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W. S., OR OUR NEED FOR CERTAINTY

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What can one say about Wisława Szymborska and the poem "Pewność", "Certainty"? It was written by Szymborska, for certain, although it has not often been reprinted in her books. We can also be sure that the poem was written no later than in the summer of 1967: it appeared for the first time in the Warsaw bi-weekly *Współczesność* number 15, 1967, page 3. It was later included in the collection *Wszelki wypadek* ("Could Have"), in 1972.

The word "certainty", *pewność*, is not a typical Szymborska word. In the well-known poem "Utopia", it appears together with other capitalized, almost three-dimensional, topographically sited Great Words: "Unshakeable Certainty" ("Pewność Niewzruszona") is neighbouring to strange places like "the Valley of the Obvious" ("Dolina Oczywistości"), "Lake of Deep Conviction" ("Jezioro Głębokiego Przekonania") and "Essence of Things" ("Istota Rzeczy"). From the island of those Great Words, or Concepts, it seems that one can only - as the poem says - "leave and plunge, never to return, into the depths. Into unfathomable life" ("Jak gdyby tylko odchodzono stąd / i bezpowrotnie zanurzano się w topieli. W życiu nie do pojęcia.").

Here, we should perhaps stop to consider what we, with certainty, can say about Wisława Szymborska. Not much, actually. She was born in 1923 in Kórnik, later settled in Kraków and has thus lived in Poland for almost 80 years. She is the author of some dozen thin books, around 250 poems which she considers worth while reprinting. As a matter of fact, there is more one can say with certainty about what is *not* the case with Szymborska, than what actually *is* the case. After all, everything could have been otherwise.

As a child, she was spared from the various deadly diseases which, in spite of the progress in medicine and hygiene, still were rife between the two world wars. And unfortunate accidents? The little Wisława might have fallen from a tree, a bus, down the stairs, she might have been burned by scalding water or choked on a fishbone. Such accidents, moreover, are not confined to children. Additional traps also await an adult, such as, for example, train

accidents, floods, an overnight stay at a pension that someone accidentally set on fire. The war and Nazi occupation was the main reason, however, why Szymborska might never have entered literature. She was not involved in the resistance movement. But in this malstrom it was possible to perish regardless of your opinions. A car with German soldiers stops in one of the streets of Kraków to look for a conspirator, two young girls passing by are forced to stand up against a wall, someone sneezes, a nervous soldier fires his machine-gun. A silly mistake: someone else was supposed to be heading along this street at just this time, not the twenty-year old Wisława, student of the underground liceum. In her drawer, at home, there were only sketches for some short stories that never were to be published... So how can we not be amazed that her poetry, after all, came into being? That she did not emigrate and became the owner of a modestly successful curiosity shop in Le Marais in Paris? Or a teacher of Polish language at Stockholms högskola, translator of Selma Lagerlöf into Polish? Or, staying in Poland, after having been first enchanted, then disenchanted by marxism, successively occupied by revisionism, Theillardism, alcoholism, romanticism, anti-romanticism, turpism, feminism, ecologism, and postmodernism? Thus ending up in the history of Polish literature as one among other women poets, who "often leans toward preciousness", at her best when "her woman's sensibility outweighs her existential brand of rationalism" ?¹

As you certainly have noticed, I have here allowed myself to paraphrase somewhat the poet's own "counterfactual" sketch in *Notrequired Reading (Lektury nadobowiązkowe)* about Michel de Montaigne and his *Essays*. This marvellously polymorphous work is certainly one of Szymborska's most important intellectual companions. She refers to him in different texts, which have been noted by some scholars.² Montaigne also appears in another, somewhat surprising context. In the 1960's and 70's Szymborska was one of the editors of the *Literary Letters* in the Kraków weekly *Życie Literackie*, where readers' letters were answered and their literary endeavours evaluated.³ There were also, now and then, apocryphical contributions to this column. One of them carried the rather transparent signature "M.E. De Mont." The signature got a reply which ended in the following words: "The extent of your digressions brings one out of balance" ("Rozmiar Pańskich dywagacji wyprowadza z równowagi").⁴ In the context of Szymborska, of course should be understood as the highest possible commendation.

