

ORDINARINESS AND RESACRALISATION: THE EXAMPLE OF WISLAWA SZYMBORKA

Mariusz Przybytek and Stephen Tapscott

We would like to share with you some of our work on the recent poems of Wislawa Szymborska, the Polish poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1996. We do so both because the work is beautiful and important, and because it brings a different perspective to these energised conversations.

Much of what we have been talking about has involved a sense of the openness of landscape and therefore of the transcendent nature of sacred space. We have tended to talk in terms of the openness and diversity of landscape, as of the Australian land – its physical and cultural diversity, its European grids and Aboriginal songlines, even a “New World” sense of frontier as in America. Eastern European landscape and writing, however, have faced a different set of issues.

The example of Szymborska brings to the conversation a sense of “folded” landscape (to use Lyotard’s concept of the transitional “pliation”). Poland has historically been a site of invasion, immigration, and occupation. Because we have been talking about space as a locus of transcendence, we need to be clear that Szymborska begins instead with a sense of place, which is historical. In the twentieth century, Polish “place” has seen partitions, wars, genocide, the ideological imposition of communism and recently of Adam Smith-style capitalism. In fact, readers of Western languages have tended to think that Eastern European writing necessarily has to deal with questions of guilt, collectivity, history, remembering. Szymborska, who was born in 1923 and has lived in Poland all her life, changes these questions, to resist both cultural determinism and delimiting expectations about what Eastern European art should be. For Szymborska, the problem of the sacredness of landscape is a question of how to resacralise a defiled space.

Sacred place is often related to a transcendent sense of time. Szymborska’s poems, however, present a consciousness committed to the Now, to a historical continuous present. Sacredness in this context consists

not in transcendence occurring in high places, but – if it is to found at all – in the ordinary, the immanent, the contingent, the idiomatic. Aesthetically, this makes for a “new” sense of Eastern European art: a horizontal sense of time; an idiomatic, even comic, sense of language; and a physical and immanent sense of the sacred.

Szyborska redefines the traditional challenge of Eastern European art in the twentieth century by stressing the dual need both to remember and responsibly to look forward. Her poems consistently acknowledge that to walk across the European landscape is to walk over layers of history, tragedy and ideology. In her poems’ themes and diction she advocates not only remembering, and not only forgetting, but a combination of remembering and creative not-knowing.

Here is our translation of the title poem of Szyborska’s 1996 book *The End and the Beginning*:

After every war
somebody has to clean up
Naturally, a mish-mash disorder
won’t put itself back together.

Somebody has to shove the rubble
off to the side of the road,
to let the carts pass through
carrying the corpses.

Somebody has to slog through
the slime and the ash,
the sofa-springs,
shards of glass and bloodied rags.

Somebody has to haul timber
to prop up the walls,
glaze the windows,
hang the doors on hinges.

Photogenic it’s not,
and it takes years.
All the cameras left already
for another war.

Bridges must again,
and railway stations anew.
Sleeves will be to shreds
from being rolled up.

Somebody holding a broom
keeps recalling how it was.

Somebody listens,
 nodding his unmutated head.
 But somewhere near them
 already some others will loiter,
 who find this all a little boring.

Even now sometimes, someone
 digging under a bush will unearth rust-eaten justifications
 and carry them off to the dump.

Those who saw
 what it was all about
 must yield place to those
 who know little.
 And less than little.
 And finally
 as much as nothing.

In the grass, which has covered over
 causes and effects,
 somebody has to sprawl
 with a tassel of green between his teeth
 and stare up at the clouds.

What an English reader might not sense in this rendering of the poem is the idiomatic playfulness of the Polish original, nor perhaps its repetitions – for instance, in the phrase “*ktos musi*” (“somebody has to”). In the opening stanzas (lines 2, 5, 9, 14) the construction amounts to a sense of personal obligation. After historical tragedies, Szymborska realises somebody has to “clean up... shove the rubble”, and so on. “*Ktos*” (“somebody”), some individual in history, inherits a responsibility to restore order, which is not quite the same as guilty collective remembering. That is, Szymborska eventually advocates a creative sense of “not knowing”, and the Polish grammar repeats in the last stanza “*ktos musi*” (“somebody has to”) take responsibility to know “as much as nothing,” in order to “stare up at the clouds.”

In the grass, which has covered over
 causes and effects, somebody has to sprawl
 with a tassel of green between his teeth
 and stare up at the clouds.

The grass covers causes and effects (that is, she's not advocating denial but organic continuity), and then the historical newcomer ruminates on it.

It's not exactly a smooth transition in the poem, however, from remembering and cleaning-up to this creative forgetting. But after the personal agendas of the first four stanzas, the grammar has changed into almost untranslatable impersonal forms. In the middle stanzas, the personal responsibility of the historical individual participates in a more organic momentum of reality, because "life goes on": "Bridges must again, / and railways stations anew." Our translation risks sounding awkward in English, because the construction in Polish is pointedly odd: something like the French construction "*il faut*" without the "*il*". If ordinary life contains the sacred, then the re-establishment of "ordinary" life might begin to constitute a resacralisation of the place where immanent ordinarieness occurs. These middle stanzas transcend personal agency; the momentum of life requires "bridges" towards the "cloud" of unknowing.

In her Nobel speech in Stockholm Szymborska explained this relation between inspiration and "not knowing". "Inspiration, whatever it may be, emerges from an unending 'I don't know'." This not-knowing, Szymborska says, is the ethical responsibility of poets and of those others, such as ourselves, whose hard work and whose contribution consists of lying on historical grass and staring at the cloud.

Inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or of artists in general. There is, was, and will always be some group of people whom inspiration haunts... Although I deny poets an absolute monopoly on inspiration, I do include them among that sparse group of people elected by fate.

In other poems Szymborska problematises aesthetic forms in language, because language and poetry become part of the historical forms they participate in. Sometimes her theme is the very difficulty of saying what it is she's saying. Poetic language itself is self-referential, folded-back like the ideological landscape, and so the clarity of her idiom repeats her theme of intelligent "not-knowing." In this poem, Szymborska most dearly addresses the responsibility to remember and to forget in the process of saying and of looking at the cloud. Poets and others fill a cultural role, lying on the (historical) grass, chewing the (immanent) tassel of grass, and regarding the (transcendent) cloud.

Szyborska's poems render the world transparent by presenting and problematising questions of representation and continuity. In this sense the sacredness of the (European) place she celebrates is rescued by public history because, paradoxically, in so far as it is personalised (by the personal agency of "*ktos musci*", the individual's participation in a larger dynamic), it participates in the strict structures of memory and forgetting. In her poetry, as the Swedish Academy characterised it, "her ironic precision discloses biological laws and the workings of history in events of human reality." In her meditations on the sacredness of the ordinary, Szyborska finds a hidden language-bridge between questions of whether art is possible after the Holocaust and questions about the relation of subjectivity and public communicability.