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Poljarnyj Vestnik: Norwegian Journal of Slavic Studies, vol. 21, 2018, pp. 1–14

The Cassandra Motif in Szymborska and Miłosz

Per-Arne Bodin

The article presents a close reading of Wisława Szymborska's "Monolog dla Kasandry," "Soliloquy for Cassandra," published in a collection of her poetry 1967, and situates the poem in the oeuvre of Szymborska as a whole. The view of Cassandra as expressed by the poet is compared with the corresponding motifs in Czesław Miłosz and with more examples from Polish and Eastern European literature and cultural history. For Miłosz the Cassandra-motif is salient in his literary works already from the time of the Second World War. It is argued that Szymborska does not agree with the common and traditional Polish notion of Cassandra, but instead polemizes against it in a complex and contradictory manner. The analyzis of the poem and its broad context will outline two views of literature and history in Polish cultural tradition, demonstrate the uniqueness of Szymborska and the intermediate position held by Miłosz in what he calls the Cassandra complex in Polish cultural history.

Monolog dla Kasandry
To ja, Kasandra.
A to jest moje miasto pod popiołem.
A to jest moja laska i wstążki prorockie.
A to jest moja głowa pełna wątpliwości.

To prawda, tryumfuję.
Moja racja aż łuną uderzyła w niebo.
Tylko prorocy, którym się nie wierzy,
mają takie widoki.
Tylko ci, którzy źle zabrali się do rzeczy,
i wszystko mogło spełnić się tak szybko,
jakby nie było ich wcale.

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Wyraźnie teraz przypominam sobie,
jak ludzie, widząc mnie, milkli wpół słowa.
Rwał się śmiech.
Rozplatały się ręce.
Dzieci biegły do matki.
Nawet nie znałam ich nietrwałych imion.
A tu piosenka o zielonym listku –
nikt jej nie kończył przy mnie.

Kochałam ich.
Ale kochałam z wysoka.
Sponad życia.
Z przyszłości. Gdzie zawsze jest pusto
i skąd cóż łatwiejszego jak zobaczyć śmierć.
Żałuję, że mój głos był twardy.
Spójrzcie na siebie z gwiazd – wołam –
spójrzcie na siebie z gwiazd.
Słyszeli i spuszczali oczy.

Żyli w życiu.
Podszyci wielkim wiatrem. Przesądzeni.
Od urodzenia w pożegnalnych ciałach.
Ale była w nich jakaś wilgotna nadzieja,
własną migotliwością sycący się płomyk.
Oni wiedzieli, co to takiego chwila,
och, bodaj jedna jakakolwiek zanim –

Wyszło na moje.
Tyle że z tego nie wynika nic.
A to jest moja szatka ogniem osmalona.
A to są moje prorockie rupiecie.
A to jest moja wykrzywiona twarz.
Twarz, która nie wiedziała, że mogła być piękna. (Szymborska 2000, 130–31)

Soliloquy for Cassandra
Here I am, Cassandra.
And this is my city under ashes.
And these are my prophet’s staff and ribbons.
And this is my head full of doubts.

It’s true, I am triumphant.
My prophetic words burn like fire in the sky.
Only unacknowledged prophets are privy to such prospects.
Only those who got off on the wrong foot,
whose predictions turned to fact so quickly
– it’s as if they’d never lived.

I remember it so clearly –
how people, seeing me, would break off in midword.
Laughter died.
Lovers’ hands unclasped.
Children ran to their mothers.
I didn’t even know their short-lived names.
And that song about a little green leaf –
no one ever finished it near me.

I loved them.
But I loved them haughtily.
From heights beyond life.
From the future. Where it’s always empty
and nothing is easier than seeing death.
I'm sorry that my voice was hard.
Look down on yourselves from the stars, I cried,
look down on yourselves from the stars.
They heard me and lowered their eyes.

They lived within life.
Pierced by that great wind.
Condemned.
Trapped from birth in departing bodies.
But in them they bore a moist hope,
a flame fuelled by its own flickering.
They really knew what a moment means,
oh any moment, any one at all
before –

It turns out I was right.
But nothing has come of it.
And this is my robe, slightly singed.
And this is my prophet’s junk.

