poem juxtaposes man's border-delimiting zeal, his belief that the world can be artificially partitioned, with an utter rejection of this notion in the world of nature. Man's instinct for acquisition, his "privatization" of nature, is most explicitly ridiculed in the postulate that stars might be relocated so one could tell which one shines for whom. The tone of indignation at unruly nature masks the poet's praise of it. Like "The Onion," "Psalm" uses a double-voiced lyrical persona. Here, the scandalized tone is ironized throughout the poem (to demand of clouds and insects their conformity with human borders is absurd) and is ultimately rejected in the last couplet: "Only what is human can truly be foreign./ The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind." These pithy lines condemn man's acquisitive and border-making drive, and praise nature's harmonious interconnectedness. Szymborska plays on a famous Latin maxim "*homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto*" ("I am a man; I count nothing that is human indifferent to me"), which celebrates human interconnectedness. By transforming this saying, she paints an image of man that stresses his proclivity for alienation, rather than for bonding.

"Psalm" also juxtaposes nature's organic chaos to man's artificial order—to the latter's disadvantage. This juxtaposition mirrors the one expressed in "Options," in which, to quote it yet again, the poet expresses her preference for "the hell of chaos over the hell of order." In fact, "Psalm" suggests, nature is only apparently chaotic; it has its internal order that makes far more sense than any order that man might create.

Evolution

Impossibility—meaning a stone wall? Well, of course, the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science, mathematics. Once it's proved to you, for example, that you descended from an ape, there's no use making a wry face, just take it for what it is . . . [G]o ahead and accept it, there's nothing to be done, because two times two is—mathematics. Try objecting to that.

(Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* 13)

Szymborska takes up the Underground Man's challenge to stand up to the "stone wall" of the laws of nature and natural science. However, unlike the renowned paradoxalist, Szymborska refrains from sticking her tongue out at this wall and making a wry face. Instead, her "face" bears the ironic smirk of a composed and rational adversary. The previous section has shown the poet subvert the notion of nature's perfection; this section will show her arguing with evolution. Not that she minds our simian descent. On the contrary, she embraces it as a critical check on man's anthropocentric hubris. Yet she also questions the inner logic of the evolutionary process and proposes unorthodox ways to evaluate it.

In her poems on evolution Szymborska frequently uses judgment as her poetic strategy. Zagajewski considers this strategy fundamental to Szymborska's poetry. In its "permanent Last Judgment," "[w]hoever was forgotten shall be remembered, whoever was wronged shall be righted" (114). This corrective judgment allows the poet to evaluate nature's performance and evolutionary history. Responding to this aspect of Szymborska's poetry, Balcerzan calls it "the poetry of revindication" (35). According to him, the poet first discovers a trace of something that has not survived in the cultural memory and then attempts to imagine "the consequences of lack," to stage "the drama of nonexistence" (35). Szymborska's poems on evolution represent such an attempt to "revindicate" lost worlds and species.

"A Speech in the Lost-and-Found Office" portrays the end result of man's evolution as an account of losses. The poet takes these losses very personally and with remarkable conscientiousness starts *ab ovo*: she first lists a loss of *her* few gods, then *her* stars, then *her* islands that sank in the sea. Next comes the negative balance sheet of *her* bodily appendages and faculties:

I don't even know for sure where I left my claws,
who walks around in my fur, who inhabits my shell.
My kith and kin died off when I crawled out onto land,
and only some small bone within me celebrates the anniversary.
I've jumped out of my skin, squandered vertebrae and legs,
taken leave of my senses many and many a time. (K&M 133)

The passage is an extravaganza of linguistic ingenuity, Szymborska's trademark, as she transforms the idiom of modern everyday life to relate prehistoric processes. "Who walks around in my fur?"—is an appropriate question about a lost coat, but not about a lost pelage. "I've jumped out of my skin" is meant here *very* literally, as is the colloquial phrase "I've taken leave of my senses" (i.e., human beings used to be equipped with more than five senses, but have since lost some of them). The speaker who recounts this ruinous balance views herself personally involved at each step of the evolutionary extortion. Her self-definition in the poem's conclusion

epitomizes Szymborska's tendency of seeing man in the perspective of all existence: "an individual being, for the moment of human kind." This formulation cautions against viewing man as nature's finished product: the context of all time and all life necessitates a qualification about the provisional nature of his current *status quo*.¹⁵

