

Review article

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**HOMO SAPIENS INNOCENS.
WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA'S (ECO)POETIC PROJECT¹****Abstract**

Nature occupies one of the most important topics in Wisława Szymborska's poetry, where the lyrical subject is always positioned in relation to other beings and within the perspective of an extended time span. The author of this article, in accentuating the anthropocentric perspective on Szymborska's poetry, proposes a reading of her poetry in the context of ecopoetry. She understands it, following Julia Fiedorczuk, as a call to reevaluate the relationship between the human and non-human world, to reflect, with the aid of poetry, on the relationship between poetry and the natural world, and also to lift the dualism between nature and culture.

Key words: Wisława Szymborska, Julia Fiedorczuk, Polish contemporary poetry, ecopoetics, nature

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Introduction

Wisława Szymborska², in proposing a “project of humanity” (Legeżyńska 2015: 15), widens the reach of her poetic intentions beyond human reality. Szymborska is interested in understanding mankind in a world regulated by natural laws, a world that is situated in relation to other life forms and one that is approached within the perspective of an extended time span. Lately, there have been attempts to utilize new interpretive languages which might draw attention to the status and the way of being of nature, both animate and inanimate, in Szymborska’s poetry within the context of ecocriticism and posthumanism.³

Discussion

Asking about plentitude in Szymborska’s poetry, Anna Legeżyńska emphasizes that her lyrical subject is always placed in relation to nature, i.e. in relation to earth and the cosmos (Legeżyńska 2015: 25). In another text, Legeżyńska analyzes “The Silence of Plants” (from the volume entitled *Moment*) (Legeżyńska 2005), where Szymborska emphasizes the need and, at the same time, the one-sidedness of man’s contact with nature: “A conversation with you is necessary and impossible”. A similar situation takes place in an earlier poem “Conversation with a Stone” (from the volume *Salt*), where the lyrical subject unsuccessfully knocked on the “the door of stone”, which denied him entrance to the world of nature: “Go away,” says the stone. / ‘I’m shut tight,’ – ‘I don’t have a door’”. “Szymborska’s earlier poetry was ecological in the literal sense, as it anthropomorphized nature in an attempt to protect it against humans”, writes Legeżyńska about “The Silence of Plants” – “now the poet describes the awareness of the separateness of people in nature and, at the same time, the lack of any kind of support outside of it”, emphasizing “the sense of exceptionalism of our condition” (Legeżyńska 2005: 283). Similarly, Wojciech Ligęza, the author of a recently published critical account of Szymborska’s work, describes her imagination as “anthropological, evolutionary, ecological” (Ligęza 2016: CVII) and draws attention to the poetically expressed concern for the protection of

2 One of the most well-known and original Polish poets (1923-2012), Nobel Prize winner in 1996, author of over a dozen volumes of poetry, also a columnist, translator, and literary critic. She created her own, distinct poetic diction, which combines an intellectual, careful observation of the world with empathetic sensitivity and openness towards all forms of being.

3 I am thinking here about various texts written by Anna Legeżyńska, Krystyna Pietrych, Iwona Gralewicz-Wolny or Agnieszka Dauksza (see: bibliography), who share a common point of view: that *homo sapiens* constitute an inclusive part of nature in Szymborska’s poetic world.

the Earth from the destructive activities of mankind. On the other hand, Iwona Gralewicz-Wolny, in her article “Fatyga łądygi. Wisława Szymborska wobec milczenia roślin” (“A Stem’s Trouble: Wisława Szymborska in Relation to the Silence of Plants”), focuses on the role of nature in Szymborska’s poem which share a sense of astonishment at the diversity of life forms. Their readings accentuate the Levinasian situation of the “I” in relation to the Other as well as the reflexivity of a subject occupied by the human-nature relation; they also emphasize the common fate of all life forms, which are heading towards death: “thanks to poetry people and nature speak with one voice for a moment” (Gralewicz-Wolny 2015: 185).

Interested in the many animals found in Szymborska’s poetry, Krystyna Pietrych takes another approach. According to her, Szymborska precedes “contemporary posthuman reflection”, “by combining the fascination with otherness and an honest admiration for the otherness with the horror resulting from both the awareness of the determinism proper to natural law and people’s cruelty towards animals” (Pietrych 2015: 280). Pietrych points to the changes in Szymborska’s approach to the animal world: Szymborska had once displayed the rule of man over the animal kingdom, taking the side of the those who are weaker, for example, in attempting to rescue a deer from hunters (“The Joy of Writing” from *No End of Fun*)⁴. In her later texts, she begins to empathically identify with them, as she does with the prey of a hungry lioness in the poem “An Occurrence” (from the volume *Colon*), “which is emphatically exemplified by a whole fragment written in the conditional tense, as if from the antelope’s point of view.” (Pietrych 2015: 292) – “And if not for the root, / that thrusts from the ground, / if not for the stumble / of one of four hooves, / [...] that the lioness seizes / with one prolonged leap –” Whereas Szymborska’s earlier poetry emphasized the difference between the world of man and the animal kingdom, her last collections of poems⁵ assume a posthuman perspective which rejects two anthropocentric assumptions: “that human beings and animals can and should be precisely differentiated; and secondly, that there is even a need for such a differentiation” (Pietrych 2015: 295).