And this is my twisted face.
A face that didn't know it could be beautiful (Szymborska 1998, 83–84)

Cassandra in Aeschylus and Szymborska

Wisława Szymborska's "Monolog dla Kassandry" ("Soliloquy for Cassandra") was published in 1967 in her collection *Sto pociech* (*A Hundred Comforts*). Its theme is the myth of Cassandra of Troy and her fate as told in ancient Greek mythology. She was the seer who for rebuffing Apollo was cursed to speak true prophecies that no one believed. One of her predictions concerned the fall and destruction of Troy. Mentioned briefly in Homer's *The Iliad*, she is more prominent in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, in which the king returns to Mycenae with Cassandra as his war trophy and concubine. Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra murders both. Cassandra knew their fate in advance.

The poem is closely related to the Antique motif but has its own specificities. The *now* of the poem is the moment when Cassandra's prophecy about Troy has come to pass: the city lies in ashes, and just as in *Agamemnon,* she tears off her prophet's robe. In the poem she does so while still in Troy, whereas in the Greek tragedy this happens only after she arrives in Argos:

Na cóż jeszcze mam na pośmiewisko
dźwigać to – posoch wieszczy i wstęgi prorockie
na szyi?! Ciebie zniszczę, zanim sama zginę!
Na cóż jeszcze mam na pośmiewisko na szyi?!
Ciebie zniszczę, zanim sama zginę! (Kasprowicz et al. 2004, 101–102)

Why mock yourself with these – trappings, the rod,
the god's wreath, his yoke around my throat?
Before I die, I'll tread you –
Die, die, die!
Now you're down, I've paid you back. (Aeschylus 1979, 154)

Aeschylus's Cassandra agonizes over the fact that she will soon die, but in the poem she gazes calmly on death seeing it from above, with distance. In *Agamemnon* she is subjected to mockery and ridicule, whereas in Szymborska's "Soliloquy" everyone is afraid of her. There she is as stern as an Old Testament prophet and views everything from the perspective of eternity and the stars. It is this severity that the poet repudiates by offering her a new and different monologue. What is most important to Szymborska are not the tragedies of history, but children, love and nature. In *Agamemnon* Cassandra continues to speak in the voice of a prophet even after taking off the external emblems of her clairvoyance. She ponders on the vengeance that will be wreaked on Clytemnestra after her murder and continues to be her former self, albeit extremely despondent. In contrast, Szymborska's Cassandra according to

the soliloquy completely rejects her role of seer and even suggests that everything connected with it is and in fact has always been meaningless. Something that further separates the two figures is that, according to Aeschylus, Cassandra's predicament is not being believed, whereas in the poem her dilemma is above all the fact that she can only gaze down "from the stars" upon future catastrophes, and this insight is all she can communicate to people around her.

The poet and Cassandra

A careful reading of the poem reveals that the attitude toward Cassandra expressed there is complicated. It is entitled "Monolog dla Kasandry," "Monologue/Soliloquy for Cassandra"), not "Monolog Kasandry" ("Cassandra's Soliloquy").[1] It is the poet who has assigned the title, and the poem is a monologue she proposes for Cassandra that conveys the prophetess's self-confession and a repudiation of her previous outlook on life. The final line, in my view, emerges directly from the poet and is not a part of the text of the proposed soliloquy, for it views and summarizes Cassandra and her physical appearance from an external perspective. "A face that didn't know it could be beautiful" might be the reflection of an outsider – the poet's rather than the proposed and inferred seer's own. The title of the poem and the last line are directly the words of the poet, while the rest of the text is meant for Cassandra, but it is a soliloquy created for her by the poet. As I see it, the final line can and should be construed as the poet's repudiation of Cassandra, who perhaps ultimately never did read the monologue the poet wrote for her. The verdict on Cassandra in the last line would seem too be too harsh if she really had performed the prescribed soliloquy. Perhaps nothing has changed. The usual reading of that line, which is also quite possible, consists in Cassandra's tragic realization that she has lived in vain.

The poet offers or perhaps even directs Cassandra to care more about ordinary life than about the tragedies of history. This quotidian life does not rule out catastrophes and death, for as is said in the penultimate stanza, people are prone to perish ("trapped from birth in departing bodies"). This fragility is also present in the word "wilgotna" ("moist" with its references to tears and sweat) and in the suddenly unclasped hands that stand for the simple day-to-day life for which the prophetess has no sympathy. The poet's exhortation to Cassandra and the reader is not any luxury and fantastic *carpe diem*, but to make the most of the simple pleasures of daily existence. The line "And that song about a little green leaf" perhaps alluding to a children's rhyme speaks of simple joys and optimism. Everyday life is similarly valued in many of Szymborska's poems higher than history on a large scale. In "Theatre Impressions," for example, what is important or even desirable to her is what happens after the curtain falls, the actors take their bows, and the audience goes home and not the tirades of the tragedy. There are also two ways of relating to death: either live in the present as common people want or make life and death abstractions as Cassandra wants.

