

MOVING AWAY FROM THE CENTRE: RELATIVISM IN THE
POETRY OF WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA.

Abstract

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Wisława Szymborska, Polish poet and translator, was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1996 by the Swedish Academy “for poetry that with ironic precision uncovers the laws of biology and historical mechanisms in fragments of human reality”¹. The poet, whose works can be said to have become classic during her own lifetime, evokes interest and wonder. Her study of life from perspectives that are diversely open, pragmatic and ironically revealing calls for attention she deserves.

It is interesting to embark on a journey with the poet through her poems which are a revelation in themselves. A study of Szymborska will reveal her “...great ability to create something of substance out of what seems to be nothing.”² Another interesting aspect of the poetry of Szymborska is the fact that

“it is so rare to meet anyone so entirely open to the world as Szymborska that it is almost shocking ... typical Szymborska subjects are an onion, a dress in a museum, writing a CV, a dead beetle, the mathematical term π , water or the effect of the discovery of a new star”.³

Poised with abundant surprises, a study of her poems will reveal that this world is larger and more copious than what we thought and the joy of using our intelligence is keener than ever.

The openness of her perspectives as evident in the poems and her penchant to remain noncommittal to the truths she leads one to discover is the proof that her perspectives are embedded in “relativism”.

Chapter-1: Introduction begins with a brief study into her biography and an appraisal of the title of the dissertation emphasizing on the strong presence of a relativist perspective in the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska. It briefly explains the implication of the word “centre” and the need to move away from it as seen in the context of the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska. The “centre” refers to the normal, ordinary or generally accepted positions implying the presence of an established hierarchy of values. Thus the perception is that of humankind viewing from within a water tight value system. The “centre” is, as Baranczak insightfully notes, “hasty generalisations, views that are speculative, dogmatic, intolerant. A belief in anthropocentrism and either man’s or nature’s perfection belong to such an ideological center”⁴. The ideas that Szymborska gathers on the periphery are, in contrast, empirical, “preferring specificity over typicality... open to change, and far from imposing.”⁵

Szymborska demonstrates the need to move away from such a “centre” by elucidating that parochialism, inherent in such a dogmatic and human-centric perspective, would curtail the scope of exploring the diversity and the copiousness of life. In “View with a Grain of Sand” she shows that most of our doctrines and worldviews are solely embedded on human conception—

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

(Wisława Szymborska: Collection of Works p.135)⁶

Even the politics of space and time are but outgrowths of our consciousness.

A second passes.

A second second.

A third.

But they're three seconds only for us.

(WSCOW p.136)

Attempt has been made at this juncture to give a simple basic amplification of the term "relativism".

Relativism is the philosophical position that all points of view are equally valid and that all truth is relative to the individual. This means that all religious systems, all art forms, all political movements, etc., are truths that are relative to the individual⁷

which implies that every individual has a perspective— valid and independent in itself. And that individual can be any thing— animate or otherwise. This is to say that "if either inquirer or context is changed different findings are created. The different findings are neither more or less true than the first but only different."⁸

Chapter II has attempted to study Wisława Szymborska's assessment of Nature. As the title of the chapter suggests, this chapter takes into account Szymborska's perception of Nature which necessarily shows that there is nothing unimportant or ordinary about life in her poetic oeuvre. In her Nobel Lecture, Szymborska says:

...in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like 'ordinary world,' 'ordinary life,' 'the ordinary course of events,' ... But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world⁹

Consistent to her relativist perspective, she does not subscribe to the hierarchical order imposed by humankind on the world. This perspective which necessarily places humankind at the top is questioned by Szymborska in the poem “No Title Required.”

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 not longer sure
 that what's important
 is more important than what's not.

(WSCOW p. 177)

Consequently, nothing is excluded from the purview of Szymborska's poetry. The seemingly unimportant things in nature like the “stone”, a “tarsier”, an “onion”, a “cat”, an “apple tree” are accorded importance like never before. Each entity, big or small and seemingly insignificant has its moment of glory in the poetry of Szymborska. The fair-minded poet is able to acknowledge the importance of each entity by finding an expression through anthropomorphism. Hence in her schema, a “stone”, a “tarsier”, an “onion”, a “cat”, an “apple tree” can present their perspectives. The chapter also explores Szymborska's demystification of Nature with the help of science. Her poetry exudes extraordinary sense of practicality and objectivity because Szymborska believes in epistemological resources only if they are empirically examined. Hence she observes in “Sky”:

Even the highest mountains
 are closer to the sky

than the deeper valleys
 there's no more of it in one place
 than another.
 A mole is no less in seventh heaven
 than the owl spreading her wings
 the object that falls in an abyss
 falls from sky to sky

(WSCOW p. 173)

And nature does not always present itself as helpful and revered, it can be wild and unforgiving at times which only prove that there are truths and falsity about each thing. In "Water" she observes:

You have saved houses from fire, you have carried off
 houses and trees, forest and towns alike

You've been in christening fonts and courtesans' baths
 in coffins and kisses.

(WSCOW p.29)

In her comparison between humankind and nature, Szymborska observes that the claims of humankind's superiority over nature are proven false by evidences one comes across almost every day. In "Onion", she rejoices in the onion's simplistic perfection and laughs at man's "inferno" of confused anatomy.

Our skin is just a cover-up
 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 omninudity.

(WSCOW p. 120)

The assumption that the onion is an example of nature's perfection is qualified in her seemingly "naïve" lyrical investigation. Szymborska's relativist perspective is evident when in the midst of her positive projection of nature, she refuses to

decisively project nature as infallible and unerring by narrating the premature death of the birds, which are excellent and perfect specimens of nature. In “Returning Birds”. she observes that nature can be “senseless and irrational even by its own standard.”¹⁰

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

(WSCOW p.52)

The bird’s untimely death is inexplicable in view of their perfect physical structures.

... honest cartilage and conscientious webbing,
the heart’s sensible sluice, the entrails’ maze,
the nave of ribs, the vertebrae in stunning enfilades.
feathers deserving their own wing in any crafts museum.
the Benedictine patience of the beak.

(WSCOW p.52)

The open-endedness of her poems on nature leaves the reader with optimism that there’s more to learn from the seemingly unimportant and unreachable nature.

Chapter III focusses on the works of Wislawa Szymborska in the light of anti-anthropocentrism. Szymborska seems to suggest that to be anthropocentric implies affirmation “that mankind is to be valued more highly than other things in nature— by man.”¹¹ Her moving away from the centre necessarily allows her to see things from a broader perspective which consequently diminishes humankind’s position. In this approach, Wislawa Szymborska, highlights the oversights and shortcomings committed by humankind, presenting his follies with irony and with qualifying skepticism about his achievements.

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 means nothing to it
 It doesn't feel itself seen or touched.

(WSCOW p. 135)

According to Edyta Bojanowska, 'Anti-anthropocentrism may well represent Szyborska's one consistent and firmly upheld belief,'¹². Anti-anthropocentrism is achieved by Szyborska by focusing on man's relationship with nature, his claims to intellectual accomplishments and the consequences of man's actions. If man stakes a claim of being the crown of the universe, the poet observes otherwise as evident in "Psalm".

Oh the leaky boundaries of man-made states!
 How many clouds float past them with impunity;
 how much desert sand shifts from one land to another;
 how many mountain pebbles tumble onto foreign soil
 in provocative hops!

Among innumerable insects, I'll single out only the ant
 between the border guard's left and right boots
 blithely ignoring the questions "Where from?" and
 "Where to?"

(WSCOW p.99)

Accommodating all possible perspectives in her probe about man, John

Blazina observes

Szyborska makes the point repeatedly, from the perspective of animals, that human beings are cruelly anthropocentric and 'unforgivably stupid. The sight of animals trained to 'ape' human beings, a dog dancing, a monkey riding a bicycle, arouses shame in the speaker of 'Circus Animals'. In 'The Monkey' the animal is 'worshipped in Egypt', 'deprived of a soul' in Europe, and 'considered edible in China'¹³

The unending exploit of nature and its resources too comes under Szymborska's watchful observation, admonishing man with her subtle but unsparing ironic comments. In "Tarsier" a Tarsier is saved because it has no perceptible value in the materialistic world of humankind.

Miraculously saved from further alterations,
 Since I'm no one's idea of a treat,
 My coat's too small for a fur collar.
 My glands provide no bliss...

(WSCOW p. 55)

Man's tall claims of intellectual acumen are also skeptically remarked by Szymborska. In "One version of Events" she points out:

Both fickle standards
 and the impermanence of artworks
 kept us wary of the Muse's service.

(WSCOW p. 209)

Again affirming her belief that no truth is final in itself, Szymborska sees man's evolutionary progress a boon and a threat at the same time. Observing the world's affairs, the practical poet sees the uncertainty of things as partly an outcome of human follies. Our political affairs are a disappointment. In "Children of our Age" she magnifies the oddities that come with politics of our time where issues concerning humans are no longer important to be deliberated but—

Raw material will do,
 or protein feed, or crude oil,

 or a conference table whose shape
 was quarreled over for months:
 Should we arbitrate life and death
 at a round table or a square one.

Meanwhile, people perished,
 animals died,
 houses burned,
 and the fields ran wild
 just as in time immemorial
 and less political.

(WSCOW p.150)

Assessing humankind from the tangible evidences of his follies, Szymborska sees man's claim of being the crowning glory of the universe' as empty and hollow because even the world that he lives in is full of contradictions and disillusionments as portrayed in "The Century's Decline".

Too many things have happened
 that weren't supposed to happen,
 and what was supposed to come about
 has not

(WSCOW p. 147)

But Szymborska's anti-anthropocentric observations do not necessarily qualify her as a misanthrope, for she accepts humankind's imperfection as a scope for improvement and hopeful striving towards perfection as she pointed out in "Discovery"

I believe in the great discovery.
 I believe in the man who will make the discovery

(WSCOW p. 75)

But as of now she finds that

'man is not the measure of all things. He is not the center of the universe, nor the source of all value, nor the culmination of terrestrial evolution.'¹⁴

Chapter IV, titled Existentialist Questions: Szymborska's assessment of the Themes of Love, Time and Death. has examined Wislawa Szymborska's assessment of

existential questions focusing on the theme of love, time and death. Though these themes are traditionally considered as life-defining and weighty, Szymborska deals with them with a light hand.

Openly rejecting any kind of philosophy, Szymborska declares:

“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.”¹⁵

Szymborska has an unconventional attitude to the subjects of Love, Time and Death. These themes are subjected to rigorous examination and are many times displaced from the romanticised perception. Contrary to the opinion that “Love is a cosmic force ... in nature, in the immaterial world, and in human relationships.”¹⁶ Szymborska observes many unsettling truths about this emotion which prompt her to ask in “True Love”

True love. Is it normal?
is it serious, is it practical?
What does the world get from two people
who exist in a world of their own

(WSCOW p. 89)

Suggesting the breach of travesty and moral principles in display of such uncontrolled emotions, such a kind of love ceases to impress the poet who sees the charade as a hollow ritual.

Why on these two and not on others?
Doesn’t this outrage justice? Yes it does.
Doesn’t it disrupt our painstakingly erected principles? Yes on both accounts.

(WSCOW p. 89)

Pointing out that there are things more important than love, in “The Letters From The Dead” she illustrates:

We know...
 ... which widows will remarry with the corpse still warm.
 (WSCOW p. 71)

which hints at the fact that the practical considerations of carrying on with life prevail over sentimentality and love. One cannot forget the poet’s own experience of deaths and remarriage. In fact she goes on to illustrate that life without love could possibly come with many desirable entailments as explicit in “Thank-You Note”

I owe so much
 to those I don’t love.

 The relief as I agree
 that someone else needs them more.
 (WSCOW p. 97)

Among other issues, the question of time is also pertinent in the poetic oeuvre of Wislawa Szymborska. Her perception of time, again, is pervasive of a relativist perspective. Szymborska views time as a purely human-construct. The whole structure attributed to the dynamics of time and time consciousness is nothing but the outgrowths of the human mind. In “View with a Grain of Sand” she points out:

A second passes.
 A second second.
 A third.
 But they’re three seconds only for us.

 Time has passed like a courier with urgent news.
 But that’s just our simile
 The character is invented, his haste is make-believe,

The present is the existential Time in Szymborska's poetic oeuvre. The significance of the moment is explicit in "A Poet's terrible Dream" which opens with "Practically every poem/ Should be titled 'A Moment'."

It is a confirmation of Szymborska's belief that the only thing that is relevant is what is achieved in the 'moment'. Faced with an evanescent life where the past is not retraceable and the future is out of reach, the poet seems to find a reassuring assurance in the glory of a moment. In "Death without Exaggeration" she reminds us that:

There is no life
that couldn't be immortal
if only for a moment.

Why do we treat the fleeting day
with so much needless fear and sorrow?
It's in its nature not to stay:
today is always gone tomorrow.

(WSCOW p. 138)

And life is but a series of individual moments. The worries of life would be greatly reduced if each moment is accepted and lived fully.

The issue of an evanescent life eventually reminds one of death, a subject closely examined by Szymborska. An absolute like death is dealt by Szymborska with a light hand. A conventional perception of death as grim and unsettling is ridiculed with by Szymborska. In her poetic cosmos, death is stripped of all pathos and tamed in Szymborska's portrayal of it. Death is typically presented from the

points of view and the sensibility of human beings—where its picture is always catastrophic, tragic or calamitous. Moving away from this singular perspective, in “Seen from Above”, Szymborska contrasts “the messy and terrifying human death with the tidy and moderately horrible death of a beetle.”¹⁷

A dead beetle 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 is strictly local, from the wheat grass to the mint.
 The grief is quarantined.

(WSCOW p. 103)

Szymborska in fact accepts death as a part of the life cycle. Dislodging Death from the usual perspective that views Death as omnipotent, she shows the many simple tasks which death cannot accomplish. In “Death without Exaggeration” she illustrates:

It can’t even get the things done
 that are part of its trade:
 dig a grave,
 make a coffin,
 clean up after itself.