Another poem, "Thomas Mann" (NE), portrays man as nature's whimsical byproduct, a result of negligent oversight. The poet assumes the position of a spokesperson for nature's interests who explains to mermaids, fauns, and angels nature's reasons for casting them out. The speaker asserts that although mother nature does not lack imagination, the mermaids' and fauns' wild rhapsody of fanciful and intricate bodily traits would overwhelm her too much:

... your arms alongside, not instead of, wings,
 ... this morphogenetic potpourri, those
 finned or furry frills and furbelows, the couplets
 pairing human/huron with such cunning
 that their offspring knows all, is immortal, and can fly,
 you must admit that it would be a nasty joke,
 excessive, everlasting, and no end of bother,
 one that mother nature wouldn't like and won't allow. (53)

Although the speaker supports nature's verdict that excludes these creatures from life, she is clearly impressed with them.¹⁶ She applauds unusual, fanciful life forms despite her seeming concurrence with the frugal and "level-headed" nature which considers them an extravagance and a "bother." Thus, without openly contesting nature's verdict, the speaker rejoices at its marvelous oversights, such as flying fish. The speaker feels consoled by detecting exceptions in nature's own rules since they attest to a certain flexibility and unpredictability that are essential "for the world to be a world" (53). She is grateful that nature "consoles our rule-bound world" ("*pociecha w regule*") and "reprieves it from necessity's confines" ("*ułaskawienie z powszechnej konieczności*"). The Polish text's unusual phraseological combinations can be unravelled as follows. The first phrase smuggles in an implicit claim that a rule is actually a sorrow, or misfortune, in the world of *homo sapiens*, since the semantic pull of the word "*pociecha*" ("consolation") makes one expect words denoting such feelings and states. In the second instance, necessity is implicitly likened to a prison sentence or confinement, since only these circumstances would warrant a reprieve or a pardon. Such indirectness and innuendo alert us to the fact that the speaker is trying to conceal her true feelings on the subject. We are led to think that although the speaker's gratitude toward nature rings genuine, she accepts nature's reasons with certain reservations: if it were up to her, she would run the world with greater flair.

Throughout the poem the reader may wonder what all the "Devonian tails," "cloven feet," and "furry frills" have to do with the titular hero, Thomas Mann. The last line holds the surprise. The great German writer is put on a par with nature's freaks, the flying fish and platypus, and is likewise introduced in terms of an anatomical curiosity: as a mammal "with his hand miraculously [quilled] by a fountain pen."¹⁷ Anna Kamieńska rightly observes that this juxtaposition may appear at once degrading and ennobling. Yet she misinterprets the poem when she claims that by putting Mann in the context of evolution the poet suggests that "the entire history of life on earth was leading to this miraculous accident the name of which is Thomas Mann" (251). Precisely the opposite is true. The poem suggests that there really was no reason why a thinking and creative being like man—and Mann in particular; the writer's name, incidentally, denotes "man" in German—should appear in mother nature's line of ordinary products. Fortunately, she let this curious exception survive and "console" our "rule-bound world." Yet the poem denies uniqueness to man's status as nature's nonconformist offspring, the status conferred upon him thanks to his creativity.¹⁸ One might add that such view of man appears degrading only if one assumes man's centrality to all earthly life, but Szymborska never shared this assumption. Anti-anthropocentrism may well represent Szymborska's one consistent and firmly upheld belief.

Indeed, anthropocentrism is the object of ridicule in "Dinosaur Skeleton" (CH). The poem's voice belongs presumably to a tour-guide in a natural history museum. The speaker persists in addressing the listeners very formally. Though his opening "Beloved Brethren" attests to a basic human equality and fraternity, the phrases that follow tend to put the addressees on a pedestal. They become ever more exalted as the cajoling speaker assumes an ever greater distance between himself and his audience. Through "Honored Dignitaries" and "Distinguished Guests," he spirals to the lofty heights of "Supremest of Courts." This manic proliferation of honorific titles becomes a testimonial to our human weakness: the sweet temptation to think ourselves more important than we actually are.