In "Monolog dla Kasandry" Cassandra also disclaims or is summoned to repudiate the

[1] This fundamental fact is noted by Lars Kleberg in his article (Kleberg 1986, 33). He also notes that this sort of the personal 'I', being distant from the poet herself, is rare in the poetry of Szymborska.

solemn language of the prophet. The poem begins with some lines emanating directly from such a stylistic register, which fit with a traditional soliloquy, but the rest of the work contains colloquial language or unusual locutions that are inappropriate to a traditional Cassandra who "turned out to be right" ("Wyszło na moje").[2]

Miłosz and Cassandra

Cassandra is a central theme in the prose works of Czesław Miłosz as well. It appears as early as 1945 in his essay "Death to Cassandra," in which he defends the catastrophism of his fellow poets in Żagary (a Polonized Lithuanian word meaning "brushwood"), a group in Wilno (today's Vilnius) to which he belonged before WWII. It is a polemical text aimed at the critic Jan Kott, who in an article from the same year had criticized the catastrophists' bleak visions from a Marxist perspective. He accussed them of being afraid to take the reality by the horns.

> Katastrofizm był wyrazem słabości, strachu i niemocy, groteska była świadectwem niedorozwoju intelektualnego, lęku przed wzięciem rzeczywistości za rogi. (Kott, 2015)[3]

Miłosz opposes to this statement:

> Nie, nie wstydzę się, że byłem katastrofistą i że w formie nieraz splątanej, niejasnej wypowiadałem strach przed zagładą. [...] Popełniałem wiele głupstw, ale nigdy nie żyłem pogodną głupotą polskiej inteligencji [...] Tam, gdzie jest pełna wiedza, poezja jest już niepotrzebna. Poezja trwa, dopóki jest awangardą wiedzy jakiejś epoki o sobie samej – z całą ceną ślepych prób. (Zamącińska 1981, 315)[4]

Miłosz attacks the interwar Polish intelligentsia for its naïve attitude toward the increasingly ominous political situation in the 1930-ies. In an anthology of postwar Polish poetry that he himself edited, he notes of the Cassandra mentality of his like-minded poets and equates the Cassandra outlook with the catastrophists talking of himself in the third person: "Because of the Cassandra-like prophecies in their poems Miłosz and his group were branded 'catastrophists'." (Miłosz 1970, 73).

In his essay collection *Ziemia Ulro (The Land of Ulro)* he writes in a similar vein:

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[2] On the language of the poem see especially Marzena Woźniak-Łabieniec: "Wśród prorockich rupieci: O Monologu dla Kasandry" (Brzozowski 1996:44–57).

[3] Catastrophism was an expression of weakness, fear and powerlessness, this grotesque phenomenon was a testimony of intellectual underdevelopment, fear of taking reality by the horns. (Unless noted otherwise, translations are my own).

[4] No, I am not ashamed of having been a catastrophist and of having expressed in a form that was at times muddled and unclear my terror in the face of annihilation [...] I have done many foolish things. But I have never subsisted on the cheerful foolishness of the Polish intelligentsia [...] Where there is complete wisdom poetry is no longer necessary. Poetry persists as long as it is a given epoch's avant-garde knowledge of itself – and pays the full price of blind experiments.

> "Katastrofizm" w istocie zajmował się wielkim kryzysem cywilizacji i nieco sztucznie został uznany za przepowiednię Kassandry, dotyczącą wydarzeń lat 1939–1945, choć przecież druga wojna światowa była jedynie pochodną kryzysu mającego trwać dalej. (Miłosz 1980, 208)[5]

In an interview from 1994 he notes in the same vein that the catastrophists' misgivings about the future had a cosmic dimension in which the Nazi occupation of Poland was only a part:

> There were also extremely pessimistic Polish authors, especially Stanisław lgnacy Witkiewicz, a catastrophist in outlook. So our poetry expressed foreboding – a kind of surrealistic prophecy of horrors to come. lt was like the voice of Cassandra. We conceived a cosmic catastrophe rather than a clearly defined political catastrophe.
>
> Later, under the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, there was a group of very young poets for whom, of course the culmination of the Apocalypse, was the Nazi occupation. For us it was not; it was simply part of a larger picture. (Miłosz 1994, 156)

Catastrophism and Cassandra are for Miłosz connected to the Second World War and the Nazi experience but are also a deeply felt experience of civilization crisis or perhaps to all human condition.