(WSCOW p. 138)

Szymborska further shows that the magnitude of death is relative by presenting two similar cases from perspectives of man and animal. In “Seen from above” death of a beetle is observed from a perspective of man—

... animals die
 more shallowly: they aren’t deceased, they’re dead.
 They leave behind, we’d like to think, less feeling and less
 world.

(WSCOW p. 103)

While the animal's grasp of the event of Death is illustrated from the perspective of a cat in "Cat in an Empty Apartment" where the owner's death is not death but a "stubborn disappearance"

Someone was always here,
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared.
(WSCOW p.139)

But Szymborska never presumes to deny the role of death in man's life: this is explicit in "Death without Exaggeration"

In our planning for tomorrow
it has the final word.
(WSCOW p. 138)

The seemingly naïve and superficial arguments about Death, as presented by the poet are in fact profound and pragmatic observations whose validity can never be denied.

The concluding chapter, discusses the relevance of Wislawa Szymborska's poetry in backdrop of a world that is continuously changing. Taking into consideration the poet's openness and her broad-based perspectives that are universal and encompassing, this chapter's assessment qualifies Wislawa Szymborska's refusal to take a stance as her response to the Century she knows so well.

The chapter also discusses the relevance in the context of the time by presenting her as a knowing but modest poet which always begins her probe with a phrase "I

don't know. Szymborska, having lived and grown during the most turbulent chapter in the history of Europe, had stared a World War straight in the face, unflinching; she had two marriages behind her; experienced life as a widow, she saw the world changed right before her eyes at a pace never seen before.

“The Century’s Decline” seems to be the poet’s pictograph for a world and the century she knows so well:

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.
It will never prove it now,
now that its years are numbered,
its gait is shaky,
its breath is short.

Too many things have happened
that weren't supposed to happen,
and what was supposed to come about
has not.

(WSCOW p. 147)



In the face of such a world, Szymborska does not presume to provide any definitive answers, but having projected the observations, provokes the reader to ponder over them and search for the answer. That is why she says in “Under One small Star”

My apologies to great questions for small answers
Truth, please don't pay me much attention.

Dignity please be magnanimous!

(WSCOW p. 91)

She provides the clue that life can be lived and enjoyed thoroughly only if one is bestowed with the ‘dignity’ stemming from ‘the big hearted tolerance’ to

accept life as it comes. It is only then that life can be lived with hope and gratitude.

This is overtly stated in “One Version of Events”

This terrifying world is not devoid of charms
of the morning
that make waking up worthwhile.
The grass is green.

(WSCOW p. 185)

The single thread running through this entire gamut of her relativist poetry is this message: that there are no scripted and definite solutions for the thousands of questions. She prefers to conclude her poems with an admission of ignorance or doubt: “I am,” she says, “a question answering a question.”¹⁸ But nonetheless, her witty and humorous observations and her seemingly naïve questions strike the reader as positive and hopeful. There is a zephyr of hope and optimism in her ostensibly naïve but pressing questions as evident in “The Century’s Decline”:

“How should we live?” someone asked me in a letter
I had meant to ask him
the same question.

(WSCOW p. 148)

The concluding chapter sums up the conclusions evolved from the previous chapters. The dissertation has discussed these aspects of her works by primarily concerning itself with her relativist perspectives where the thrust has been determined, in the second chapter, on her effort to present the importance of the unimportant. This evolved into a close examination of her views on nature. The third chapter concerns itself with Szyborska’s treatment of the “centre” by re-examining humankind’s claim of being the crowning glory of creation. In effect, this chapter

presents her her anti-anthropocentric views. Finally, in the fourth chapter an attempt has been made to study her assessment of the existentialist stance relating to questions on love, time and death. Finally, the concluding chapter, puts the various threads of argument and discovery of these earlier chapters into a cogent whole.

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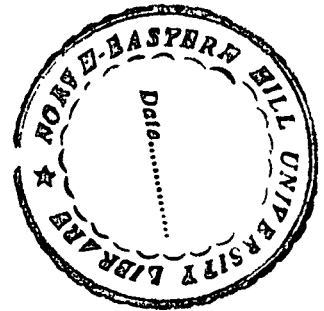
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**Moving Away From the Centre: Relativism in
the Poetry of Wislawa Szymborska.**

Kamailang Ranee



**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement
for the degree of Master of Philosophy**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG
OCTOBER 2008**

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DECLARATION

I, Kamailang Ranee, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, and that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis for the award of any previous degree to me, or, to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other university/institute.

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(Kamailang Rane)

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CONTENTS

<u>Chapter I:</u> Introduction	..	1
<u>Chapter II:</u> Importance of the Un-important: Szymborska's Views on Nature.	..	11
<u>Chapter III:</u> Man Un-crowned: Anti-anthropocentrism in the poetry Of Wislawa Szymborska	...	26
<u>Chapter IV:</u> Existential Questions: Szymborska's assessment of Love, Time and Death.	...	54
<u>Chapter V:</u> Conclusion	...	79
Bibliography	...	90
Brief Bio-Data	...	96

Chapter I

Introduction

The most relevant approach towards understanding the pervasiveness of the relativist perspective in the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska must necessarily involve studying in some detail significant autobiographical events that probably help shape this broad-based, unbiased outlook at life.

Wislawa Szymborska, Polish poet and translator, was born on July 2, 1923 in Kornik (now Bnin) near Poznan to Anna Rottermund and Wincenty Szymborski. She had one sister Maria Nowojka (born in 1917). Her family moved to Krakow in 1931 when she was eight years old where she finished her elementary education and attended a convent school. Szymborska started writing when she was in school. During the Second World War, Szymborska defied official sanctions and attended a banned Polish Secondary School at the time of the Nazi occupation of Poland. In 1943 Szymborska worked for a railroad company as an official (to avoid transportation to a labour camp in Germany). After the war, from 1945 to 1948, she studied Polish Literature and Sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Unlike other Polish writers, who migrated to other countries, Szymborska chose to stay in Poland during the war years. In 1948 she married fellow poet and Editor Adam Wlodek, but their marriage ended in divorce six year later in 1954 though she continued a very close friendship with him.

From 1953 to 1981 she worked on the Krakow literary magazine *Zycie Literackie* as poetry editor and columnist, devoting most of her time to literary criticism. Selections of her reviews were subsequently collected in *Letury Nadobowiazkowe* which shares its title with a column that Szymborska continued to write in until 1981.

Her poetry raises questions concerning the centre and the subsequent need to move away from that centre; the basic assumption being that humankind¹ and its value-system, the acknowledged and unacknowledged beliefs that prevail, have long been the centre or measure of all things. This introductory chapter will endeavour to explore the implications raised by the questions with the intention of demonstrating the basically relativist nature of Wislawa Szymborska's poetry.

In her poetry, Szymborska's concern is limitless for she does not allow herself to be restrained in her quest to know more about life. She believes that life is full of interesting, inexhaustible mysteries to be explored and poetry is the only vehicle towards achieving a satisfying, enlightening exploration of life. "Szymborska's poems encompass potentially ponderous themes, humankind's latent savagery, the dangers inherent in technological progress, and the inevitable successions of civilizations. But despite the serious philosophical underpinnings, the poems are written ... with a light hand"².

Poetry being her sole occupation, Szymborska firmly believes in the power of poetry as a vehicle to explore life. In an interview in 1966, she explains:

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.”³

Szymborska believes that poetry surpasses all methods of literary expressions. She also discovers that poetry is impartial, open and all-encompassing; leaving nothing outside its purview. Szymborska observes that poetry existed long before letters were invented: cultures and civilizations depended on poetry for their sustenance and continuity. Thus, she sees poets as inheritors and guardians of the art [poetry] which needs to be revived.

Szymborska does not seem to want to narrow down her poetry to a handful of thematic issues. Her poetry explores a vast range of issues. Almost anything under the sun becomes a relevant poetic subject, touching on least expected subjects such as “Body Builders’ Contest”, “Writing a *Résumé*”, “Tarsier” and many other seemingly insignificant incidents. Her poetry is never didactic; neither does the vastness of her canvas prevent her from being consistent in her quest to evaluate issues with the detachment

of a scientist. Her investigation is firmly grounded in objectivity. She carefully uses witty but thought-provoking comments that effectively breakdown ordinary attitudes, perspectives or valuations.

Relativism and openness are thus the major characteristics in the poetic oeuvre of Wislawa Szymborska. The pervasiveness of a relativist's perspective in the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska can be seen in her intentional refusal to take any stance. Moreover, Szymborska does not claim to profess new truths; neither does she try to nullify the existing ones. In one of her interviews she says, "I do not engage in philosophy but in modest poetry",⁴ and "modest poetry" is the greatest weapon that she arms herself with to probe misconstrued notions and assumptions generally accepted by everyone. She, in fact incites the reader to ponder about the scepticisms she projects in her poetry. In Szymborska's poetic oeuvre, there are always two sides of a coin. There is no knowledge that is final and absolute. Every observation always has many possible perspectives. As a poet, Szymborska can only present them to the reader without passing any judgment.

Before attempting to understand the complexities surrounding the pervasiveness of the relativist perspective in the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska, it is important to understand the implication of the word relativism as it is commonly understood:

Relativism is the philosophical position that all points of view are equally valid and that all truth is relative to the individual. This means that all religious

systems, all art forms, all political movements, etc., are truths that are relative to the individual.⁵

which implies that every individual has a perspective that is valid and independent in itself. The individual may be animate or inanimate. This is to imply that “if either inquirer or context is changed different findings are created. The different findings are neither more nor less true than the first but only different”⁶, which further suggests that honest observations reveal “the truth and the falsity about each thing”⁷.

This dissertation will demonstrate the relativist perspective that is the most consistent feature of poetry that seeks to breakdown stereo-typical attitudes and perspectives. As most of the accepted truths are human-centric postulates rooted in humankind’s observations, comments and examination, they seem to define the world one lives in only in a perspective subscribed to and appreciated by humankind. Szymborska refuses to wholly subscribe to the human-centric perspectives and provides interesting insights into these “seemingly true observations” compelling the reader to re-examine cherished assumptions: to move away from the centre to the periphery for a more objective and impartial perspective of things.

Szymborska moves to the periphery and leaves behind the centre which is, as Stanislaw Baranczak insightfully notes, “hasty generalisations, views that are speculative, dogmatic, and intolerant...the ideas that Szymborska gathers on the periphery are, in contrast, empirical, preferring specificity over typicality... open to change, and far from imposing.”⁸

The poem “View with a Grain of Sand” exposes the shortcomings of the human-centric views and generalizations of things:

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

(Wisława Szymborska: Collection of Works p.135)⁹

is only our experience and not the sand's. Innate to human nature, is the habit to observe things only from the perspective of man. “Anthropocentrism is the placing of humanity at the centre of everything, so that all forms of life will be regarded only as resources to be consumed by human beings”¹⁰. Religion seems to be guiding the idea which places humanity as the centre, and Christianity is one of the most anthropocentric of them all, as evident in the Bible: Genesis 1:26¹¹, that man should have dominion over other creatures:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

The idea of placing “man” at the centre is the driving force behind the belief that humankind is endowed with superiority over all beings, that only he has the license to grant identity to things around him, be it living and non living. In naming things too, according to Szymborska, human

consciousness comes into play. The approximation made on physical sensations, psychological intuitions, obligations, religious allegiances stem from human conceptions. Interpretations, justifications and the postulations of philosophies, moralities, and religions are but human constructs. In “View With a Grain of Sand”, Szymborska demonstrates that the politics of time and space is also strictly confined to human consciousness:

A second passes.
 A second second.
 A third.
 But they're three seconds only for us.

(WSCOW p.136)

The perspective of humankind comes first, in this scheme of things. Anthropocentrism does not provide an alternative perspective. John Seed observes:

Anthropocentrism means human chauvinism... Human chauvinism, the idea that humans are the crown of creation, the source of all value, the measure of all things, is deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness.¹²

The “idea that is embedded” in our “culture and consciousness”, denies all the other possible estimation of things that life offers. Szymborska finds that this seemingly confident self-assuring and complacent idea can diminish the thirst for knowledge and inspiration. She points out the advantage of giving space to scepticism and asking questions by saying:

...A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous “I don't know”...And any knowledge that doesn't lead to new questions quickly dies out: it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life. In the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a

lethal threat to society. That is why I value the 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.’¹³

Using the little phrase “I don’t know”, one has to move away from a centrist-dogmatism, probe into reality and ask questions or life will be bereft of its multiplicity and variety and other possibilities. This idea is reflected in Szymborska’s poem, “Possibilities”¹⁴:

I prefer Grimm’s fairy tales to the newspapers’ front pages.
 I prefer leaves without flowers to flowers without leaves.
 I prefer dogs with uncropped tails.
 I prefer light eyes, since mine are dark.
 I prefer desk drawers.
 I prefer many things that I haven’t mentioned here
 to many things I’ve also left unsaid.
 I prefer zeroes on the loose
 to those lined up behind a cipher.

I prefer the time of insects to the time of stars.
 I prefer to knock on wood.
 I prefer not to ask how much longer and when.
 I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility
 that existence has its own reason for being.

Life offers a plethora of choices from its repertoire of mysteries. Every individual clearly possesses the discretion to choose and the choices are valid and convincing in their own right. And because life has so much to offer one can never confine oneself to only one set of perspective. Szymborska consistently reiterates this perspective in her poetry.

Szymborska does not, however, nullify the validity of the anthropocentric perspective. She in fact suggests that other perspectives are also equally valid and self-evident. Moving away from the so-called “centre” will take one out of the conventionality of this centrist dogmatism.

By moving away from the “centre”, one is also presented with a number of interesting observations, which, are often missed out and, sometimes, even carelessly overlooked as a result of anthropocentric perspective.