The speaker firmly believes in man's superiority to a dinosaur. He considers the dinosaur an example of faulty proportions: too long a tail, too small a head, too much appetite, too little brain power. In criticizing the dinosaur he draws on a set of purely human notions about proper psychic and somatic make-up. The juxtaposition of man and the dinosaur reveals inexhaustible layers of human hubris:

Distinguished Guests,
 we're in far better shape in this regard,
 life is beautiful and the world is ours—

Venerated Delegation,
the starry sky above the thinking reed
and moral law within it—

Most Revered Deputation,
such success does not come twice
and perhaps beneath this single sun alone—

Inestimable Council,
how deft the hands,
how eloquent the lips,
what a head on these shoulders—

Supremest of Courts,
so much responsibility in place of a vanished tail—(77–8)

This monologue marks the speaker as a rather obtuse specimen of the species he so jubilantly extols, which is Szymborska's way of ironizing the beliefs he represents. His panegyric overflows with utter trivialities, such as "life is beautiful and the world is ours." By conflating Kant and Pascal he creates a hodgepodge of incongruous notions (the second of the quoted stanzas), as the first believed in man's privileged position in the universe, while the other questioned it. The assertion of man's superiority on the basis of his deft hands and eloquent lips reveals the full extent of the speaker's bias: the partiality for eloquent lips over a long neck betrays a purely arbitrary judgment. Moreover, if being well-proportioned were to constitute the main criterion of comparison, man fares no better than a dinosaur, since his excessively large brain corresponds to the latter's excessively long tail, as the poem's final line implies. A view of man as nature's greatest work, the *telos* of natural history, is groundless.¹⁹

Nonetheless, man's relatively short evolutionary history allows for moderate pride in his achievements, as "No End of Fun" (NE) demonstrates. In a half-amused, half-amazed tone, the poem ponders man's daring to make such extravagant claims as happiness, truth, eternity, or freedom despite his fragility and precocity:

only just realized that he is he;
only just whittled with his hand né fin
a flint, a rocket ship,
easily drowned in the ocean's teaspoon,
... sees only with his eyes;
hears only with his ears;
his speech's personal best is the conditional;
he uses his reason to pick holes in reason.
In short, he's next to no one,
but his head's full of freedom, omniscience, and the Being
beyond his foolish meat—
did you ever! (60)

As in "A Speech in a Lost-and-Found Office," man is seen here in the totality of evolutionary history. Lines 2–3 above convey this idea in a cleverly compressed metaphor that may be unfolded the following way: hardly has man's hand evolved from a fin, and already it whittles a flint, only to move shortly thereafter to the task of building a spaceship! Yet the speaker denies man his status as the crown of existence by calling him a "crystal's deviant descendant," and moreover denies our world a centrality in the universe by calling our sun "one of the more parochial stars." (The speaker's identity and gender are unspecified, but his—or her—perspective is clearly not human; it could be divine or extraterrestrial.) The poem exemplifies Szymborska's conflation of the biological and humanistic views of man. Man appears here as a crystal, meat, a finned creature, but also as a thinking, creative, philosophizing, and inquisitive *individual*: "And considering his difficult childhood/ spent kowtowing to the herd's needs,/ he's already quite an individual indeed/—did you ever!" Irony, as Barańczak perceptively notes, plays a key role in Szymborska's view of man since it safeguards her humanism from the contamination of anthropocentric hubris (1979: 135).

Death

In "Seen from Above" (LN) Szymborska uses the theme of nature to talk about human death. The poem describes a dead beetle that:

... lies on the path through the field.
Three pairs of legs folded neatly on its belly.
Instead of death's confusion—tidiness and order.
The horror of this sight is moderate,
its scope strictly local, from the wheat grass to the mint.
The grief is quarantined.
The sky is blue. (103)

The poem contrasts the messy and terrifying human death with the tidy and merely "moderately" horrible beetle death. While people view human death as an event on a cosmic scale, the beetle's death has a "strictly local" dimension, the lament of fellow-beetles does not ensue. Nature runs its natural course.²⁰

People attribute the differences between the beetle and human deaths to the differences between the beetle and human existence:

To preserve *our* peace of mind, animals die
more shallowly: they aren't deceased, they're dead.
They leave behind, *we'd like to think*, less feeling and less world,
departing, *we suppose*, from a stage less tragic. (103, emphasis mine)

The poet avoids direct speech and insistently qualifies these statements as mere opinions. She thus casts doubt on the notion of the lesser profundity

of the animal death relative to ours if it were to be based on an assumption that animals feel and know less. She stresses the *arbitrariness* of such a view, the possibility that it may only be our wishful thinking (“to preserve our peace of mind”). We can know what another creature feels just as much as we can imagine how a grain of sand views itself.