In *The Land of Ulro* he further maintains that this feeling of catastrophism derives from "the Russian experience," i.e. Poland's alarming proximity to Russia and the Russian Revolution. In yet another connection Miłosz he dates this fear of Russia connected to Russia further back in history "during the nineteenth century the Poles developed what might be called a 'Cassandra complex'," an outlook that is reflected in Polish literature" (Miłosz 1981,134). But no one wanted to listen to the Poles and their apprehensions about the future in Europe. Miłosz sees a continuity in Polish thought from the nineteenth century, or perhaps from Jan Kochanowski in the 16-th century to the postwar period. According to him, writers should assume the role of Cassandra – voicing warning about where history is headed, but they must also reconcile themselves with the fact that they will not be heeded.

Thus in Miłosz's view of history the nineteenth-century Polish consciousness suffered from a Cassandra complex that was shared by both Żagary and Stanisław lgnacy Witkiewicz but rejected by other Polish intellectuals in the interwar period. Originally used in psychology, the concept has arisen again nowadays in this political context with reference to Miłosz to describe the new threat posed by Russia in the wake of the occupation of the Crimea, an action that Poland is said to have warned about.

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[5] "Catastrophísm" was above all engaged with the great crisis of civilization. Only later was it acknowledged, somewhat superficially, as a Cassandra-like prophecy of the events of 1939-45, even though the Second World War was but a corollary of a far more protracted crisis. (Miłosz 1984, 271).

Jerzy Stempowski and Walter Benjamin

The Cassandra complex in Polish culture, then, is intimately but not exclusively connected to predictions on the part of Polish writers about the World War and the collapse of Western civilization. This interpretation of Cassandra in a Polish context can also be traced back to Jerzy Stempowski's important 1950 "Essay for Cassandra," in which the myth is outlined in detail, followed by brief sections discussing who among the Polish intellectuals before WWII foresaw the horrific future but were ignored. He views them as truth-sayers and martyrs:

> Almost all the people mentioned here are dead. The talent to predict the future certainly does not favor longevity. Even I, only the listener, did not avoid my share of difficulties. On the other hand it is clear that today discipline and patience will not suffice. If Europe, ruined by so many insanities, is to avoid annihilation, her population must learn to foresee more accurately the results of its actions, and it can no longer afford to ignore those who possess this gift. For the older ones it is almost insignificant.Yet I am thinking about people of the younger generation, who have their whole lives in front of them. Who among them will be ready to put on the robe in which Cassandra addressed Apollo: 'In this gown of a prophet you have put me to ridicule in front of your enemies.' (Stempowski 1990, 36)

Stempowski begins his essay by saying that "For the ancient Greek authors Cassandra was a symbolic figure representing the interior anguish and impotence of prophets." (Stempowski 1990:20). Prophets lack the power to make others believe them. He is stern and pessimistic in his view of the future of Europe and the possibility of the rule of common sense in politics independent of states being democracies or dictatorships. Stempowski's essay is addressed to Cassandra as Szymborska's poem and the poem could be seen as a polemic statement against the essay: The world does not need more Cassandras but ordinary people.

"Catastrophism" in Miłosz's view is not a literary school but a broader movement, something of an outlook that anticipates future disasters. It resembles the "state of emergency" that the German thinker Walter Benjamin points out in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the last text he wrote before committing suicide in 1940. Every epoch, he maintains, has its emergency situation. Recognizing the present such state will enable to combat Fascism, which was the immediate threat he faced. This is the same sort of extreme vulnerability to which Miłosz refers, and Benjamin as Miłosz extends this feeling in principle to all ages or to modernity in any case. "State of emergency" and catastrophism seem to be similar concepts defining this gloomy time in European history and the human predicament in general.

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. (Benjamin 1968, 257)

This is the same outlook that Miłosz described, as already quoted, in *Ziemia Ulro* as "merely a corollary of a far more protracted crisis" ("jedynie pochodną kryzysu mającego trwać dalej").