¹ Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, 1969, p. 485

² Wojciech Ligeża, *Szymborskiej korekta świata*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2002, p. 143. A quotation from Montaigne appears both in the poem "Notatka" (1962) and as motto for the poet's work (in one of the few texts Szymborska has written about her own poetry, "Od autorki", in *Poezje wybrane*, Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdz. Wydawnicza 1967, p. 5-6): "See how many ends this stick has!" ("Kij rozgałęził się w gęstwinię końców").

³ *Pocztą literacką*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 2000.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 144.

Actually, "*to bring out of balance*" seems to be one of the central principles of Szymborska's poetics. In this poetic world, human certainty is constantly overshadowed by uncertainty. Certainty seems to be nothing more than an exception to uncertainty. Thus, those who have fallen in love at first sight may be "convinced that a sudden passion joined them". But the poet adds:

Such certainty is beautiful,
but uncertainty is more beautiful still.
Oboje są przekonani,
że połączyło ich uczucie nagle.
Piękna jest taka pewność,
ale niepewność jest piękniejsza.

("Miłość od pierwszego wejrzenia")

Confronted with the most accidental and particular, the poet concludes that all this is more important than the seemingly important:

So it happens that I am and look.
Above me a white butterfly is fluttering through the air
on wings that are its alone,
and a shadow skims through my hands
that is none other than itself, no one else's but its own.

When I see such things, I'm no longer certain
that what's important
is more important than what's not.

Tak się złożyło, że jestem i patrzę.
Nade mną biały motyl trzepoce w powietrzu
skrzydełkami, co tylko do niego należą
i przelatuje mi przez ręce cień,
nie inny, nie czyjkolwiek, tylko jego własny.

Na taki widok zawsze opuszcza mnie pewność,
że to co ważne
ważniejsze jest od nieważnego.

("Może być bez tytułu")

Certainty, *pewność*, thus dissolves in favor of uncertainty. In Szymborska's poetry from the later years – all my examples so far are from the 80's or 90's – there is more and more of apology for uncertainty and not-knowing. In the well-known "Niektórzy lubią poezję", this apology sounds almost like an incantation:

Poetry –
but what sort of thing is poetry?
More than one shaky answer
has been given to this question.
But I do not know and do not know and cling to that
like a redemptive handrail.

Poezję –
tylko co to takiego poezja.
Niejedna chwiejna odpowiedź
na to pytanie już padła.
A ja nie wiem i nie wiem i trzymam się tego
jak zbawiennej poręczy.

("Niektórzy lubią poezję")

Or, in the well-known words of the Nobel Lecture from 1996:

Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know." [---] This is why I value that little phrase "I don't know" so highly. It's small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended. [---] Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating "I don't know".

Szyborska has an easily recognizable way of beginning a poem. Her poems are, more often than not, introduced by negations and other contrastive constructions. What is stated is immediately questioned or undermined.

NEGATIONS

There was a key and suddenly there is no key...
Był klucz i nagle nie ma klucza.

("Klucz")

Nothing can ever happen twice.
Nic dwa razy się nie zdarza...

("Nic dwa razy")

The Great Mother has no face.
Wielka Matka nie ma twarzy.

("Fetysz płodności z paleolitu")

My sister doesn't write poems.
Moja siostra nie pisze wierszy.

("Pochwała siostry")

The world is never ready
for the birth of a child.
Na urodziny dziecka
świat nigdy nie jest gotowy .

("Rozpoczęta opowieść")

ADVERSATIVE

Here are plates, but no appetite.
And wedding rings, but the requited love
has been gone now for some three hundred years.
Są talerze, ale nie ma apetytu.
Są obrączki, ale nie ma wzajemności
od co najmniej trzystu lat.