In fact, the poem implies a *lack* of difference between animal and human deaths:

. . . clearly nothing much has happened to it.
Important matters are [supposedly] reserved for us,
for [just] our life and [just] our death
that always claims the right of way. (103, emphasis mine)²¹

The poet's insistence on dissociating herself from the views presented implies that she subjects them to her “naive question” strategy, that she intends to show them only “supposedly” true. Szymborska denounces the hierarchical order we impose on the world as our own ridiculous construct, as Barańczak points out (1979: 135). If, then, the opposite is true—that animals and people die a similar death—two conclusions are possible. First, the death of animals has the same cosmic scope that people think their own death has. Second, human death has a “local,” insignificant scope, like the death of animals, and all the importance we attach to it is unwarranted. The poem maintains the tension between these two possibilities, but the last line shifts the balance toward the second option. Not only does death “claim” the right of way (B&C), it *violates* it (“wymuszonym cieszy się pierwszeństwem”). The word “wymuszone” moreover conveys the sense of “extortion” (K&M accentuates this overtone, though it loses the traffic imagery). This line paints the image of death as a forcible driver: death violates the rules in order to gain primacy. Thus the final line suggests that the prominence of death in our systems of thought rests on a usurpation.

In another poem, “Autotomy” (CH), Szymborska counters the implicitly invoked belief in the supremacy of death with an example to the contrary. She describes the holothurian, a primitive sea creature which, when attacked, cuts itself in two, thus sacrificing one part of its body to the assailant, and preserving and then regenerating the other:

It violently divides into doom and salvation,
retribution and reward, what has been and what will be.
An abyss appears in the middle of its body
between what instantly becomes two foreign shores.
Life on the one shore, death on the other.
Here hope and there despair.
If there are scales, the pans don't move.
If there is justice, this is it. (82)

The scales of life and death remain balanced: the holothurian dies without excess, only as much as is necessary, and grows back “just what's needed from what's left.” This is “justice” because both the holothurian and its attacker get something; their encounter is not a winner-take-all situation.

The holothurian's ability to split endlessly into life and death would appear to make it an immortal creature. In another of her reviews Szymborska engages in a thought-provoking meditation about the curious mixture of life and death that exists in nature:

For hundreds of millions of years life lived itself [wyżywało się] in single-cell creatures that reproduced by fission. Now, fission cannot be called birth, since we're dealing with one and the same cell, only in two twin copies. It is also hard to say that these twins are its children, since one cannot be one's own child. . . . The mother cell simply disappears in fission—and this is quite different from the death that is known to other, more complicated animals. A corpse is needed in order to pronounce death, as is the case in any proper criminal investigation. In view of all that: where do we have the corpse? . . . The sort of ideas that primordially came into nature's head, really! It used to create organisms that live, but are neither born properly, nor fated to die. And even if they die, death comes to them from the outside, as an unfortunate accident, rather than . . . an internal necessity of an organism. It's as if death were taking casual part-time jobs before eventual promotion to a permanent position. One could say that . . . these creatures still rub shoulders with immortality in a quite familiar way. For reasons known only to itself, nature began moving away from its original concept and launched the production of mortal creatures . . . (Lektury 1992, 193–4)

“Autotomy” claims that human beings also “rub shoulders with immortality,” though in a much more intangible fashion, since our division into life and death occurs along lines different than those of the holothurian:

We, too can divide ourselves, it's true.
But only into flesh and a broken whisper.
Into flesh and poetry.
The throat on the one side, laughter on the other,
quiet, quickly dying out.
Here the heavy heart, there *non omnis moriar*—
just three little words, like a flight's three feathers.
The abyss doesn't divide us.
The abyss surrounds us. (82–3)

The human body is destined for the “shore of death”; only “poetry” can ensure man's survival, if only (or perhaps—even?) a spiritual one. As in “Thomas Mann,” artistic creativity represents man's distinguishing and ennobling feature (the poem is devoted to the memory of a writer as well, the Polish poet Halina Poświatowska). Yet this poem broadens the notion of poetry to encompass consciousness, thought, our ability to philosophize. The line “Here the heavy heart, there *non omnis moriar*” exemplifies once again Szymborska's penchant for activating the literal sense of an idiom.²² In both Polish and English, the phrase “heavy heart” denotes sorrow,

burdensome distress. Yet Szyborska also means it in the sense of “a heavy organ” by which she maintains the parallel with the preceding line that contrasts flesh with poetry (“heavy heart” also alludes to Poświatowska, who died young of a heart disease and wrote mostly love lyrics). Thus, the heart as a bodily organ is juxtaposed to poetry and philosophy, which themselves are the products of the heart, but now conceived as a seat of the soul.