The act of “moving away” is to be understood in the context of relocating perspectives, allowing other possible perspectives to take over whilst never invalidating existing ones. “Moving away” from that “centre” will allow for reality to be observed from a greater distance and create space for other perspectives that are more encompassing, comprehensive and universal. What is evident here is the expansive consideration for things other than human: animals, plants and other living and non living things which have different levels of consciousness. The act of “moving away” calls for abandonment of preconceived human perceptions and simultaneously projecting observations as they are, in the disinterested manner of reporting about a situation, not judging it.

This dissertation will bring out these ‘possible perspectives’ which undoubtedly assert that Szymborska’s poems are characterised by openness and the pervading relativist’s perspective. One question that might be asked is how the poet achieves this incredible consistency in projecting truth without being partial. Szymborska adopts anthropomorphism or giving voice to things animate or otherwise, a voice projecting possible perspectives of things other than human.

ENDNOTES

1. Szymborska uses “human” in order to refer to human kind in general. I have used the same word and have not departed from her usage of the word throughout my dissertation. However I have substituted it with the more inclusive word humankind.
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Chapter II

Importance of the Un-important: Szymborska's views on Nature.

In her Nobel Lecture, Wislawa Szymborska observed:

...in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like 'ordinary world,' 'ordinary life,' 'the ordinary course of events,' ... But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world¹

These words authenticate the observation that there is a strong inclination to move away from the "centre" of an "ordinary" or "normal" point of view where she entertains the right to look at even the most common of situations from a totally different angle, oftentimes subverting the "ordinary" or "normal" value systems.

She consistently reflects in her poetic oeuvre that everything in existence is unique and exceptional. Consequently, nothing is excluded from her sight; to her all things are equally important. Szymborska commands respect as a fair-minded poet by accommodating nature as she would do humankind. Such is the uniqueness of her perspective that even nature is accepted as incorporating more than what many poets would wish to include. In this scheme of things, nature is thus represented by the entirety of its surroundings, animate or inanimate; biotic and abiotic; visible and invisible. It is a "fusion of matter and idea, biology and philosophy".² She looks with

amazement at nature, at its flamboyant display of assets, awestruck by its “pattern” and singularity. In “No Title Required” she observes thus:

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 not longer sure
 that what’s important
 is more important than what’s not.

(WSCOW p.177)

Szyborska perfectly understands that nature is too important to be passed off without giving it the proper attention that it deserves. She, therefore, questions the “hierarchical order we imposed on the world and dismisses them as our own ridiculous construct”³. Though not in any way a nature worshipper, her poems delve into the details nature has to offer. In doing so she is able to present truths overlooked by many and taken for granted by some.

In “Possibilities”, to nature and to life in general she has this to say:

I prefer not to ask how much longer and when.
 I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility
 that existence has its own reason for being.⁴

The openness as reflected in the lines is typical of Szyborska. With her, acceptance of reality does not necessarily justify credulity. In fact she concerns herself with the concrete, observable and tangible phenomena in nature. With total indifference to the “ordinary” or general opinion of

others about nature, she never presumes or assumes the confidence of knowing all.

In the poem “Conversation With a Stone”, she adopts an anthropomorphic⁵ mode when she allows nature to speak for itself:

I knock at the stone’s front door.
 “It’s only me, let me come in.
 I want to enter your insides,
 have a look round,
 breathe my fill of you.”

(WSCOW p. 30)

Though curiosity expressed here is overpowering, humankind’s attempt to define nature seems to reach no further than nature’s threshold. This inability to comprehend about nature is exposed by Szyborska by showing that even our most cherished conceptions may not necessarily be true. Humankind’s presumptuous demeaning of nature is repulsed, the “ordinary” hierarchical presumptions befittingly inverted:

“Go away,” says the stone.
 “I’m shut tight.
 Even if you break me to pieces,
 we’ll all still be closed.
 you can grind us to sand,
 we still won’t let you in.”

(WSCOW P. 30)

What lies exposed here is the limited scope of the human imagination. Szyborska intentionally uses the peremptory “Go away” which is suggestive of the irrelevance of human-constructed philosophy when it comes to defining nature. Nature assumes an entity as important as man in

Szyborska's poetic oeuvre. Humankind's position is symbolic of an ill-informed alien trying to probe nature, his curiosity stems from reports and hearsay:

I mean to stroll through your palace,
 then go calling on a leaf, a drop of water.
 I don't have much time.
 My mortality should touch you.

(WSCOW p.30)

The two distinct pictures here are man on one side and nature as stone on the other. Humankind's entreaties to peek into the "palace" of the stone for enlightenment, is dismissed by the stone for humankind lacks "the sense of taking part", which implies that humankind's understanding of nature is too shallow to define it. Humankind is preoccupied with the question of "mortality" and does not "have much time" for a thorough probe into the quintessence of nature. Thus the subsequent deductions about nature are results of a hasty generalisation.

Humankind's hasty generalisation inevitably brings about misrepresentation of nature. Szyborska's use of words like "palace" and "mortality" for nature and man respectively, explicates the contrasting temperaments of the two entities. Humankind's weakness is also calculatedly emphasized, in "Conversation With A Stone", as a reminder of his "mortality" and the predicament of not having "much time" (WSCOW p.30).

Another perception put forth by Szyborska is that nature is neither romantic nor mystical. Scientific discoveries and inventions have helped us

de-mystify untold mysteries about nature; and she uses science to probe and to enlighten readers about it.

Things in nature can no longer be credulously accepted in their established aura of human-construct attributes. They need to be empirically probed before being accepted as such. In “Sky”, Szymborska illustrates that religious connotation concerning the elements in nature stem purely from constructed ideas.

Even the highest mountains
 Are no closer to the sky
 than the deepest valleys.
 There's no more of it in one place
 Than another.
 A mole is no less in the seventh heaven
 than the owl spreading her wings.
 The object that falls in an abyss
 falls from sky to sky.

Division into sky and earth—
 It's not the proper way
 to contemplate this wholeness.
 It simply lets me go on living
 at a more exact address
 where I can be reached promptly
 If I'm sought.
 My identifying features
 are rapture and despair.



(WSCOW p.173)

Such is Szymborska's poetic vision that it extends the boundaries of its definition by including prosaic, scientific data in her new understanding of the world around her. Interestingly, this is done without any sense of being contradictory, or un-poetic or even revolutionary. Thus, the infallible explanations of science about the roundness of the earth and its being

suspended in the universe prompts the poet to reflect that the direction of the sky is not only up; and that the sky is no longer the sky but simply 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' ⁶

Szyborska does not doubt the real and material existence of the world, but points out that its aesthetic and sensual values exist only in human minds. In "View With a Grain of Sand", nature retains its being even without human ideas.

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.

The lake's floor exists floorlessly,
and its shore exists shorelessly.
Its water feels itself neither wet nor dry
and its waves to themselves are neither singular nor plural

(WSCOW p.135)

The point to ponder here is the fallacious ideas one has about nature. The stoic posturing and the tone of the poem suddenly change the reader's positive reception of nature. The poet tries to demonstrate that nature is more important than the man-made notions connected to it.

The romantic setting of the lake and its cerulean water may appear different to any perceptive being other than human. The questioning poet, by observing that nature in all its components is indifferent to or at least

untouched by man made philosophies, unsettles worshippers of nature who, like Wordsworth, claim:

...am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains: and of all that we behold
 From this green earth;
 ... The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart and the soul
 Of all my moral being.⁷

She further reiterates that humankind's consciousness is constantly used to express nature's feelings as explicit in "View With a Grain of Sand":

Our glance, our touch means nothing to it.
 It doesn't feel itself seen and touched.
 And that it fell on the windowsill
 is only our experience, not its.
 For it, it is no different from falling on anything else
 with no assurance that it has finished falling
 or that it is falling still.

(WSCOW p.135)

Sentimentality is conspicuous by its absence in Szymborska's nature poems. She intrepidly points out that 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".⁸ as evident in the poem, "Possibility":

"I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility
 that existence has its own reason for being."

In so doing, Szymborska is not taking a stand that is anti-romantic, but presents a refreshingly novel perspective whereby the usual human

attitude to nature is side-stepped and the arrogance of this view is revealed as pure instance of limited vision.

Another poem, “Water”, portrays fantastic features attributed to nature as debatable, problematic and open to discussion. She opens the poem with seemingly innocent questions, and throughout the poem uncovers harsh truths.

She expands the scope of poetry by including science as an inspiration and uses scienticism⁹ as a method of lyrical investigation. The poet observes that a single drop of rain on her hand transcends the geographical and political boundaries of the world; as the rain drop could possibly have originated from all waters of the world. Another drop of sea water collected on the poet’s finger proves that the “landlockedness” of the Caspian Sea is not permanent. The cyclical processes of transformation of water into different states of matter, viz. liquid, solid and gaseous only reinforces the idea that rivers are not always the tributaries of oceans and the same can be vice-versa.

“A drop of water fell on my hand
drawn from the Ganges and the Nile”

On my index finger
the Caspian Sea isn’t landlocked,

and the Pacific is the Rudawa’s meek tributary,
the same stream that floated in a little cloud over Paris

in the year seven hundred and sixty four
on the seventh of May at three a.m.

(WSCOW p.28)

Szyborska re-evaluates nature in the light of new scientific discoveries and discovers many loopholes in the romanticized notions about it. The rationale remains that nature has many visages; from among which, humans often choose to retain only the cherished and positive ones.

In “Water”, the rigorous and practical poet in the same breath sings about the many facets of water, as philanthropist and annihilator; as panacea and saboteur, as being sacrosanct and sacrilegious. The semantic pull of the words serves to show nature as equipoise and equiprobable on both the negative and positive aspects.

Someone was drowning, someone dying was
calling out for you. Long ago, yesterday.

You have saved houses from fire, you have carried off
houses and trees, forest and towns alike

You’ve been in christening fonts and courtesans’ baths
in coffins and kisses.

(WSCOW p. 29)

The observations through the poet’s lyrical investigations provoke questions whether nature can attain any perfection after all Szyborska does not provide a definitive answer. She, in fact, presents the many tangible facets of reality and provokes the reader to re-examine the traditionally accepted notions of things.

The poem “The Onion” 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 contains a fourth
 a centripetal fugue.
 Polyphony compressed.

Nature's rotundest tummy,
 it's greatest success story,
 the onion drapes itself in its
 own aureoles of glory.

(WSCOW p.120-121)

What the poet suggests here is the singularity of the onion in its physical components. Its whole being exudes contentment even in isolation. The symmetry of its different layers of skin suggest an “echo combined into chorus”¹⁰. The poem also heightens the onion's self sufficiency by metaphorically suggesting an inward focus by being a “centripetal fuge”, needing no external comments for its glorification as it drapes itself in its “own aureoles of glory”, thereby reinforcing her observation that nature can at times be perfect.

Focusing on the physical constitution of man and onion, she juxtaposes onion's simplicity and man's complexity in order to have a *common plane for the two*:

Our skin is just a cover-up
 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.

(WSCOW p. 120)

The onion seems perfect because of its simplicity. The assumptions of nature's perfection become "qualified in the poet's 'naïve' investigation"¹¹, as long as the focus is directed to the onion. The ironic distancing of the onion from man is brought to the fore in:

we hold veins, nerves, and fat,
 Secretions' secret sections.
 Not for us such idiocy
 onionoid perfections.

(WSCOW p.120)

The poet waits until the last two final lines of the poem to show that such singular features are true and valid in extreme forms of nature's specimen.

Szyborska observes that nature is flexible and adaptable. The poet speaks about the ability of specimens in nature to comfortably adjust to their surroundings for survival as evident in the poem, "Autotomy."

In danger, the holothurian cuts itself in two.
 It abandons one self to a hungry world
 And with the other self it flees.

It violently divides into doom and salvation,
 Retribution and reward, what has been and what will be.

(WSCOW p.82)

Nature is imbued with special resilience. In the poem, when the holothurian, is attacked, it saves itself by sacrificing half its torso to the hungry predator while fleeing with the remaining half. The scene here not only speaks of nature's resilience but also of justice dispensed by nature: both the predator and the prey survive and continue the journey of life.

If there are scales, the pans don't move.
If there is justice, this is it.

To die just as required, without excess.
To grow back just what's needed from what's left.

(WSCOW p.82)

In Szymborska's poetic oeuvre, there is an air of tidiness, quietude, contentment and uniformity about nature. Even the seeming wildness of its specimens is implicit with latent tameness at their core. In the poem "Tarsier" the theme of nature's contentment is overtly expressed.

I am a tarsier— the father and grandfather of tarsiers—
a tiny creature, nearly half of something,
yet nonetheless a whole no less than others,

...I, a tarsier,
Know well how essential it is to be a tarsier.

(WSCOW p.55)

Each specimen of nature has its moment of glory. Szymborska celebrates the importance of a seemingly unimportant "tarsier", a rodent which seems to contribute nothing to the material well being of man, as its "coat's too small for a fur collar" and its "glands provide no bliss". Being worthless to human needs does not necessarily disqualify the 'tarsier' as being worthless in nature's schema. Being unemployable to man is an achievement in itself, qualifying it to claim a spot among the only

...few who remain unstripped of fur
untorn from bone, unplucked of soaring feathers,
esteemed in all our quills, scales, tusks and horns
and in whatever else that ingenious protein

has seen fit to clothe us with,...

(WSCOW p.56)

With nature, having ‘less’ is ‘more’: its specimens are happy and feel wanted without appearing worthwhile to man.

Though appearing to celebrate nature for its positive reflections, Szymborska refuses to decisively project nature as infallible and unerring and she does this without any hint of accusation against it. True to her consistently held belief that nature is equipoise, the poet shows how natural instinct can err too. For example, she shows that “nature can also be senseless and irrational even by its own standard”¹². In the poem “Returning Birds” she questions the inexplicable death of the birds:

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

(WSCOW p.52)

The birds, in spite of being nature’s showpieces of perfection possessing

... honest cartilage and conscientious webbing,
the heart’s sensible sluice, the entrails’ maze,
the nave of ribs, the vertebrae in stunning enfilades,
feathers deserving their own wing in any crafts museum,
the Benedictine patience of the beak.