("Muzeum")

You can't move an inch, my dear Marcus Emilius,
without Aborigines sprouting up as if from the earth itself.
Ledwie ruszysz nogą, zaraz jak spod ziemi
Aboryginowie, Marku Emiliuszu.

("Głosy")

The onion, now that's something else.
Co innego cebula.

("Cebula")

I'll bet you think the room was empty.
Wrong. There were three chairs with sturdy backs
Myślicie pewnie, że pokój był pusty.
A tam trzy krzesła z mocnym oparciem.

("Pokój samobójcy")

DISJUNCTIVE

They were there or they weren't.
On an island or not.
Istnieli albo nie istnieli.
Na wyspie albo nie na wyspie.

("Atlantyda")

In the snapshot of a crowd,
my head's the seventh from the edge,
or maybe fourth from the left,
or twenty-eighth from the bottom;
Na fotografii tłumu
moja głowa siódma z kraja
a może czwarta na lewo
albo dwudziesta od dołu;

("Fotografia tłumu")

COMPARATIVE

Earlier than man exiled from Eden...
Wcześniej niż ludzie wygnana z raju...

("Małpa")

This spring the birds came back again too early.
Tej wiosny znowu ptaki wróciły za wcześnie.

("Przylot")

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.
It will never prove it now...
Miał być lepszy od zeszyłych nasz XX wiek.
Już tego dowieść nie zdąży...

("Schyłek wieku")

Such is Szymborska's way of reflecting on reality. No exclamations, many questions, and, for the rest, statements which are always relativized, undercut by additions, reservations, counterstatements. Her poetry thus creates space for questions: it "*brings one out of balance*", as the Editor of *Literary Letters* said about Montaigne's *Essays*. It shows unknown versions, offers inverted perspectives, points to the not-realized alternatives of history. Especially in Szymborska's poetry from the 1960s and '70s there is an abundance of very visual, unexpected juxtapositions of two oscillating perspectives, which might be called surrealist and remind us of the paintings of Magritte. The poet applies a double perspective, juxtaposing the everyday and the extraordinary. One could especially mention the many poems devoted to the theme of painting, writing, photography and other forms of representation ("Radość pisanie", "Przy winie", "Pejzaż", "Kobiety Rubensa", etc.) This "double perspective" is, however, no simple confrontation where the gray everyday and established conventional truth on the one hand, is dismissed in favor of the unexpected, uncoventional reality of dreams or "the back side" on the other. Even if there are plenty of negations in Szymborska – she is probably the most frequent user of the word *not* (*nie*) and the prefix *un-* (*nie-*) in world literature – her domain is not that

of simple negation. Her mode is, as Adam Zagajewski once wrote in an essay, "the negation of negation", which obviously does not have anything to do with the Hegelian synthesis:

It is here, in this pendulum movement, in the poetic negation, in the contradiction of the contradiction, that this brilliant talent mainly expresses itself. The talent for multiplicity, for always being able to see two things at the same time, for reflecting over opposites for turning the governing opinion inside out.⁵

If Szymborska's earlier poetry seems to be governed by a kind of symmetry between "the world of everyday reason" and the different "anti-worlds", the collections from *Wielka liczba* (1976) and onwards are governed by another contradiction: that between unity and multiplicity. "The talent for multiplicity" which Zagajewski mentions, is expanding. In the ironical defense of simplicity in "The Onion", man's chaotic multiplicity, which demands understanding, interpretation, is juxtaposed with the tautological onion which represents "the stupidity of perfection". The opposite of order is here not some paradoxical, "surrealist", "anti-order" but the world in its chaotic multiplicity.

A turning point in Szymborska's evolution in the direction of multiplicity instead of juxtaposition, chaos instead of ironic anti-worlds, might have been the collection *Wszelki wypadek* ("Could Have", 1972). In this book, we find the decisive, desperate and firm credo which seems to point out the direction taken by the later Szymborska: "My faith is strong, blind, and without foundation" ("Moja wiara jest silna, ślepa i bez podstaw", in the poem "Discovery", "Odkrycie"). In the same book we also find, finally, the unseemingly little poem with the impressive title, "Certainty", "Pewność".