While the holothurian’s survival is *material* and tangible, man’s survival is *immaterial* and intangible: it consists in the immortality of thought. The poet introduces the idea of human survival ironically. The manner in which she first mentions it resembles footnoting or appending the text proper. The interjection “*och prawda*” (B&C: “it’s true”) suggests a sudden recollection of an almost forgotten trifle. The human “shore of life” harbors ephemeral diminutions: a broken whisper, quiet laughter that dies out quickly, three words like “a flight’s three feathers.”

The difference between the holothurian’s and man’s survival may be explained by what threatens the one and the other. “The abyss” cuts *through the middle* of the holothurian’s body, while man is *surrounded* by it. In other words, the holothurian is assailed by a tangible presence, another animal, while man is threatened in a spiritual sense, by the “abysmal” mystery of the universe and existence. The poem conveys a sense that in comparison with the holothurian, man’s survival may not amount to much, but under the circumstances it actually means a great deal.

Szyborska extends the jurisdiction of her poetic “Last Judgment” (as Zagajewski calls it) to include even death. In her crusade to set its limits, “On Death, Without Exaggeration” (PB) represents a landmark case. This poem, as “Autotomy,” evokes the notion of death’s omnipotence only implicitly. Among the arguments to the contrary the poet notes death’s incompetence in matters of weaving, mining, farming, or baking cakes. Omnipotence implies the ability to do everything. Since death cannot do a great deal of things, one should not consider it all-powerful. It proves incapable of even the simplest tasks connected with its trade: digging a grave or making a coffin. The world of nature wins over death many a time:

All those bulbs, pods,
tentacles, fins, trachea,
nuptial plumage, and winter fur
show that it has fallen behind
with its half-hearted work.

. . . Hearts beat inside eggs.
Babies’ skeletons grow.
Seeds, hard at work, sprout their first tiny pair of leaves
and sometimes even tall trees far away.

Whoever claims that it’s omnipotent
is himself living proof
that it’s not.
There’s no life
that couldn’t be immortal
if only for a moment. (139)

The self-perpetuation of all life contradicts death’s omnipotence. Death is a series of failed attempts. Seeds, bulbs, and pods keep on sprouting. Organisms develop features that improve their capacity of outmaneuvering death, such as tentacles or fins that allow them to detect and swiftly escape danger. Nature encourages procreation (“nuptial plumage”) and survival (“winter fur”). All living creatures are “living proof” (again, Szyborska’s conflation of the literal and the metaphoric senses) of the basic immortality of all life—“if only for a moment.” This pointedly contradictory qualification redirects our customary way of thinking about death. Rather than to belittle the value of life in the face of inexorable death, the poet emphasizes life’s—however fleeting—“moment” as a victorious stronghold against death’s encroachments.

Although Szyborska uses nature in her investigation of human predicament, nature in itself remains for her an inscrutable mystery, in the face of which amazement and wonder are the only appropriate reactions. Numerous poems, such as “Miracle Fair” (PB), “Birthday” (CH), “Allegro ma non troppo” (CH), or “Wonderment” (CH) convey precisely this sentiment. So does her review of a book on extinct reptiles. The book’s author dismisses all the sensationalism connected with them as unnecessary. Szyborska counters:

I disagree with the author emphatically. I am not so *blasé* as to see any life form as normal. There has never been and never will be a normal animal. Thus the work of paleontologists, despite its daily tediousness, is a visit to the land of magic wonders. What’s most interesting, the theory of evolution has not been able to disclose the secrets of this magic. On the contrary, life appears all the more amazing, the more logical appears its development. (*Lektury* 1973, 124)