It is the duty of the Polish poet to shoulder Cassandra's prophetic mantle. At the same time, however, Miłosz stops short of identifying with Cassandra. Instead he speaks objectively, almost as a diagnosis, of the Cassandra complex, and refers to his generation of poets, often as "we." As he sees it, the Cassandra motif is an outlook held by the Polish poet, or perhaps more or less by all poets vis-à-vis the world and history.

Another attitude that he often assumes has to do with the value of daily life. In poems such as "On Angels" or "The Gift," for example, he rejects the eternal perspective in favor of ordinary existence. This is a stance much more similar to the views expressed in the later poetry of Szymborska.

Szymborska as Cassandra

Let us now return to her. Szymborska is searching in this poem for something other than the role of Cassandra. The prophet regrets (or should regret) that she was unable to live in the present or love an individual human being. The poem is, I maintain, a sophisticated polemic directed against the Cassandra complex and its attitude toward the role of the poet in Polish culture. It also seems to be aimed at herself and her earlier poetry from immediately after WWII, which often had a historical and political edge and sometimes contained downright Stalinist verses. Later in one 1956 poem, the prophetic voice is still heard in a poem where the poet is situated in Jericho after the town had been destroyed in the battle. The situation is the same as in our poem: a woman standing in an utterly destroyed town after the battle waiting for her own death:

Historia nierychliwa
na trąbkach mi przygrywa.
Miasto, w którym mieszkałam,
Jerycho się nazywa.

Osuwają się ze mnie, tra ta ta, mur za murem.
Stoję naga zupełnie
pod powietrza mundurem.

Grajcie, trąbki, a składnie
grajcie z całą kapelą.
Już tylko skóra spadnie
i kości mnie wybielą. (Szymborska 1957, 35)

I hear trumpets play the tune
to a history of woe.

For I lived once in the town
that is known as Jericho.

The walls they all go tumbling
tra ta ta goes the fanfare
and I stand stripped to nothing
but a uniform of air.

So blow you trumpets, blow true,
quickly, strike up the whole band.
My skin will fall away too,
only whitened bones will stand. (Szymborska 2015, 41)

Here the poet seems indeed to assume the role of a victim in a historical chain of events. The tragedy of Jericho will but repeat itself, and the "I" in the poems knows this. It is but a step further to identification with figures such as Cassandra, and it is that role that Szymborska challenges in "Soliloquy for Cassandra." Tadeusz Nycz even proposes that the Jericho destroyed is Communist Poland in 1956 (Nyczek 2000, 22).

Cassandra in East European Literature

The Cassandra motif runs through all Western literature. One finds it, for example, in Friedrich Schiller's ballad "Kassandra." As Miłosz notes in an essay on the importance of familiarity with the classics for understanding older literature, Cassandra is a motif, found as I noticed, in Polish literature as far back as in the poetry of the Renaissance poet Jan Kochanowski. Cassandra also has a role in Stanisław Wyspiański's *Akropolis. Dramat w czterech aktach* from 1904 featuring a gloomy fate of a messianic Poland. Anna Kamieńska's poem "Rozterka Kassandry" ("Cassandra at a Loss") contains an admonishment for people not to rush to judgement and for herself as a poet to be not to sure of her verdict. In Ukrainian literature the theme occurs in Lesia Ukrainka's drama *Cassandra. A Dramatic Poem* (Kawecka 2012: 93-102), where the character much more associates to the myth than in Szymborska's poem. It is so richly represented in the Slavic literatures that it almost seems to be a specifically Slavic or East European subject.

The Russian poet Osip Mandel'shtam develops the motif in "To Cassandra" ("Kassandre") (Mandel'shtam 1993,132). The implicit comparison developed in the poem is between defeated Troy and Petrograd (Petersburg) immediately after the Revolution, and the tone of the poem is serious, dark, even apocalyptic. Dedicated to Mandel'shtam's fellow poet Anna Akhmatova, it was published on 31 December 1917 in the newspaper *Volia Naroda*. Akhmatova is cast in the role of Cassandra, and Petersburg takes the place of Troy. The poem summarizes the events of the year:

Я не искал в цветущие мгновенья
Твоих, Кассандра, губ, твоих, Кассандра, глаз,
Но в декабре – торжественное бденье –
Воспоминанье – мучит нас!

И в декабре семнадцатого года
Все потеряли мы, любя:
Один ограблен волею народа,
Другой ограбил сам себя...

Time blossomed, and I did not reach for
your lips, Cassandra, your eyes, Cassandra,
but in December, oh, what a solemn vigil
– memory torments us!