(WSCOW p.52)

In spite of their intricate physiques, the birds meet their deaths in an ordinary manner. The birds’ physiques are described as nature’s artistic craftsmanship; the exemplar of perfection achieved by nature. But their untimely death shows nature’s wastefulness. “In short, nature has certainly

succeeded in its creative attempt; the birds' premature death betrays an error."¹³

By bringing to the fore the observable phenomena of nature— with all its accomplishments, as well as its so-called irrationalities and flaws, Szymborska effectively demonstrates that, impositions of human ideas on nature may not yield the most promising results. The open-endedness of her poems on nature leaves the reader with optimism that there is more to learn from the seemingly unimportant and unreachable in nature.

However, in order to learn anything at all, there must be a flexibility of perception, preceded by a suspension of the usually held “norms” and yardsticks. It is only when one re-examines accepted notions that one can come closer to a true evaluation and perception of nature.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Horace Engdahl. (Ed) Nobel Lectures, Literature 1995-2000. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2002.
- 2 Edyta M Bojanowska. "Wisława Szymborska: Naturalist and Humanist" The Slavic and East European Journal Vol.41, No. 2 (Summer 1997); p-200.jstor Mon Aug 28:36:52 2006 <http://www.jstor.org>>
- 3 Edyta M Bojanowska. "Wisława Szymborska: Naturalist and Humanist" The Slavic and East European Journal Vol.41, No. 2 (Summer 1997); p-217.jstor Mon Aug 28:36:52 2006 <http://www.jstor.org>>
- 4 <http://library.thinkquest.org/11959/szymbor/34poem2.htm#bure>.
- 5 Anthropomorphic is derived from the word anthropomorphism which is defined by The Concise Oxford English Dictionary as *the attribution of human characteristics or behaviour to a god, animal or object*.
- 6 Edyta M Bojanowska. "Wisława Szymborska: Naturalist and Humanist" The Slavic and East European Journal Vol.41, No. 2 (Summer 1997); p-202.jstor Mon Aug 28:36:52 2006 <http://www.jstor.org>>
- 7 J.B. Foreman, Ed. Masterpiece of Best Poems: Selected Poems by William Wordsworth (pp203). London and Glasgow: Collins, 1970.
8. Edyta M Bojanowska. "Wisława Szymborska: Naturalist and Humanist" The Slavic and East European Journal Vol.41, No. 2 (Summer 1997); p.209.jstor Mon Aug 28:36:52 2006 <http://www.jstor.org>>
- 9 Ibid, p200
- 10 Ibid, p206
- 11 Ibid, p207
- 12 Ibid, p209
- 13 Ibid, p209

Chapter III

Man Uncrowned: Anti-anthropocentrism in the Poetry of Wisława Szymborska

As analysed in the last chapter, the act of moving away from the centre calls for a reassessment of some of the cherished assumptions of reality and for a change of stance or perspective whereby, with each new poem, a new perspective is discovered. This chapter will attempt to discuss Szymborska's "tendency to see 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."¹

As her probe is entrenched in objectivity and empirical evaluation of things, humankind comes under Szymborska's scanner. Her seemingly naïve questionings about humankind project harsh truths—oftentimes contradicting claims of human superiority over all things in the universe. It is important to mention here that Szymborska's anti-anthropocentrism does not qualify her as a misanthrope: she merely suggests a re-examination of views that are wont to be accepted as biblical truths—implying that no truth is final in itself as all truths are relative.

Anti-anthropocentrism may well represent Szymborska's one consistent and firmly upheld belief,² [for]... to be anthropocentric is to affirm that mankind is to be valued more highly than other things in nature—by man.³

Szyborska reveals human limitations by focusing on man's relationship with nature, his claims to intellectual accomplishments and consequences of man's actions. If man stakes a claim of being the crown of the universe, the poet observes otherwise.

In the poem, "Brueghel's Two Monkeys" the poet contests the human claim to evolutionary progress. While trying to come out with a definite picture of the "history of mankind" the poet "stammers and hedges" until her simian friends "prompt" her with the "gentle clinking of the chains" gesturing from the windowsill, where they were perching that mankind's history is punctuated with cruelty, bondage, estrangement from nature and its subsequent subjugation as symbolized by the monkeys being chained to the floor.

One monkey stares....
 ...but when it's clear I don't know what to say
 he prompts me with a gentle
 clinking of his chain.

(WSCOW p.3)

John Blazina observes:

Szyborska makes the point repeatedly, from the perspective of animals, that human beings are cruelly anthropocentric and "unforgivably stupid". The sight of animals trained to "ape" human beings, a dog dancing, a monkey riding a bicycle, arouses shame in the speaker of 'Circus Animals'. In "The Monkey" the animal is "worshipped in Egypt", "deprived of a soul" in Europe, and "considered edible in China"⁴

Szyborska deflates man's mammoth ego, by lending nature a voice to speak through anthropomorphization. Through anthropomorphization, things in nature voice their comments, concerns and protests through human

speech. In the poem “View with a grain of Sand” the poet rejects the cloaking of nature with human consciousness, hitherto the basic assumption of many schools of poetry.

Humankind’s unthinking and unquestioning appropriation of centrality in the cosmos has led him to a questionable authority where individual and human reactions are used as the basis to pronounce anything beautiful or ugly, precious or worthless, small or big; actually passing judgments on the whole gamut of colours in the universe. Szymborska bursts this bubble of self importance by pointing out that the consequent implications of the thousands of ideas put forth are purely “outgrowths of our consciousness, human imputations rather than nature’s inherent characteristics.”⁵

We call it a grain of sand,
 But it calls itself neither nor sand.
 It does just fine without a name,
 whether general, particular
 permanent, passing,
 incorrect, or apt
 our glance, our touch means nothing to it
 It doesn’t feel itself seen or touched.

(WSCOW p.135)

The poem’s subtle but confident projection of the limited relevance of man’s ideas compels the reader to reconsider man’s claim as the centre of the universe. Though wholeheartedly celebrating the uniqueness of man in nature, Szymborska also points out that nature is much wiser than man as demonstrated in the poem “Psalm”.

The poem speaks of humankind's zeal demarcate the earth, his passion to privatize nature, politically and geographically partitioning nature with artificial boundaries. But man and his belief in artificial boundaries are explicitly ridiculed when the poet points out that nature utterly rejects his borders—ants, sand, clouds ignoring the questions “where to?” and “where from?” and violating man's strictly guarded borders with ‘impunity’.

Oh the leaky boundaries of man-made states!
 How many clouds float past them with impunity;
 how much desert sand shifts from one land to another;
 how many mountain pebbles tumble onto foreign soil
 in provocative hops!

Among innumerable insects, I'll single out only the ant
 between the border guard's left and right boots
 blithely ignoring the questions “Where from?” and
 “Where to?”

(WSCOW p. 99)

Nature's outright rejection of man-made enclosures symbolically suggests that

Only what is human can truly be foreign
 The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind.

(WSCOW p. 100)

The ostentatious portrayal of unruly nature by the poet only heightens her latent praise for its advantages over humankind: a point which she wants to impress is that humankind's place and grasp over the universe is self proclaimed and highly exaggerated. Bojanowska points out: “ ‘Psalm’ suggests nature is only apparently chaotic; it has its internal order that makes far more sense than any order that man might create.”⁶

Man's zeal to privatize nature is paradoxically complimented by his penchant to loot and destroy as demonstrated in the poem "Tarsier". The tarsier's exultation of being among the few animals which "remain unstripped of fur" alludes to humankind's endless pursuit of material wealth at the cost of nature. Though apparently happy, the tarsier's self congratulatory tone betrays an undercurrent of indignation and a hint of accusation against man's actions, their consequential impact on nature. The seemingly sycophantic tarsier's "My Good lord and master/ ...my good lord is gracious" only accentuates the irony of the reason for its being spared. Only a handful of the animal species seem to have escaped man's clutches, the tarsier being one of those survivors, not out of man's kindness but

Miraculously saved from further alterations,
 Since I'm no one's idea of a treat,
 My coat's too small for a fur collar.
 My glands provide no bliss...

(WSCOW p. 55)

Man's claim of being the crowning glory of the universe seems to work against him in the backdrop of his follies and indiscretions. Being "truly foreign", man has failed to understand the well being of "the rest". His poor "sense of taste" finds utter rejection when nature speaks back through anthropomorphism. The poem "Conversation with a Stone" presents another instance where imaginations of the humankind are utterly rejected as being "truly foreign" to the world of "the rest". Humankind's ideas of beauty are irrelevant to the "stone" and his senses are too "poor"

to appreciate the real beauty of nature and its essence. Humankind lacks the sense of “taking part”, being “truly foreign” to it; and the poem suggests that his appreciation of beauty is more connected with his passion to own and use than to preserve. This seems to be the reason for the “stone” to stiffly resist humankind’s intrusion into its “world”.

... “you shall not enter,” says the stone.
“You lack the sense of taking part.”

(WSCOW p.30)

Szyborska also uses nature in her poems to provide interesting insights and critiques on humankind. Anthropocentrism is an object of ridicule in the poem “Dinosaur Skeleton”. The speaker’s monologue begins with addressing the audience, presumably in a museum where skeletons of dinosaurs are displayed. The ascending degree in which the guests are addressed with each stanza— “Beloved Brethrens”, “dear friends”, “esteemed comrades”, “gentle citizens”, “ladies and gentlemen”, “honored dignitaries”, “distinguished guests”, “venerated delegation”, “most reverent deputation”, “inestimable council”, “supremest of Courts” shows the poet’s subtle technique in suggesting human weakness for proliferating honorific titles.

The exaggerated praise for human’s numerous advantages over the incongruence of the dinosaur’s physique in terms of size and proportion betrays extremely partial generalizations of the speaker. The speaker is shown to “firmly believe in man’s superiority to a dinosaur”⁷. The poet

intentionally exposes humankind's *hubris* by juxtaposing him with the dinosaur.

The dinosaur is shown as an example of faulty proportions in terms of its having: 'too long a tail,' 'too small a head,' 'too much appetite,' 'too little brain power'. While the speaker's self congratulatory tone for man's perfections in general are too colourful and too brazen implying they are grounded in complacency and emptiness.

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

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

Supremest of Courts
So much responsibility in a place of a vanished tail—

(WSCOW p.77)

The poet's deflation of human ego is more explicit in the poem "Nothing's a Gift" where the speaker overtly confesses the human limitations by dismissing the claims that man is:

... a far better shape in this regard,
life is beautiful and the world is ours

(WSCOW p.206)

with an imperative declaration that:

Nothing's a gift, it's all on loan
I'm drowning in debts up to my ears.
I'll have to pay for myself

with myself,
give my life with my life.

(WSCOW p.206)

The “head on these shoulders” which the speaker in the poem “Dinosaur’s Skeletons” claims to have “much responsibility” sadly contains “a memory” that

... “won’t retain one blade of grass
as it’s truly seen”

(WSCOW p.19)

In fact the poet points out in the poem that man’s life and possessions are so fleeting and impermanent that “the heart can be repossessed/ the liver, too, /and each finger and toe.” Szymborska goes beyond the euphoria of self admiration by showing that humankind as an entity reeling in debts where “Every tissue... lies in the debit side. / Not a tentacle or tendril /is for keeps”. This observation is consistent in line with the poem’s finale in “No End of Fun” where the poet summarises the precarious position of humankind as:

With that ring in his nose, with that toga, that sweater.
He’s no end of fun, for all you say
Poor little beggar.
A human, if ever we saw one.

(WSCOWp.60)

Focusing on the drapery adorned by man, the poet shows man as the only specimen which does not walk the earth in the skin he is born with, protecting himself with borrowed robes drawn from other sources of nature,

which implies that man is a beggar. The attainment of happiness, truth and peace of mind are humankind's priorities but tragically these are goals that humankind has never been seen to achieve. The poet raises this pertinent question in the poem "No End of Fun"

So he's got to have happiness,
 he's got to have truth, too,
 he's got to have eternity—
 did you ever!

(WSCOW p.60)

Szyborska's anti-anthropocentrism is also markedly evident in her probe into the achievements credited to man. She underlines instances that show man in positions that are incongruous even by the standards set by him as in the poem "An Unexpected Meeting". The poem describes an unexpected meeting between the speaker and a friend. The conversation that follows betrays the latent uneasiness glossed by the "exceeding courtesy" shown to each other: the reader is made to anticipate a lively sharing of experiences, especially as the meeting takes place after "years" of separation, but the topics of the conversation are ironically, irrelevant to the occasion:

Our tigers drink milk.
 Our hawks tread the ground.
 Our sharks have all drowned.
 Our wolves yawned beyond the open cage.

(WSCOW p.20)

Human speech is sometime unrealistic, unpractical and hugely

exaggerated. The conversation here is also marked by the peculiar, clipped, brevity of the sentences, the dullness of tone and long punctuations of “silence”. The ponderous irony here is heightened as the claim for humankind’s superiority over the rest is based on his belief that he stands apart from the rest because of his ability to verbalize his thoughts.

... in mid-sentence,
all smiles, past help.
Our humans
don’t know how to talk to one another

(WSCOW p.20)

His multi-dimensional evolutionary progress over the centuries has only led him to this highpoint of creation where he has “realized that he is he” in “No End of Fun”, just another human, with no additional embellishments at all, who still

Sees only with his eyes;
hears only with his ears;
his speech’s personal best is the conditional;
his speech’s personal best is the conditional
he uses his reason to pick holes in reason.’

(WSCOW p.60)

In “Discovery”, Szyborska distances herself from the euphoria about man’s discoveries. The poet stoically refuses to participate in the failed scientific experiment. In her ‘refusal to take part’ she is able to report a frustrating ordeal of the scientist during the experiment. The poem expresses scepticism in the ability of man to achieve anything through discoveries.