In depicting the onion with its simplicity and inward, con-centric focus Szyborska may well have created a negative image of her own poetic world. The “ex-centricity” with which Baranowska credits Szyborska—meant as an avoidance of the center—may on the other hand serve as an apt characterization of the poet’s *oeuvre*, of the way she thinks about the world, responds to its fluidity and change, and approaches her poetic material (the “naive question” strategy). Although Baranowska is right to consider ex-centricity the cornerstone of Szyborska’s poetry, she fails to specify her use of this metaphor. The term “ex-centricity” should not lead one to think that Szyborska deals with peripheral *issues*. On the contrary, she confronts central matters of reality, such as life and death or man’s place in the universe. Ex-centricity in her case implies a peripheral *vantage*

point, a selection of less well-trodden paths from which to approach these central issues. More fundamentally, as her "View with a Grain of Sand" suggests, since a direct insight into the heart of things is impossible, the epistemological quest by its nature implies a peripheral position with respect to the unreachable *Ding an Sich*. If, then, the approximation of reality is the best we can hope for, the proliferation of viewpoints, often from peripheral and unexpected perspectives, will likely yield the most promising results.

Szymborska's move to the periphery may also be viewed ideologically. What the poet leaves behind—that is, in the center—are, as Barańczak insightfully notes, hasty generalizations, views that are speculative, dogmatic, intolerant (1994: 264). A belief in anthropocentrism and either man's or nature's perfection belong to such an ideological "center." The ideas that Szymborska gathers on the periphery are, in contrast, empirical, "preferring specificity over typicality, . . . open to change, and far from imposing" (Barańczak 1994, 264). Such predilection for the periphery implies a preference for individual and partial truths. The open-endedness of her poems on nature, often achieved by pervasive and multidirectional irony, and the diversity of perspectives that different poems represent, aid her in staying away from "centrist" dogmatism.

Szymborska's humor likewise represents a corollary of her ex-centricity. One cannot write a serious poem that compares man to an object that is lyrically as peripheral as the onion. The poet's humorous disposition is coupled with a conviction that poetry can successfully combine profundity with entertainment. The poet's humor also represents a way of "recapturing" poetry's "lost territories" (see the interview I quote in my introduction). To those who wish to classify her as an existential poet, Szymborska replies: "I do not engage in philosophy but in modest poetry. Existentialists are monumental and monotonously serious, they don't like to joke . . . I don't subscribe to this way of thinking. I always find something funny in excessive seriousness. Excessive joy, on the other hand, or robust enthusiasm, saddens me, even terrifies me" (Nastulanka 305).

"Robust enthusiasm" may well be the least appropriate label for Szymborska's poetry. I would nonetheless argue that her poetry strikes a note of *qualified* optimism, optimism filtered through doubt, skepticism, and hesitation. Her view of man and his place in nature combines despair and rapture, the abyss and the miracle, and this complex mixture is covered with an overlay of acceptance and the feeling of complete awe in the face of the mystery of life. I therefore believe that Miłosz, one of the least perceptive of Szymborska's readers, could not have been farther off the mark when he attributed "bitterness" and "a vision of despair" to Szymborska's poetry (7). On the contrary, Szymborska is a moderately and cautiously hopeful poet, though her hopfulness does indeed have a bitter taste to it.

NOTES

I would like to thank Professor Stanisław Barańczak, Professor Robert Maguire, Dr. Betsy Moeller-Sally, and Giorgio DiMauro for their invaluable assistance when preparing this article.

