

Nobel Prize in Literature 1996



Wislawa Szymborska

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1996 was awarded to Wislawa Szymborska *"for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality"*.

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The Polish poet and critic Wislawa Szymborska is 73 years old and lives in Cracow. Since 1957 - when censorship had lost its stranglehold after the thaw of the previous year - she has published a handful of slim but powerful collections of poems, a few volumes of book reviews and a number of highly esteemed translations of earlier French poetry. She now disclaims the work with which she made her début in 1952 and its successor of 1954 - both of them attempts to conform to social realism

A typical example of her way of expressing her viewpoint can be found at the end of the poem "The Joy of Writing":

The joy of writing.

Power of preserving.

The revenge of a mortal hand.

Szyborska's retribution takes the form of poetry in the full spirit of the citation for this prize: "There is no life / that couldn't be immortal / if only for a moment". These lines come from the poem "On Death, without Exaggeration".

The stylistic variety in her poetry makes it extremely difficult to translate, but there nevertheless exist a number of works in other languages, so that the major part of her poetry is accessible to a wider readership. An excellent survey is provided by the selection of 100 poems translated into English which Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh have published under the title of "View with a Grain of Sand" (1995). This ranges from "Calling Out to Yeti" (1957) to "The End and the Beginning" (1993). The abominable snowman, the Yeti, in the first of these collections arouses strong associations with Stalin, whose -ism has disillusioned Szyborska. In the later collection, the poet's identity is introduced with the words "My identifying features / are rapture and despair".

With her distance and commitment, Szyborska accords full support to her idea that no questions are of such significance as those that are naive. From this position she presents her poetic deliberations in a form that is fastidious while her register, paradoxically enough, is extensive, continually shifting in every respect. In her discourse there is a striking combination of esprit, inventiveness and empathy, which calls to mind both the Renaissance and the Baroque.

Szyborska's criticism of civilisation often finds expression in an irony made more scathing by its very restraint: "There is no such thing as a self-critical jackal". In this way her muse becomes subversive in the best meaning of that term.

Translations vouchsafe us glimpses of her mastery of technique, even in rhymed verse. Her diction is finely chiselled and at the same time free of mannerism. What lies behind this is spelt out in the poem "Under One Small Star": "Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words, / then labour heavily so that they may seem light." She has

been described as the Mozart of poetry, not without justice in view of her wealth of inspiration and the veritable ease with which her words seem to fall into place. But, as can be seen from the quotation, there is also something of the fury of Beethoven in her creative work.

Anders Bodegård has translated a selection of her poems into Swedish, and published them with the title of "Utopia" (1989). This volume contributes strongly to our impression of her work. The final lines of the poem "Possibilities" reveal yet another of her starting points: "I would in fact rather contemplate the possibility / that existence could be justified.

Earlier, Per Arne Bodin and Roger Fjellström had translated a selection of poems, "Aldrig två gånger" ("Nothing Twice") (1980). The concluding anti-image in the last stanza of the title poem illuminates like a streak of lightning Szymborska's art:

With smiles and kisses, we prefer
to seek accord beneath our star,
although we're different (we concur)
just as two drops of water are.

(Transl. by S. Baranczak & C. Cavanagh)

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http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1996/press.html