The end results of man's discoveries are not in any way likely to absolve him from all the realization that "he is he" in "No end of Fun". It can be seen here that the poet does not dismiss man's aspiration to discover, as some undesirable quality; she only questions the rationale of the cost involved in the process:

I believe in the great discovery.
 I believe in the man who will make the discovery
 I believe in the fear of the man who will make the discovery.

I believe in his face going white,
 His queasiness, his upper lip drenched in cold sweat.

(WSCOW p.75)

The tone of the speaker moves from that of a sceptic to being convinced of the futility of the attempt at discovery by hinting that the failure of the experiment could also be that it becomes a "secret" that he or the state will not permit to disclose, which finally ends in the tragic failure of the experiment.

I believe in the ruined career.
 I believe in the wasted years of work.
 I believe in the secret taken to the grave.

(WSCOW p. 75)

In "Going Home", human predicaments are probed before the audience. The privilege of being a learned man brings with it serious perplexities. The poem shows the failed attempt of a scientist, and his subsequent return home, mentally stressed out. The only comforting thought

for him against the ordeal and the embarrassment is to psychologically revert to that state of innocence, symbolized by “going home”:

He came home. Said nothing.
 It was clear, though that something had gone wrong.
 He lay down fully dressed.
 Pulled the blanket over his head.
 Tucked up his knees.
 He's nearly forty, but not at the moment.
 He exists as he did inside his mother's womb,
 clad in seven walls of skin, in sheltered darkness'.

(WSCOW p.74)

There is an unnerving silence and tameness in the man's return to his home, the man says nothing but the message that the poet wants the reader to grasp is loud and clear by implying that “truth”, “happiness” and “eternity” and other virtues she mentions in the poem “No End of Fun” are not guaranteed by discoveries and inventions achieved by man.

In fact the man's numerous discoveries bring with them many unwanted disasters. “On the Banks of the Styx” speaks of the bleakness the present day generation is facing: as vividly portrayed by the poet:

Mankind has multiplied, has burst its bounds:
 nothing sweet soul, is as it was before.
 Skyscrapers, solid waste, and dirty air:
 the scenery's been harmed beyond repair.

(WSCOW p.125)

Szyborska's anthropocentric perspectives are also evident in her abnegation of humankind's intellectual achievements. She definitely does not subscribe to the validity of humankind's intellectual *hubris*.

On the contrary, she points out that our passion for literature and related literary pursuits may not achieve the desired enlightening effect they are supposed to. This is evident in the poem “Slapstick” where literary pursuits are viewed with ridicule. The poet presents to us a paradoxical angelic perspective on all the human literary pursuits; through this perspective, the poet seems to hint at the ludicrousness of the celebrated achievements; a sight resembling slapstick comedy.

While picking out at the subjects that humankind’s literary works are preoccupied with, the poet is unforgiving. She points out that angels would refuse to read humankind’s novels which, most of the time concern “thwarted hopes”; poems “bear our grudges against the world”; plays would drive the angels to “distraction with their railings”

If there are angels,
I doubt they read
our novels
concerning thwarted hopes

I’m afraid, alas,
they never touch the poems
that bear our grudges against the world.

The rantings and railings
of our plays
must drive them, I suspect,
to distraction.

(WSCOW p.203)

The poet makes light of the issues which human minds consider weighty; and this is possible in her all-encompassing perspective, which takes an “in-human” that is, angelic perspective. It is true, the human world

is overweighed with emotions; pushing us with pessimism, impatience and greed to the brink. She points out that in “our” literary pursuits we are sentenced “to hard shelleying for life” as explicit in “Poetry Reading”; “our” works are pervaded with the “grudges we bear against the world” an evidence we can recall in P.B. Shelley’s “To a Skylark ”

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought. ⁸

Though the poet does not prescribe the shunning of intellectual exercises, she definitely shows that sometimes there are many advantages to an uncorrupted mind. This forms the subject of her poem “In praise of my sister”. The poem likens the art of writing poetry as to a contagious habit-forming menace:

... once it starts up it’s hard to quarantine.

(WSCOW p.112)

The intellectual and artistic feats of poets can sometime create “whirlpools where family love may founder”. The poet seems to perceive intellectual pride as one of the reasons for the loss of family and traditional values in society. There is in fact a sense of warmth and assurance for the speaker in the simplicity of the sister whose head is not yet corrupted by scholarly imports:

Her soups are delicious without ulterior motives.

(WSCOW p.112)

Though her entire repertoire of writings consists only of “postcards from vacations” the sister’s stories are sincere: reflective of pristine and undiluted experiences. Bereft of grandiloquent phrases, the sister still has

so much
much
much to tell.

(WSCOW p.113)

In “Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem”, Szymborska exposes human failures to measure up to the established literary standards. The poem speaks of the collapse of intellectual values; where even poets can no longer “convince”. The remarks of the “authoress” in the poem evince “certain helplessness”, the “authoress” also seems lost in “a terrifying expanse”; the questions she poses “can only be called imprecise”.

Though the “authoress” takes up genuine issues like war and humankind’s position in the universe, which are a real and universal concern, the poet points out that her ‘fundamentally unpersuasive thesis combined with her lackadaisical style, with “a mixture of lofty rhetoric and ordinary speech” convinces “no one”.

Szymborska’s study of the poem by the authoress reflects her views on the general collapse of artistic value and their genuine appreciation which is yet another dent in the human cloak of pride. Szymborska’s final conclusion about the author can be summed up in the lines

Her moralistic intensions glimmer throughout the poem.
They might shine brighter beneath a less naïve pen.

Not under this one, alas. Her fundamental unpersuasive thesis...
Combined with her lackadaisical style (a mixture
Of lofty rhetoric and ordinary speech)
Forces the question: Whom might this piece convince?
The answer can only be: No one. **Q.E.D.**

(WSCOW p.117)

The last word Q.E.D. (*Quod erat demonstrandum: Proves that what you say is true*) is an intentional abbreviation, signifying that the poet has proven what is being said about poetry and intellectual exercises; and also reaffirms her belief in empirical evidence by probing first before coming to any conclusion.

The issue that Szymborska emphasizes here is the failure of humankind to keep up an established tradition of good poetry: an intellectual exercise in which human beings pride themselves. The poet's concern is also voiced in an interview in 1996 in which she says:

“In the beginning poetry could be anything. Crafted speech was used to express both feelings and the most basic information, ranging from prayer, through codes of *savoir vivre* and historical chronicles, to the rules of the art of writing... Poetry then began shrinking more and more, and as the most extreme consequences of this process there only remains writing poems about writing poems....”

Szymborska's comments on the failing standards and the fleetingness of artworks are total in “One version of Events”;

Both fickle standards
and the impermanence of artworks
kept us wary of the Muse's service.

(WSCOW p.209)

This intellectual inconsistency is also exposed in the poem “Poetry Reading” where we are shown that human interest in intellectual aggrandisement seems to be but pretence. Our real interests are with things less refined and more unruly. The rejection of poetry in “Poetry Reading” is masked by the witty but ironic description of the crowd in the hall where poetry reading takes place in which, of the “twelve people in the room”, half came inside because of “the rain”, and the rest are “relatives of the poets”.

The paradox that the poet wants to project here is the fact that poetry is being pawned in exchange for less finer pursuits like a game of boxing which is a sad reminder that man is still enslaved to bestial instincts of violence and passion.

The irony of the situation is further heightened when the narrator observes that even the audience attending the “poetry reading”, far from being attentive, doze off into a dreamy sleep to dream of banal and every day worries. The seemingly naïve observation of the poet raises questions about the fickleness of human sensibility, which prefers brute force to intellect as symbolized in the poem by “muscle” and “poetry” respectively.

Oh, not to be a boxer but a poet
 one sentenced to hard shelleying for life,
 for lack of muscles forced to show the world
 the sonnet that may make the high school reading lists
 with luck. O Muse ...

(WSCOW p.25)

Not only in the giving up of the finer arts like poetry, for a more physical pursuit, but the human preoccupation with sinewy physique is also discussed by the poet. This preoccupation seems to reflect an insecure mind which requires consolation for lack of any specialised instinct unlike some animals. This perspective is evident in the poem “Bodybuilders’ Contest”.

From scalp to sole, all muscles in slow motion.
The ocean of his torso drips with lotion.
The king of all is he who preens and wrestles
with sinews twisted into monstrous pretzels.

Onstage, he grapples with a grizzly bear
The deadlier for not really being there.
Three unseen panthers are in turn laid low,
each with one smoothly choreographed blow.

(WSCOW p.25)

The bodybuilder’s “choreographed moves” as he pretends to grapple with the imaginary animals on stage; the “smooth blow” with which the animals are being “laid low”; the “grunts” he makes as he twists the monstrous and mammoth muscles, are wittily described. The imaginary battle and the feat achieved are far from imposing; for the reader is made to understand that the whole contest is just a make-believe exercise. All the muscles are only for exhibition and are never meant for use, the muscles being the result of artificially enriching vitamins. Masked under the seemingly naïve and simple description of just ‘another contest’ is an allusion to the futile world of make-belief which the humankind is in.

The poet is half amused, half amazed as she looks at the human torso which can hardly be put into any meaningful use apart from winning a contest. She also frowns at the futile exercise. The knowing poet sees all the emptiness in the celebration of all “imaginary achievements”.

These hollow celebrations of imaginary achievements are juxtaposed with the claims of possessing an intuition called “conscience”—but honesty is always a casualty. This human weakness is skilfully exemplified by Szymborska in the poem “Writing a Résumé”. The poem unearths one of the most corrosive traits of human nature: deception.

The truth that Szymborska discovers in humankind is ‘untruth’. Human nature is often defined not by what it reveals but ironically, by what it conceals. For Szymborska, an uncommon and unconventional topic like “Writing a Résumé”, can project many uncomfortable questions about human ethics. The poet questions the human compulsion to negate factual representation of things especially in a “Résumé” where only the agreeable facts are mentioned while the truth is suppressed or dispensed away with.

Regardless of the length of life,
a résumé is best kept short.
Concise, well-chosen facts are de rigueur.
Landscapes are replaced by addresses,
shaky memories give way to unshakable dates.

Of all your loves, mention only the marriage;
of all your children, only those who were born.

Trips only taken abroad.
Memberships in what but without why.
Honors, but not how they were earned.

Write as if you'd never talked to yourself
And always kept yourself at arm's length.

(WSCOW p.98)

The disarmingly honest poet is completely astounded by the many façades used by man. The desperation to succeed in a human world compels him to adapt methods that are unethical or even immoral. In writing a résumé, truth is optional, words are carefully chosen to mask all failures and achievements are glossed over with exaggerated truths.

There is no place for conscience; humankind is at odds with itself and its established principles of honesty. The poem overtly exposes the ways of a human world where humankind is passed off for what it is shown and not for what it is. More importance is given to

His shoe size, not where he's off to,
... a photograph with one ear showing.
What matters is its shape, not what it hears.

(WSCOW p.155)

The poet laments the perpetual decay of ethical values of a human society; a society where “price” is preferred to “worth” and “title” is valued more than “what’s inside” and ultimately a man’s worth is judged by the “résumé” he posts.

Szyborska’s anti-anthropocentric poems explicitly speak against the artificiality of human nature. To show others that he is polite, friendly, agreeable and amiable, man “smiles.” Heads of states do the same with

each other in the poem “Smiles” which indicts the fake smile of the “statesmen” of the world.

The world is temporarily kept together through diplomatic skills and a “smile” is but another diplomatic strategy. In the poem, the smiles masqueraded by the leaders of the world express neither confidence nor concurrence, but is an empty charade that hides the calculating minds.

The world would rather see hope than just hear
its songs. And that’s why statesmen have to smile.

Our times are still not safe and sane enough
for faces to show ordinary sorrow.

(WSCOW p.106)

In the poem the smiles of the statesmen are shown not as an end but a means to tell the world that all is well as of now, although the “game” that they play is a “complex” one and the “goal is far out of reach”. The poem also indicts the smiles shown by “heads of state” as involuntary and strenuous: choreographed for all occasions:

On airport runways, in the conference room.
They must embody one big, toothy “Wow!”
while pressing flesh or pressing urgent issues.

(WSCOW p.106)

A “smiling paradise” is an ideal and “human brotherhood” is just another dream that humankind would struggle to realize. The poet is not convinced that humankind will succeed as “sadness is inborn in human nature”.

Dreamers keep saying, "Human brotherhood
will make this place a smiling paradise."
I'm not convinced.

But human beings are, by nature, sad.
So be it, then. It isn't all that bad.

(WSCOW p.106-107)

The poet shows that a smile is no longer an expression of happiness, but an apparent consolation in a world where things can go awry and the poet does not condone humankind's failure to measure up to the very standards it has established for itself.

Continuing her observations about the deceit inherent in human nature, the poet also discovers man's wanton deviation from political ethics. In "Children of Our Age" the poet discusses the decay in present day politics of the world. The poet perfectly understands the importance of politics, in the contemporary context. This is one area which affects all strata of society; it decides the fates of one and all and no one is outside its purview.

All day long, all through the night,
all affairs—yours, ours, theirs—
are political affairs.

(WSCOW p.149)

But the poet observes that the politics of the age is conspicuous by the absence of integrity and responsibility. Man seems confused about the true purpose of politics. Selfishness, greed and materialism have overwhelmed politics so much that humanitarian issues have become a secondary priority. Issues concerning humans are no longer important enough to be deliberated upon but

Raw material will do,
or protein feed, or crude oil,

or a conference table whose shape
was quarreled over for months:
Should we arbitrate life and death
at a round table or a square one.

(WSCOW p.150)

and squabbles about petty and unimportant issues lead to wars; bringing
about uncertainties and indecisions.

‘To be or not to be, that is the question.’