- 1 From the 1995 honorary degree by the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, through the Polish PEN Club poetry award, recognition for Szymborska culminated in the Nobel Prize awarded to her on October 3, 1996. Book-length publications about Szymborska started appearing only at the end of 1996, and the most scholarly of them are the critical essays collected in *Radość czytania Szymborskiej* and the works by Stanisław Balbus and Dorota Wojda (these three also contain extensive bibliographies). I was told that Wojciech Ligeza is currently preparing a monograph.
- 2 For example, a translation of the fragments of Théodore Agrippa D'Aubigné's epic *Les Tragiques*. See Jerzy Lisowski, ed., *Antologia poezji francuskiej* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1966: 599–608). See Balbus (31) for more information about Szymborska's translating activity.
- 3 The preface accompanies *Poezje wybrane*. The interview appeared in Nastulanka's collection (since the announcement of the Nobel Prize, there has been a flurry of interviews, but they tend to be brief). It is characteristic that in her 1995 A. Mickiewicz University speech Szymborska explicitly declined to talk about poetry, much less her own, and instead took the occasion to address larger issues of contemporary Polish readership (see *Arkusz*). The personal note is also absent from her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the writing of which became her instant worry upon learning about the award (see *The New York Times* issue; see *The New Republic* for her Nobel lecture).
- 4 All translations from Polish texts other than Szymborska's poems are mine.
- 5 I have omitted the conversational references to the interviewer in the quote.
- 6 In addition, Szymborska's reviews have been collected for the 1973 and 1992 volumes of *Lektury nadobowizkowe*. She has recently continued them in *Książki*, a monthly supplement of *Gazeta Wyborcza*.
- 7 The translations of Szymborska's poems, unless otherwise noted, come from Barańczak and Cavanagh's collection.
- 8 The quotes from "The Apple Tree" are accompanied by my own translations.
- 9 She explicitly states the latter in "Options" (PB). The poem is a list of things the poet *prefers*, moderation being embedded even in her choice of the verb. Rather than proclaiming what is right or wrong, better or worse, the poet merely states her preference.
- 10 Polish phrases in the square brackets follow my own translations.
- 11 Szymborska uses a similar trick in the poem "The Terrorist, He's Watching" (LN). The redundant repetition of the personal pronouns coextensive with the subject serves as a glimpse into the terrorist's slightly retarded, half-illiterate mind.
- 12 Grażyna Borkowska overlooks entirely the central irony of "The Onion," which results in an unfortunate misreading. She argues that the phrase "the idiocy of perfection" reflects the poet's *frustration* at man's inability to return to self-sufficient, homogenous existence (56). Precisely the opposite is true.
- 13 Szymborska's review in *Lektury* (1992) of a book on birds contains a similarly enthusiastic description: "I like birds for . . . diving in waters and clouds. For their bones filled with air. For the waterproof fluff under their feathers. For their claws, lost at the wings and preserved at the feet. . . . For their staring eyes, which see us in their own way. . . . I value highly the grayness of their feathers that is never monotonous . . ." (203).
- 14 "[T]he nave of ribs, the vertebrae in [a] stunning [row *en suite*]." The Polish word "*amfilada*" (Fr. *enfilade*) denotes a row of rooms connected by doorways, characteristic of the 17th and 18th century palaces, rather than, as the B&C translation suggests, an "enfilade," a column-like arrangement of troops.

- 15 "A Speech" resembles another of Szymborska's poems, "Wonderment" (CH), which lists perplexed questions about the elementary facts of human existence:
- Why to excess then in one single person?
This one and 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?
Why only once in my very own person?
Precisely on earth? Under this little star?
After so many eras of not being here? (K&M 135)
- 16 I see nothing in the poem that would support Balcerzan's view that the poet ridicules the "plagiarizing" character of the human imagination that invented these creatures (34). The speaker is genuinely captivated with mermaids and fauns. Balcerzan is right that there is irony in the poem; however, it is directed elsewhere.
- 17 I prefer the K&M translation of the word "*upierzonq*" as "quilled" since, like the Polish, it conveys the meanings of both a "feather" and a "writing implement" (cf.: B&C "feathered"). On the other hand, the B&C rendition of the word "*cudownie*" as "miraculously" seems more appropriate in the context of the poem: man is a miracle of nature (cf.: K&M "wondrously").
- 18 *Lektury* includes a review of a book on giants and dwarfs in the world of nature in which Szymborska's line of thought resembles that of "Thomas Mann." The idea that giants and dwarfs do not mix inspires Szymborska to conclude that "man can be Gulliver only among Gullivers." As a "consolation" she adds that "man only in these—extremely narrow—dimensions of its kind could have exerted himself so as to come up with Swift and his marvelous tale" (1992: 137–8).
- 19 In "Tarsier" (NE), another of Szymborska's "evolutionary" poems, man usurps nature's function as the arbiter of evolution: he condemns some species to extinction and propagates others. Szymborska takes up this issue also in a review of a book on deer hunting (*Lektury* 1992: 117–8).
- 20 Several other of Szymborska's poems explore the differences in human and animal perspectives. The poem "The Dream of the Old Turtle" (LN) describes the turtle's dream about its past encounter with Napoleon. In the turtle's perception, the great warrior exists as a pair of legs, from heels to knees, shod in black shoes. Another poem, "Cat in an Empty Apartment" [EB], tries to imagine a pet's thoughts on its owner's death.
- 21 I have added the words in square brackets to transmit the Polish text more literally.
- 22 The quote "*non omnis moriar*" ["I shall not wholly die"] comes from Horace's Ode XXX.

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