Pewność

- *Więc jesteś pewien, że nasz okręt przybił do pustyni czeskich? - Jestem pewien, panie.*
To jest z Szekspira, który, jestem pewna,
nie był kim innym. Kilka faktów, data,
portret omal za życia... Twierdzić, że to mało?
Czekać na dowód, który Wielkie już Morze porwało
i rzuciło na czeskie brzegi tego świata?

Certainty

"Thou art certain*, then, our ship hath touch'd upon
the deserts of Bohemia?" "Aye, my lord." The quote's
from Shakespeare, who, I'm certain, wasn't someone else.
Some facts and dates, a portrait nearly done before
his death... Who needs more? Why expect to see

⁵ Adam Zagajewski, *Drugi oddech*, Kraków: Znak 1978, p. 113.

the proof, snatched up once by the Greater Sea,
then cast upon this world's Bohemian shore?

*Changed from Shakespeare's "perfect" (translator's note).

The poem begins with a quotation of two well-known lines from Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*. The notion of "the shores of Bohemia" may be unacceptable for a person with some knowledge of Central European geography⁶, but inside *A Winter's Tale* it is fully coherent. In this world of Shakespeare, Bohemia has shores and deserts, and none of the characters in the play question it; for the Mariner in *A Winter's Tale*, it is certain. But now, the poet takes a step backwards. What more is certain? That "the quote is from Shakespeare", indeed from the Polish translation by (N.N.). What more is certain? That the author was no one else, i. e., he was the person usually acknowledged as the author of William Shakespeare's works - and not, for example Ben Jonson or any other person discussed in the Shakespeare literature. But the certainty with which we can say anything about this historical Shakespeare is very modest, compared with the certainty with which the characters in *A Winter's Tale* speak about the geography of Bohemia. What we know with certainty ranges from little to less: "some facts", then "a date", then "a portrait nearly done during lifetime" of the Bard (nearly, but actually not).

Here we have yet another variation on the juxtapositional principle of the 1960's, which we have tried to describe earlier. The absurd certainty of Shakespeare's imaginative world is contrasted with the frail evidence of William Shakespeare's outer, historical existence. So, would this mean that art is more beautiful, rich and attractive than reality? Such a romantic conclusion would be contrary to the basic ideas in Szymborska's writings.

The poet's answer to the lack of certain knowledge about Shakespeare – "Twierdzić, że to mało?", literally: "To say that this is little?" is *another* question: "Czekać na dowód, który Wielkie już Morze porwało i rzuciło na czeskie brzegi tego świata?" – literally, "Wait for the evidence which the eventually Great Sea has snatched and thrown upon the Bohemian shores of this world?" Here, the imaginary Bohemia of Shakespeare's play is projected on our reality. The certainty, the predictability of our reality, is seriously questioned once there can also be "Bohemian shores of this world". Which, then, is the Great Sea which could bring evidence to these "Bohemian shores"? Not a real sea, but rather at the same time a sea and the "Great Maybe", which the poet, by means of homonymy, includes in the expression "Wielkie Morze/Wielkie Może". Thus, nothing is more predictable in our own world than in

⁶ Cf. Wieland's commentary: "Wie die See nach Böhmen kommen könne, war ein Umstand, den sich unser Autor vielleicht von darum nichts anfechten ließ, weil man in Mährchen auf die Geographie nicht zu achten pflegt".

Shakespeare's. A fact that the Editor of *Literary Letters* in *Życie Literackie* once, in an inverted, ironic way, also stressed in an answer to the signature "W.S., London" (not to be confused with "W.S., Kraków"), in connection with the signature's attempt to write a tragedy taking place in feudal Denmark. The advice from the Editor to the author in London ended:

We recommend you to read more and to visit the sites of action more often, to write less and to ask yourself only such questions which can be answered.