(WSCOW p. 149)

Everything assumes a political meaning except important questions
of life and death. Man has never learned from the past and “nothing has
changed” except perhaps the manners, ceremonies, and dances as evident
in “Torture”. In the last stanza of the poem “Children of Our Age” the poet
is explicit in her resigned acceptance of humankind’s misplaced sense of
priority:

Meanwhile, people perished,
animals died,
houses burned,
and the fields ran wild
just as in time immemorial
and less political.

(WSCOW p. 150)

In “The Acrobat” the poet offers another insight into the flaws of
politics and the humankind’s affinity with it. The seemingly complimentary
poem on the dangerous exploits of an acrobat turns out to be comments

on the simulations of a human mind in politics. Szymborska's comments on the physical exploits of man are intentional and heighten the paradox.

The dangerous feats performed by the acrobat in a circus trapeze are vividly described, but the poet's choice of words is unflattering. The acrobat's contortion of his flexible body is suggestive of being "crippled"; his "ease is arduous", his agility is "watchful", his "inspiration is calculative" and his clever strategies are "plots from head to toe" by which he "cunningly weaves himself through his own former form". She ridicules the acrobat's agility and sees it as being a metaphor for the posturing of an ambitious mind as it plots to seize power:

...do you know
 how he plots from head to toe
 against his very being; do you know, do you see
 how cunningly he weaves himself through his own former shape
 and works to seize this swaying world
 by stretching out the arms he has conceived.

(WSCOW p.57)

Wisława Szymborska does not fail to notice that humankind has still to put in a lot of effort to attain a place at the top of the hierarchy. Though man can argue about his superior abilities over nature and the rest of the living beings, the one imperative reality is life's impermanence and unpredictability. "Birth, death, and reproduction are common to all life..."¹⁰ but with the exception of man, the rest are not as self-destructive as man is, and death often comes naturally.

The poet observes that human weakness shows up when emotions like “hatred” rules and permeates all walks of life. In “Hatred” this emotion has been shown to deter man from progressing further. It has divided nations, races, religions and societies for centuries:

How easily it vaults the tallest obstacles.
How rapidly it pounces, tracks us down.

Hatred is a master of contrast—
Between explosions and dead quiet

(WSCOW p.181)

The poet further points out that hatred always precedes wars and will linger on as wars’ aftermath. Man has not learned to correct his past mistakes: proving that his predicaments are in a way, his own follies. History proves that many other seemingly less important things have outlasted human generations. The fleeting reality of life is clearly illustrated in “Museum”, where antiquities prevail over humankind, their maker.

The antiquities’ silent triumphs accentuate the paradox about man’s defeat in the face of eternity. The leftovers of the “last three centuries” in the poem stand as witness to the impermanence of human achievements and worldly glory.

The crown has outlasted the head.
The hand has lost out to the glove.
The right shoe has defeated the foot.

(WSCOW p.11)

Added to its unpredictability and impermanence, human life is further plagued by needless and wasteful wars. In “The End and the Beginning”, the destructiveness of a war is projected through vividly shocking images of “the rubbles at the roadside” where “carts loaded with corpses get by”. The poet reports in indifferent and stoic tone the grimness of the war, strongly suggesting the numbness of grief, where survivors do not celebrate their survival; and the dead are no longer grieved for “causes and effects” are best forgotten.

Those who knew
 what this was all about
 must make way for those
 who knew little.
 And less than that.
 And at last nothing less than nothing.

(WSCOW p.178)

Happiness comes but rarely. The poet’s study of a man’s world reveals truths that are difficult to reconcile, let alone condone. She also illustrates concrete evidences that

Too many things have happened
 that weren’t supposed to happen,
 and what was supposed to come about
 has not

(WSCOW p.147)

Her naïve questionings about man also reveals that life is punctuated with too many unfulfilled dreams with chance playing too important a role to be unambiguous. “Could have” shows that man can neither control his

fate nor can he foresee his future. This harsh truth as observed by the poet seems to equate man with the rest.

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.

You were in luck—there was a forest.
You were in luck—there were no trees.

(WSCOW p.65)

Though her observations are steeped in anti-anthropocentrism, Szymborska's honest observations, do not however project her as a misanthrope. What the fair-minded poet does through her poems is to refute humankind's *hubris* and to suggest that there is hope for improvement. She sees hope in man's ability and exhorts him to strive for perfection before his claims can be substantiated. But as of now she finds that "man is not the measure of all things. He is not the centre of the universe, nor the source of all value, nor the culmination of terrestrial evolution."¹¹

ENDNOTES

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Chapter IV

Existential Questions: Symborska's Assessment of Love, Time and Death.

Temperamentally and ideologically, Symborska 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 exception to rules.¹

Though sceptical about accepted views and most accepted concepts, Symborska prefers not to profess new truths or values, but presents her observations with the detached stoicism. Symborska embarks on her quest to deal seemingly weighty questions with a light hand. Her process of naïve questioning, coupled with her modest curiosity and belief in the simple phrase "I don't know" inspires her to touch upon existentialist questions emanating from the importance of love, time and death in human life.

The themes of love, time and death have traditionally been considered life-defining and of critical importance. It is true that all folklore, legends, artistic and literary works revolve around or are inspired by these themes. Much has been said and written about love, time and death: these subjects are among the most debated existential questions as they are seminal to the strongest human emotions and are linked to numerous worldviews. They are however, inevitably conventional, rigid and dogmatic. But Symborska demonstrates that these existing perceptions may be re-examined. She feels the need to ascertain truth is to be ascertained only through tangible proof.

Over the millennia, love is the one subject that has concerned mankind in a very significant way. Individual experiences of love have given rise to a myriad of questions that problematise, aspects of love manifested in such love as may be understood to be romantic, courtly, conjugal, filial, familial and love for God.

People of different eras have expressed their own understanding of love, setting up their own yardsticks to define it, sometimes even prescribing formulae to deal with it. But behind all these varied reactions lies the universally accepted notion that love is indeed the most noble, most humanizing and most desirable of experiences.

Typically, Szymborska turns the issue upside down to show that this may not be a universally acknowledged or experienced fact. Hence, she brings out interesting insights about love through her poems with her seemingly “naïve questionings”. These seemingly naïve questions, far from seeking to establish new truths, are in fact revelations about the limitations of all pre-conceived notions about love. Interestingly, several of her poems are on the subject of love. It may be noted that human psychology is remarkably affected by love. Love has caused men to sacrifice their lives and ironically also caused men to take away lives, to fight wars and destroy each other. Love is often taken too seriously and its quality is often measured by the exaggerated attempts to prove its validity. In Shelley’s word,

love is a cosmic force . . . in nature, in the immaterial world, and in human relationships.²

Szyborska, however, does not concern her study with philosophical interpretations of the word and its meaning. She engages in studying the perceptible demonstrations of it, especially in human relationships. In consistence with her relativist perspective, here too Wislawa Szyborska prefers scepticism and moderation to confident assertion. She also

...has a penchant for dwelling on contradictions to generally accepted truths...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.³

This observation is evident in the poem “True love where the poet reports an open display of affection by two lovers. The poet is astounded at the intensity of their passion and the redundant display of it. The lovers so entranced in love making are oblivious of the world. They live in an illusory and impractical utopia. The oddity of the lovemaking is accentuated by the sense of isolation and alienation that they are accorded with. The passion is not shared by all. She also points out in “True Love” that the source of such a passionate rapture can not even be ascertained.

‘The light descend from nowhere’

(WSCOW p.89)

In the poem, the poet’s questions about the practicality and necessity of love to define lives seem to convey her scepticism about the excessive indulgence in passion and emotion.

True love. Is it normal?
 is it serious, is it practical?
 What does the world get from two people
 who exist in a world of their own.

(WSCOW p.89)

Szyborska demonstrates that “true love” which exists between “two people/who exist in a world of their world” lacks rationality and even consistency. The poem reiterates that the display of such uncontrolled emotion defies practicality and contributes nothing to human society. Such kind of love ceases to impress the poet who sees the charade as a hollow ritual.

Why on these two and not on others?
 Doesn't this outrage justice? Yes it does.
 Doesn't it disrupt our painstakingly erected principles?
 and cast the moral from the peak? Yes on both accounts.

(WSCOW p. 89)

The harsh truth that the poem reveals is not the non-existence of such love, but that because “it comes along so rarely” love is just a happenstance. Not everyone attains it and the pragmatic poet is prompted to be sceptical of even the necessity of attaining such love. Perfect “happiness and eternity” (“No End of Fun”) is not guaranteed by “true love”, but even without it perfectly good children are still born. Procreation is always possible outside it.

The poet points out that “true love” is but an ideal not too many people achieve. Disappointments are best limited when expectations of attaining “true love” are kept at their lowest.

True love. Is it really necessary?
 Tact and common sense tell us to pass over it in silence,
 like a scandal in Life's highest circles.
 Perfectly good children are born without its help.
 It couldn't populate the planet in a million year,
 it comes along so rarely.

Let people who never find true love
 keep saying that there's no such thing.

The faith will make it easier for them to live and die.

(WSCOW p.89)

Szyborska's discourse on love reveals many loopholes on the accepted perception about love. Though the lover's perspective is seemingly rational and confident, one cannot deny the validity of the disinterested poet's observations when she points out that love may never lead to a marriage because is a legal accepted contract between man and woman to come together as partners for life.

This harsh truth is revealed in another poem "Writing a Résumé" where the poet nonchalantly speaks of the fleetingness of love and its effects. What seem to really matter is not love but a tangible attestation of relationship—marriage. Past loves and their excitements are best forgotten; life goes on and well even without the backward glance at past loves.

Of all your loves, mention only the marriage;
 of all your children, only those who were born.

(WSCOW p.155)

Man's tryst with love is unending. Though many take love as the life defining force, its true picture is never revealed. The same person may experience it many times; and each love may not be like the last, for there is no definite yardstick to measure it as a standard. In "Under One Small Star" the modest poet's apologetic tone seems to reinforce the indescribability of love:

My apologies to past loves for thinking that the latest is the first.
(WSCOW p.91)

and with man's short-lived memory, it is inevitable that love so venerated may become a thing of the past that cannot withstand the ravages of time. The poet points out that souvenirs outlive love, as evident in "Museum"

Here are plates but no appetite.
And wedding rings, but the requited love
has been gone now for some three hundred years.
(WSCOW p.11)

Wisława Szymborska does not reject love as being non-existent; she acknowledges the roles it plays in life and nowhere does she prescribe a staying away from it. But she also underlines the ironic truth that necessity goes beyond love, that practical considerations demand rejection of love as belonging to a past, as seen in "The Letters from the Dead"

We know...
... which widows will remarry with the corpse still warm.

(WSCOW p.71)

The poem speaks about the godlike advantages and superiority of the "living" over the "dead"; where the living continues to witness the world

the dead leave behind. The comment on the untimely remarriage of widows may hint at disloyalty but the poet also points out that practical considerations prevail over sentimentality and love. One cannot forget the poet's own experience of death and/or remarriage.

Once again, in "The Classic" the poet touches on the subject of ill-fated love. With his death, the maestro will soon be forgotten; his talents will vanish into thin air as will his love and the lamentation for his death.

The ill-fated love will fade away.

Eyes will stop shedding tears.

(WSCOW p.85)

The poet seems to convey the hard but undeniable truth that there is no emotion which is sacrosanct in itself; no memories indelible; no love or talents that are eternal since all good things do and must come to an end.

"Szyborska is not sentimental"⁴ for her assessment of love compels the reader to revisit the "conception of love as the supreme spirit and sole productive source of good in the life of the world."⁵ While the poet demonstrates the indispensability of love to describe the human world and human relationships, at the same time she emphasizes the fact that there are many instances where normal lives are lived even when love does not play too important a role.

In "Family Album" the theme of love is stoically de-romanticised by the poet. A glimpse of the family album, tells the poet that the ancestors of that particular household lived a normal life without having to undergo the

trials and tribulations associated with love. Their passing away is suggestive of “a doddering second childhood”. The poem shows that people do not die from love; death is always a result of some diseases. There seems to be an intentional distancing in the poem of the family from the effects of love. But there is nothing amiss in the family. In fact, the ancestral members of the family are portrayed as being free from the dramatic proceedings of

death defying vigils, love struck poses.

(WSCOW p.39).

There is no senseless drawing of blood, neither are there any family feuds where “wretches are found bleeding in the garden, shirts in stain”. The ancestors’ lives and even their deaths are shown to have never been defined by love. “The Family Album” explicates that

No one in this family has ever died of love.
 No food for myth and nothing magisterial.
 Consumptive Romeos? Juliets diptherial?
 A doddering second childhood was enough.
 No death defying vigils, love-struck poses
 over unrequited love letters strewn with tears!
 Here, in conclusion, as scheduled, appears
 a portly, pince-nez’ d neighbour bearing roses.
 No suffocation-in-the-closet gaffes.

No Bosch-like hell within their souls, no wretches
 found bleeding in the garden, shirts in stain!
 (True, some did die with bullets in their brains,
 For other reasons, though and on field stretchers.)
 For others, death was mad and monumental—
 not for these citizens of a sepia past.
 Their griefs turned into smiles, their days flew fast,
 their vanishing was due to influenza.

(WSCOW p.39)

“Thank-you Note” explores a different standpoint on love which is in contrast to the perspective that “one loves for what one can give rather than for what one can get, and the perpetuation of the relationship is a major goal.”⁶ The poem illustrates the reality that the sense of satisfaction and fulfilment does not entirely depend on ‘love’:

I owe so much
to those I don't love.

The relief as I agree
that someone else needs them more.

(WSCOW p.97)

It shows that there is always the possibility of a happy life outside the purview of love. The poet shows us that the narrator in the poem, being free from the obligation of love is in harmony with the world. When in love, “people should forsake all other potential partners, the relationship should take precedence over all other relationships, and there should be self-sacrifice, full communication, and total commitment”⁷ But the poet overtly suggests in the poem (“A Thank You Note”) that love compels adjustment which sometimes infringe upon personal ‘freedom’, because love would mean ‘sacrifices’ and suppressions of personal will.