In December of 1917
we lost everything, and love too:
this one was robbed by the people,
that one robbed himself... (Mandelstam 1973, 96)

The poem contrast two times, the blossing times before 1917 and the time after the catastrophe where love was completed between the two only when it was two later and everything was lost. The simplest interpretation of the "solemn vigil" is that it refers to Christmas Eve (cf. "torzhestvennoe bden'e, usually "vsenoshchnoe bdenie" – a church service preceding a major holiday) but it can also have allusions to a wake over a dead person. The theme is deeply serious, and Cassandra stands for Russia just before or after the disaster of 1917. Russia is in ruins in the same way as Troy. The character of Cassandra is here as in Miłosz deeply connected with the Russian revolution, but here as present event and not as a historical fact as in the view of the Polish poet.

The same year Szymborska's poem was published, the Russian bard Vladimir Vysotskii wrote "Pesnia o veshchei Kassandre" ("Song about the Clairvoyant Cassandra"), in which the myth appears in its original form, as in Miłosz. Thus in the refrain:

Без умолку безумная девица
Кричала: «Ясно вижу Трою, павшей в прах!»
Но ясновидцев – впрочем, как и очевидцев –
Во все века сжигали люди на кострах. (Vysotskii 1994, 19–20)

Incessantly, the mad lady
cried, "I clearly see Troy in ruins!"

But clairvoyants, just like eyewitnesses,
have in all ages been burned at the stake.

In "To Cassandra" the Vysockij seems to identify with Cassandra, both as a prophet and as a witness. In the Soviet context the song echoes the theme of the memory and amnesia of the atrocities committed by the regime. Cassandra takes the role of a dissident.

The East German writer Christa Wolf took up the Cassandra motif a few years after Szymborska wrote her poem, although she never mentions her Polish colleague. She has treated the theme both in her 1983 novel *Cassandra* and in her essay collection *Voraussetzungen einer Erzählung: Kassandra* (*Conditions of a Narrative: Cassandra*). For Wolf, Cassandra is a gender issue: men render her invisible and ignore her, the character is put into a feminist perspective.

What can be said is that all writers – except Szymborska – identify with the myth and with Cassandra. In Szymborska's poem, however, from a victim she becomes an accomplice. She is guilty of the elevated monumental style, the fact that in her historical passion she has forgotten the individual human being in her position vis-à-vis the might of history. Love, a strong theme in several of the other poems – Mandel'shtam's, for example – is absent from hers. The poet, particularly the poet in Eastern Europe, is a misunderstood prophet. Szymborska wants to abstain from that role, although it may seem that ultimately Cassandra continues to play it despite the poet's urging her to adopt a different view of reality.

A Polish pattern of thought

Thus Szymborska's poem strongly disavows a pattern of thought in Polish (and, we can add) East European literature, namely the "Cassandra complex." The American literary scholar Claire Cavanagh has taken note of this fact:

> As poets, he and Szymborska occupy opposite ends of the poetic spectrum. Miłosz mistrusts the poet's public voice even as he employs it to great effect. But in her unassuming way Szymborska works systematically to deflate this voice: in her "Soliloquy for Cassandra," for example," the prophet bemoans the bardic stance that serves only to distance her from the cares and joys of ordinary life. This may be why Miłosz recently described Szymborska's own poetic voice as "attenuated," a mere "whisper." She speaks at a pitch that is nearly inaudible to prophets' ears." (Cavanagh 1999,176)

The poet will ultimately prefer "the cares and joys of ordinary life" to "the bardic stance." Szymborska consorts with Anna Kamieńska but parts company with all the other writers mentioned above. Her poem is a protest which paradoxically enough becomes something more than a whisper but something of a manifesto in itself, although wanting to deny the idea of manifestos, directed against the Cassandra complex that runs throughout Polish culture – at times, for example, in Miłosz and perhaps in her own early writings as well. She is in the same time far from the naivity of the generation before the war, spoken about by Miłosz.

The attitude it displays toward poetry and the poetic language differs radically from what

we see in mainstream Polish literature. What still renders the poem ambiguous is that the reader is left without an answer to the question of whether Cassandra really reads the monologue the poet has prescribed for her. Cassandra perhaps remains in her role and her complex, while the poet certainly abandons it. Miłosz is in this respect conflicted, and this split is probably one of the most important distinguishing features of his writing. In its ambivalence the motif or theme in many ways is typical of Polish culture as a whole.

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