The peace I feel with them,
the freedom—
love can neither give
nor take that.

I don't wait for them,
as in window-to-door-and-back.
Almost as patient
as a sundial,
I understand
what love can't,

and forgive
as love never would.

(WSCOW p. 97)

The poet also suggests that love brings with it expectations and inevitably shattered hopes. The poem also hints at an impatient and unforgiving love. A relationship without the entanglement of love is described as desirably normal where sentimentality is completely removed and separations never painful.

From a rendezvous to a letter
is just few days or weeks,
not an eternity.

(WSCOW p. 97)

Szyborska also seems to ponder over the fact that is always possible even without love. She picks up events out of every day life to convey the thought that love is not always necessary to perpetuate a relationship. “A Thank You Note” shows that happy moments like “trips” taken, “concerts” attended and visits to “cathedral” are shared even with people whom one does not love. Szyborska observes that those whom one does not love deserve the credit”, because love entails obligations and responsibilities which come in the way of one’s happiness in life.

Trips with them always go smoothly,
concerts are heard,
cathedrals visited,
scenery is seen.

They deserve credit
if I live in three dimensions,
in nonlyrical and nonrhetorical space
with a genuine, shifting horizon.

(WSCOW p.97)

There is more than one facet of love, and not all kinds of love are as attractive. This perspective is evident in the poem “One Version of Events”. The stanza implies not only the multifaceted existence of love, but also hints at the existence of the “insincere kind love”: the love that does not keep its word.

Love after all exists in many forms, some of which is undesirable and best kept at a distance. Evidently the poet suggests that total commitment, sacrifice and wholehearted devotion are not always possible even in love and practical commonsense entails de-romanticisation of love.

Love attracted us,
of course, but only love
that keeps its word.

(WSCOW p. 209)

Again, the intentional de-romanticisation of love in “Love at First Sight” seems to convey the final word by the poet on the dogmatic perception of love as a sign of the loyal, unflinching and firm commitments associated with it:

They say
the first love is the most important
That’s very romantic,
But it’s not the case with me [...]

Other loves
still breathe deeply within me.
This one lacks the breath to sigh.

(WSCOW p.197)

Among other issues, the question of time is also pertinent in the poetic oeuvre of Wislawa Szymborska. Her perception of time once again

evident of a relativist perspective. Szymborska views time as a purely human construct. The whole structure attributed to the dynamics of time and time consciousness is nothing but the outgrowth of human mind. In “View with a Grain of Sand” she points out:

A second passes.
 A second second.
 A third.
 But they're three seconds only for us.

Time has passed like a courier with urgent news.
 But that's just our simile
 The character is invented, his haste is make-believe,

(WSCOW p. 136)

Anna Legezynska observes:

‘the existential time in Szymborska’s poetry is the ‘present.’ What happens here and now is just exactly what a person can try to capture for a short moment. Everything else exists as a hypothesis, either reconstructed from memory (the past) or as a product of speculations about the future.’⁸

It is evident that Szymborska sees the importance of a moment. She also seems to say that life is defined not by the things of the past or plans for the future for these are beyond control. The whole meaning of life is defined by what is done now, at the present moment. She points out that the whole stretch of life is a ‘series of moments’ joined together. The poet’s conviction in the significance of the moment and its preferability is explicit in “A Poet’s Terrible Dream” where the poem opens with the phrase, “Practically every poem / could be titled ‘A Moment.’”⁹

In a world where everything is relative, where ideas change with time, where nothing is absolute, Szymborska observes that the only thing that is

relevant is what one achieves in a “moment.” The poet also sees the possibility defying the impossible only if the moment is seized and immortalized by creativity. Faced with the evanescent life and the inevitability of death the poet finds a assurance in the glory of the moment. She explicates this in “death Without Exaggeration”

There's no life
that couldn't be immortal
if only for a moment.

(WSCOW p.138)

In “Nothing Twice” she dismisses the needless worries, as displayed by many, for the future and uncertainties of life. Szymborska’s perception about time exudes optimism and affirms that life is full of invigorating experiences.

Why do we treat the fleeting day
with so much needless fear and sorrow?
It's in its nature not to stay:
today is always gone tomorrow.

(WSCOW p.6)

As pointed earlier, Szymborska sees in more ways than one; being defined by a “turning point”, the locus being a particular “moment” being brought about by chance or “happenstance”. The observation is exemplified in “Could Have”. The poem stuns the reader with a convincing observation of “an unfortunate coincidence” avoided not because of any reason but because of a “particular deciding moment”:

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.

Alone. With others.
 Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
 Because the day was sunny.

(WSCOW p.65)

Szyborska shows that the tragic and the comic are two dimensions apart but each could be, could have been, the other in just a “moment”.

In “A Moment in Troy”, the poet persistently shows the reader that the “moment” separates not just the tragic and the comic but also the real world and the ideal. The young girls in the poem need to steal just “a moment” to be transported to the world they so long to be. The situation and the occasion are immaterial and their transport into the dream world of ‘Troy’ takes place even in

In the middle of dinner,
 In the middle of a book
 While studying the mirror,

(WSCOW p.12)

In the poem, the girls’ travel back in time is triggered by the “grand boudoir of a wink”; and it takes away the worries of the little girls’ world from their minds and let them “observe disaster from a tower of smiles.” The poem also shows that even though the moment is just a ‘wink’ and the dreaded “return” to the world of reality is inevitable, the girls return

Pale and tearless.
 Triumphant. Sated with the view.

(WSCOW p.12)

The triumph of moment over history, dates and eternity is vividly exemplified in the poem “Museum”. The moment, encapsulated in man’s creativity has proven to have outlived man and lasts longer than history.

Metals, clay and feathers celebrate
their silent triumph over death.

(WSCOW p.11)

As evident in her poems, the theme of death also pervades Szymborska’s poetic oeuvre. Using a perspective that goes beyond the self and human concerns, her poetry “suggests that the prominence of death in our systems of thoughts rests on usurpation”.¹⁰ Shielding herself with the phrase “I don’t know” and consistently wielding her weapon of ‘naïve questioning’, she takes on weighty themes and unearths truths that are ignored. She also perceives the relativity of established standards—where a single established norm cannot possibly provide comprehensive answers to all questions. Keeping her personal involvement and opinion at a distance, she subsequently rattles the reader with interestingly stunning observations. Her observations on the theme of death are among the most insightful observations.

Expectedly, Szymborska’s perception and understanding of death is markedly different from conventional viewpoints. In her poetic cosmos, death is stripped of all pathos, gruesomeness and such other generally prescribed conceptions.

Death is typically presented from the point of view and sensitivity of human beings where its picture is always catastrophic, tragic or calamitous. Moving away from this singular perspective, in “Seen from Above”, Szymborska contrasts “the messy and terrifying human death with the tidy and moderately horrible death of a beetle”.

11

A dead beetle 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 is strictly local, from the wheat grass to the mint.
 The grief is quarantined.
 The sky is blue.

(WSCOW p.103)

The poet questions the fact that people attribute differences to the beetle and human death to the differences between the beetle and human existence.

The poem also questions the notion that the death of the beetle is less profound and moving:

To preserve our peace of mind, animals die
 more shallowly: they aren't diseased, they're dead.
 They leave behind, we'd like to think, less feeling and less world
 departing, we suppose, from a stage less tragic.
 Their meek souls never haunt us in the dark,
 they know their place.
 They show respect.

And so the dead beetle on the path
 lies unmourned and shining in the sun.
 One glance at it will do for meditation—
 clearly nothing much has happened to it,
 important matters are reserved for us,
 for our life and our death, a death
 that always claims the right of way.

(WSCOW p.103)

Though faced with the inevitability of death and the need for a psychological refuge to face it, Szymborska makes light of the tragedy associated with death. All species have to undergo through the same process irrespective of which genus they belong to.

The poet also presents a curious mix of life and death in nature. In “Autotomy”, the scale of life and death remains in perfect balance: the holothurian, faced with the threat of a hungry predator cuts itself into two and subsequently survives. The sacrifice of one part of its body satiates the predator but allows it to continue with life.

In danger, the holothurian cuts itself in two.
It abandons one self to the hungry world
and with the other self it flees.

(WSCOW p.82)

Though destined for the ‘shore of death’, the holothurian is able to “die just as required without excess”; its ability to “grow back from what is left” seems to make it immortal. “Autotomy” suggests that man too rubs shoulder with immortality like the holothurian though the human death is divided along a different line. The poem suggests:

We, too, can divide ourselves, it’s true.
But only into flesh and a broken whisper.
Into flesh and poetry.

(WSCOW p.82)

The body is destined for the shore of death but man can defy that through creativity and the legacy he leaves behind. The notion that death is a burdensome distress is hence defused.

Continuing on the vein that death is never omnipotent, the poet shows in “On Death Without Exaggeration” that new life follows what death has left behind. The world of nature and man wins over death many times:

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 sometime even tall trees fall away.

Whoever claims that’s its omnipotent
is himself a living proof
that it is not.

(WSCOW p.139)

In her crusade to establish its limit, Szymborska shows death’s incompetence in simple matters like weaving, mining, farming, building ships or baking cakes. Death is also incapable of carrying out tasks that are connected with it like digging a grave, making a coffin and clean itself. Omnipotence entails the ability to do all things and to do them perfectly. The self perpetuation of life contradicts death’s omnipotence and death is too imperfect to be called one:

It can’t even get the things done
that are part of its trade:
dig a grave,
make a coffin,
clean up after itself.

(WSCOW p.138)

Not overlooking the role it plays in human lives, the poet honestly admits to the inevitability of death. It is true that death lingers at the back of one's mind:

In our planning for tomorrow
it has the final word.

(WSCOW p.138)

But it is also true that obsession with death and its effect is “always beside the point” because life prevails over death. Death is unable to erase what has been done. The poet points out that

There's no life
that couldn't be immortal
if only for a moment.

(WSCOW p.139)

The seemingly naïve and superficial arguments about death, as presented by the poet are in fact profound and pragmatic observations whose validity can never be denied. As Birgitta Trotzig, Member of the Swedish Academy, points out: “In Szymborska surface is depth, the path of negation has the effect of a quiet but tremendous explosion of being.”¹²

Szymborska's negation of the obsession death is also explicit in the poem “Funeral” where the poet shows the reader that matters of life still take over the burdensome distress of death. In the poem, the mourning about the dead is suddenly forgotten and subjects of life and the living take the centre-stage. Contrary to the opinion that “the death of a friend can be ‘the deepest wound’ in life”,¹³ the poet explains that grief felt for the loss of

someone is momentary. As evident in the poem, in the first minutes of the funeral, conversations have to do with the dead man, but life shortly takes over and the lines have more and more to do with the survivors' undramatic, almost banal, every day worries:

"So suddenly, who could have seen it coming"
 "stress and smoking, I kept telling him"
 "not bad, thanks, and you"
 "these flowers need to be unwrapped"
 "his brother's heart gave out, too, it runs in the family"
 "I'd never know you in that beard"
 "he was asking for it, always mixed up with something"
 ... "you were smart, you brought the only umbrella"
 "so what if he was more talented than they were"
 "no, it's a walk-through room, Barbara won't take it
 ... "with body work and paint, just guess how much"
 "two egg yolks and tablespoon of sugar"
 ... "I've never been in this part of the grounds"
 "I dreamed about him last night, I had a feeling"
 "his daughter is not bad looking"
 "the way of flesh"
 ... "it all sounded so much more solemn in Latin"
 ... "I could sure use a drink"
 "give me a call"
 "which bus goes downtown"
 "I'm going this way"
 "we're not

(WSCOW p.157)

Exploring issues from all possible perspectives has been one consistent effort by Wislawa Szymborska. Death is no exception. In "Cat in an Empty Apartment" death is viewed from the perspective of a cat. The poet unconventionally assesses the thoughts that could have possibly been going on in the mind of the cat.

Ironically the cat fails to grasp the full meaning of her owner's death. The only consequences that are palpable to a cat about the owner's death are the tangible absence of activities. No "lamps are lit at night", "things no longer start at the usual time", "there's more space" and the even the "feeding hand has changed". To the cat, the owner is not dead but has "suddenly and stubbornly disappeared."

Die—you can't do that to a cat.
 ... Nothing seems different here,
 but nothing is the same.
 Nothing has been moved,

(WSCOW p.189)

The cat ironically takes the absence as an affront and contemplates to "teach the owner a lesson"; it plans to show aloofness on its part when the owner returns.

Just wait till he turns up,
 just let him show his face.
 Will he ever get a lesson

on what not to do to a cat.

(WSCOW p.189)

It is interesting to note that the cat's failure to grasp the magnitude of the event of its owner's death is nature's answer to man's indifference to the death of a beetle in "Seen from above". This only proves that the perception of death can only be relative. It is interesting to compare man's perception of an animal's death as described in "Seen from above".

... *animals die*
 more shallowly: they aren't deceased, they're dead.
 They leave behind, we'd like to think, less feeling and less
 world.

(WSCOW p.103)

While humankind fails to comprehend the meaning of death apart from that of their own kind, animals too are indifferent. To the cat, in “Cat in an Empty Apartment”, the death of the owner is an ordinary “sudden disappearance”.

Someone was always here,
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared.

(WSCOW p.189)

What can be normal to one individual can be extraordinary, even disastrous to another, and this is true to the subject of death. “For Szyborska, the awful is, all too often, the normal, and her even tone embraces, in one of her most accomplished poems, the act of terrorism itself—which is, of course, entirely normal to its perpetrator”¹³.

In “The Terrorist, he’s Watching”, the death of people caused by the explosion of a bomb planted by a terrorist, is detachedly described. To a perpetrator, the death of so many people, old and young, is anything but sad and abnormal. The long and frustrating wait in the poem to see how many people will survive the explosion ends in a soft and undramatic declaration ‘The bomb, it explodes’, leaving the reader to imagine the rest.

The poem is also a stark reminder that death can happen anywhere—a resonance of the poem “Could Have” which speaks of the hand of chance in the life of people. It also “stands for Lockerbie and Belfast, Jerusalem and Oklahoma.”¹⁴ Death does seem to “claim the right of way” through chance as in “Could Have”, through natural cause as in “Family Album”, self-inflicted as in “Suicide” or through perpetrators as in “The Terrorist, He’s watching”.

Contrary to conventional ideas with which death is associated, lamentation is conspicuous by its absence in Szymborska’s poetry, implying the acceptance that death is but the last of existence’s constantly passing and constantly changing forms. “Elegiac calculation” is a metaphysical poem about death; each statement is followed by a parenthetical clause in the conditional mode¹⁵.

The journey of life continues even beyond death. Though what exactly happens in and after death seems to be still a matter of speculation, the poet says “I don’t know”

I’ve given no assurance
as concern their fate
(if there is one common fate
and if it is still fate)

(WSCOW p.187)

Szyborska's observations about death strike the reader as desirably hopeful. Though life is short and marked by suffering and death, no historical event can alter or has altered this basic existential condition as explained in "Tortures":

Nothing has changed
 The body still trembles as it trembled
 Before Rome was founded and after,
 in the twentieth century before and after Christ.

(WSCOW p.151)

But her honest and practical acceptance of death as part of life only accentuates the beauty of life; life has more to offer with its promising fecundity.

Life, you're beautiful (I say)
 you just couldn't get more fecund
 more befrogged or nightingaily
 more anthill or sproutspouting.

(WSCOW p.80)

Her witty and humorous appropriation of words provides the reader with the necessary distance to laugh at himself and takes away the sting of grave issues. Szyborska's observations on death provide the reader with a perspective that is surprising, even comforting because it is impersonal and unsentimental. Nonetheless, Szyborska's approach in evaluating death radiates comfort and hope, enabling the reader to examine death as something inevitable yet definitely not tragic as one has generally accepted and believed

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CHAPTER V

Conclusion

With a modest nine slim volumes of poetry that spans nearly half a century of her writing, Wislawa Szymborska is far from being a prolific writer. But the power of her poetry captivates any one who reads her poetry. The poet who lived and grew during the most turbulent chapter in the history of Europe, had stared a World War straight in the face. She had two marriages behind her; experienced life as a widow; she stood witness to the stand-off between the superpowers of the world; she personally experienced the rigours of living under communism, and she saw the world changed right before her eyes at a pace never seen before.

Wislawa had seen a world where nothing is absolute, where everything could be questioned, where today's truth may change into tomorrow's untruth, a world where people live in a virtual world of technologies, people connected on line but disconnected in life, a world where the wealthy are not the rich, where the good are no longer the great and vice versa, where parents are busy for their children but not with them, where "stupidity isn't funny", "wisdom isn't gay" and "hope isn't that young girl anymore". And standing on the threshold of the Twenty First Century, the poet's pictograph of a world and the century she knows so well is evident in "The Century's Decline", where she sorrowfully laments:

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.
 It will never prove it now,
 now that its years are numbered,
 its gait is shaky,
 its breath is short.

Too many things have happened
 that weren't supposed to happen,
 and what was suppose to come about
 has not.

...Anyone who planned to enjoy the world
 is now faced
 with a hopeless task.

(WSCOW p.147)

In the face of such a world and its attendant dilemma, Szymborska is reluctant to provide easy and definitive answers. In fact, her poem "Under One Small Star" openly conveys the poet's apologetic tone which is suggestive of her modesty and honest disposition in the face of overwhelming questions. Her tone seeks to draw attention to the fact that her poetry and her vision are not for those looking for definite answers.

She does not pretend to have scripted answers and definite solutions for the thousands of questions raised:

My apologies to great questions for small answers

(WSCOW p.91)

But nonetheless the poet, with her witty and humorous observations and her questions, strikes the reader as positive and hopeful. There is a zephyr of hope and optimism in her ostensibly naïve but pressing questions:

"How should we live?" someone asked me in a letter

I had meant to ask him

the same question.

(WSCOW p.148)

The relevance of Szyborska's poetry in the contemporary world cannot be denied: with her perspectives deeply entrenched in relativity, the poet avoids "anything that might smack of dogmaticism or didacticism ... prefers to conclude her poems with an admission of ignorance or doubt: "I am," [she says] "a question answering a question."¹

Her questions and positions take the reader by surprise as he/she is confronted with uncomfortable truths. The reader is thus incited to introspect. Consequently, he/she is forced to search the self and rework the perspectives that he/she might have unquestioningly accepted. Her questions are vividly edifying and enlightening. But more than that they point the direction to the greater self awareness.

Starting her probe into life with the phrase "I don't know", the knowing poet of the world offers broad and unconventional perspectives and "maintains an optimism and sense of wonder about the world while recognizing the trials of reality"². In "Notes From A Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition", She says:

"We've inherited hope
the gift of forgetting . . ."

(WSCOW p.4)

She again reinforces her belief that:

This terrifying world is not devoid of charms
of the morning

that make waking up worthwhile.

(WSCOW p.185)

In “Allegro Ma Non Troppo” the poet recounts the fecundity and desirability of life in the midst of many unfavourable happenings. Her approach to life is an example of a person fired by the zeal to live life, welcoming each and every chance it offers and of course be grateful for each moment she is offered.

Life, you're beautiful (I say)
 You just couldn't get more fecund,
 More befrogged or nightingaily,
 More anthillful or sproutspouting.

I'm trying to court life's favour,
 to get into its good graces,
 to anticipate its whims.
 I'm always the first to bow,

Always there where it can see me
 With my humble, reverent face,
 Soaring on the wings of rapture,
 Falling under waves of wonder.

Oh how grassy is this hopper,
 How this berry ripely rasps.
 I would never have conceived it
 If I weren't conceived myself!

Life (I say) I've no idea
 what I could compare you to.
 No one else can make a pine cone
 And then make the pine cone's clone.

I praise your inventiveness,
 Bounty, sweep, exactitude,
 Sense of order—gifts that border
 On witchcraft and wizardry.

... I tug at life by its hem:
 Will it stop fro me, just once,

Momentarily forgetting
To what ends it runs and runs?

(WSCOW p.185)

An optimist, Szymborska shows that life in this ‘terrifying world’ is still possible because of the inherent ‘dignity’ in the nature of mankind. In “Under One Small Star” the poet, seems to pray for mankind with a plea:

Dignity please be magnanimous

(WSCOW p.91)

The “dignity” that the poet refers to here is the big hearted tolerance, the generosity that is inherent in human nature to accept the harsh truths of life. “Dignity” to the poet seems to suggest a moving away from parochialism and anthropocentrism; the big hearted acceptance of things other than human for consideration and existence and the ability to live in harmony with nature, and to respect it as one does fellow human beings.

“Dignity” also refers to the ability to count each moment a treasure, each love and death as parts of life. The poet also points out that it is this virtue that sets man apart from the rest.

Moving away from any parochial perspective, the poet exudes openness, tolerance and patience with the world and all the follies of life. The inherent “dignity” she speaks about in human nature would qualify humankind to see miracles happen even in the most trivial and ordinary of situations. This observation is explicit in “Miracle Fair”

An extra miracle, extra and ordinary:

the unthinkable
can be thought.

(WSCOW p.165)

Szyborska observes that “an extra miracle” happens to individuals all the time though this world is too preoccupied with other priorities to notice. As Edward Hirsch observes:

Szyborska has mounted in her work a witty and tireless defense of individual subjectivity against collectivist thinking, and her poems are slyly subversive in a way that compels us to reconsider received opinion. No sooner does a familiar idea come her way than she starts turning it around to see what it will look like from different directions.³

The poet’s relativist perspectives subvert parochialism and anthropocentrism and provide her with observations that reveal the truth and falsity of each thing in the universe. This enables the poet to comfort herself even in the worst and most hopeless of situations. It is because of this, that the poet is able to say that life is a miracle punctuated by so many other miracles. Her poetry concerns everything under the sun, but she also takes up issues of human nature.

She speaks of the humankind’s tendency to take things for granted by overlooking many truths. She points out oversights and shows the reader that each moment of life is a miracle, all things seen, all things imagined, all things touched are miracles:

The commonplace miracle:
That so many common miracles take place.

The usual miracle:
invisible dogs barking
in the dead of night

One of many miracles:
 a small and airy cloud
 is able to upstage the massive moon.

Several miracles in one:
 an alder is reflected in the water
 and is reversed from left to right
 and grows from crown to root
 and never hits bottom
 though the water isn't deep.

A run-of-the-mill miracle:
 winds mild to moderate
 turning gusty in storm

A miracle in the first place:
 cows will be cows.

Next but not least:
 just this cherry orchard
 from just this cherry pit.

A miracle minus top hat and tails:
 fluttering white doves.

A miracle (what else can you call it):
 the sun rose today at three fourteen a.m.
 and will set tonight at one past eight.

A miracle that's lost on us:
 the hand actually has fewer than six fingers
 but still it's got more than four.

A miracle, just take a look around:
 the inescapable earth.

(WSCOW p.165)

The poet's subtle approach in revealing the seemingly ordinary everyday facts is intentional and the reader is brought to an awareness about miracles "that are lost on us". Her comments resuscitate man from a stupor which implies the blind acceptance of the given.

At one level, the poet seems to show that there is a miracle in the phenomenon of small and airy cloud upstaging the massive moon, but she also seems to convey the feeling that “a small and airy cloud” of complacency can “upstage the massive moon” of hope and bright promises of life. The Poet’s view of man’s place in nature combines despair and rapture. The poetry of Szymborska, in spite of the discomfort of harsh truths, the seemingly insignificant realities, uncertainties of man’s destiny, strikes a note of qualified optimism filtered through doubt, scepticism and hesitation.

The possibilities of such copious miracles in life draw a surge of optimism in the poet’s examination of life. In not being able to appreciate these miracles, life would be deprived of joy and meaning. Her poetry, though ironic and sometime laced with stoicism, appeals greatly because of her touching integrity and reassuring modesty as evident in her plea:

My apologies to great questions for small answers

Truth, please don’t pay me much attention.

(WSCOW p.91)

By giving importance to the simple phrase, “I don’t know”, the knowing poet widens the horizon to examine life even if in so doing, discovers in “We’re Extremely Fortunate” that:

We’re extremely fortunate
not to know precisely
the kind of world we live in.

(WSCOW p.213)

Szyborska perfectly knows that the world she lives in and the era she witnesses, the history she reads, the future she envisages are far from being perfect for they leave many questions unanswered, and rightly so, because in less-than-perfect things, there are scopes for improvement. In striving towards perfection, there is hope and expectation which enables one to move on. “Reality Demands” encrypts her observations that life is an unstoppable experience.

Reality demands
that we also mention this:
Life goes on.
It continues at Cannae and Borodino
At Kosovo Polje and Guernica.

... Where not a stone still stands
you see the Ice Cream Man
besieged by children.
Where Hiroshima had been
Hiroshima is again,
producing many products
for everyday use.

(WSCOW p.184)

By recalling the places of conflict like Kosovo, Cannae, Hiroshima, the poet reminds the reader of the pain and loss suffered by humanity. But it is also true that life continues in spite of them for pains are fast forgotten, the moment wins over history— hope is brought alive by the sight of children fighting for ice cream as childhood is ever desirable and fulfilling. Reinforcing her belief that life is endowed with great resilience as she notes in “Notes From a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition”:

We've inherited hope—
 The gift of forgetting.
 You'll see how we give
 birth among the ruins.

(WSCOW p.4)

Despair comes in many guises; wars, tyrants and systems of governances are some of them. Yet it is always possible for the perpetuation of life in the midst of death and overwhelming situations. This strain of thought is echoed in “The End and The Beginning” where the poet points out that wars do not necessarily spell the end of everything. There is always someone to pick up the pieces and the shreds littered by wars.

After every war
 Someone has to tidy up

 ...Someone has to shove
 The rubbles to the roadsides

 Someone has to lug the post
 to prop the wall,
 someone has to glaze the window,
 set the door in its frame.

(WSCOW p.178)

Past experiences and evidences prove that there is always someone to pick up the pieces, to continue living even after war and tumult: “biology triumphs over history, leading not to nihilism but to an acceptance of human limitation”.⁴ Amy Gamerman comments thus: “Wondering if our evanescent lives could possibly be of interest to heavenly spectators, the poet—an

optimist in spite of herself—answers yes.”⁵ This optimism is reflected in

“Maybe All This”

They’ve got a taste for trivia up there?
 Look! On the big screen a little girl
 is sewing a button on her sleeve.
 The radar shrieks,
 the staff comes at a run.
 What a darling little being
 with its tiny heart beating inside it!
 How sweet, it’s solemn
 Threading of the needle!
 Someone cries enraptured:
 get the Boss,
 Tell him he’s got to see this.

(WSCOW p.214)

The picture of a girl silently threading a needle silently, the only movements visible being her hands mending the cloth and the heart beating are suggestive of constructive activity. Szymborska projects the picture of the girl with tiny hands, solemnly threading the needle as enrapturing because hope can only come with innocence and a modest approach to life.

This dissertation has focused on Szymborska’s attempt to offer an alternative perspective other than those conventionally conceived from the human point of view. The dissertation has discussed these aspects of her works by primarily concerning itself with her relativist perspectives where the thrust has been determined, in the second chapter, on her effort to present the importance of the unimportant. This evolved into a close examination of her views on nature. The third chapter concerns itself with Szymborska’s treatment of the “centre” by re-examining humankind’s claim

of being the crowning glory of creation. In effect, this chapter presents her anti-anthropocentric views. Finally, in the fourth chapter an attempt has been made to study her assessment of the existentialist stance relating to questions on love, time and death. Finally, the concluding chapter, puts the various threads of argument and discovery of these earlier chapters into a cogent whole.

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**HEAD
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**