4 This is one of Szymborska’s most well-known, programmatic and autothematic texts in which a poet-demiurge is able to stop bullets shot at a deer by hunters in mid-flight, though here we are dealing with a reality which exposes its fictionality: “Other laws, black on white, obtain”, the deer is “written”, and the hunters are “prepared to swarm the sloping pen at any moment”.

5 Szymborska’s later poetry is inaugurated by an elegiac in tone volume, *The End and the Beginning* from 1993. The following volumes include: *Moment* (2002), *Here* (2009), and the posthumously published *Enough* (2012).

These cursorily signaled stances, on the one hand, show the different understanding and ambiguity of ecocentric notions applied to Szymborska's work, which point towards the issues of nature in literature; on the other hand, they strengthen the temptation to apply new concepts that might refresh the interpretations of well-known poems. I propose, for the purpose of this short text, to look at this poetry differently, shifting the accent of the already established ecological readings of Szymborska's imagination, which have been empathetically directed towards the sphere of non-human beings. This imagination, however, **does not construct a one-sided relation to various forms of nature**, as advocated by Gralewicz-Wolny, and **does not identify with a point of view of non-human life forms**, as suggested by Pietrych. The lyrical subject of her poetry does not intend to rescue the antelope fleeing the lioness and does not see in it an analogy to the injured human. The conditional tense used in the poem does not have to mean having to taking the side of the of the victim; it rather points to the significance of chance in the struggle to survive – in "Joy of Writing", "Lying in wait, set to pounce on the blank page, / are letters up to no good", and in "Returning Birds" (from *No End of Fun*) the birds "down they fall / into the snow, into a foolish fate", returning too early "This spring" – "Rejoice, O reason: instinct can err, too". This poetry does not attempt to endure "the uncrossable ontic border between man and animal" (Pietrych 2015: 293); quite the contrary, Szymborska remains, in a consciously consistent manner, anthropocentric in her description of this world, thus demonstrating the poetic consequences of the limitations resulting from this assumed point of view.

The distinguishing feature of Szymborska's poetry is this particularly **nurtured difference between what is human and non-human** – a blurring of distinctions, an emphasis on otherness, a fascination with otherness – which provides the opportunity to observe these beings as if in a mirror. Despite being subject to the same laws of physics ("we've got a lot in common. / The same star keeps us in its reach. / We cast shadows based on the same laws", "The Silence of Plants") and biological equality – in all of us "veins, nerves, and fat, / secretions' secret sections" ("The Onion" from the volume *A Large Number*), especially in relation to the inevitability of death, Szymborska remains a poet of difference, provoking comparisons⁶, rooted in self-awareness and the ability to

6 The lyrical subject in the poem "Among the Multitudes" (from the volume *Moment*) takes pleasure in fortuitously being herself "as herself" and, grateful for the grace of fate, admits that: "My yen for comparison might have been taken away". These words could be ascribed to the poet, thus allowing the poem to be viewed as a kind of covert form of autoreflexion.

reflect on the human species. The exceptionalism of this poetry, which has been emphasized many times, the isolation or even the exclusion of *homo sapiens* from other beings appear here as a value which allows us to be ourselves and build our own identity.

Never abandoning the anthropocentric point of view, Szymborska gladly mystifies the non-human perspectives, projecting “ex-centric”⁷ approaches (Borkowska 1991: 53), and attempts to look at the world from the position of a monkey, a cat, an antelope, a rock or a grain of sand, though for her “Our glance, our touch mean nothing to it”, “And that it fell on the windowsill/ is only our experience, not its” (“View with a Grain of Sand” from the volume *The People on the Bridge*). In the cited “An Occurrence”, as in the famous “Cat in an Empty Apartment” (from the volume *The End and the Beginning*)⁸, in which we also are dealing with the separated role of the focalizer (contrived perspective of the cat’s experience) and the speaking “I”, the lyrical subject, on the one hand, attempts to come closer to the external world as much as possible, seemingly identifying with it, on the other hand, however, she never fully stops differentiating, does not abandon the anthropocentric “I”, which she is not able, and also does not want to, cast off.

By distancing himself from the world, towards which he is mindful and empathetic, the lyrical subject of Szymborska’s poetry emphasizes his “otherness” and impenetrable monadic quality (Balbus 1996). Szymborska knows that plants and animals perceive the world differently than man and does not pretend to understand the nature of this “difference”; the silence of plants and the conversation with the stone take place only from our perspective, “we try to understand things”, but we do this “each in our own way” (“The Silence of Plants”). The many references to the world of culture and autoreflexively

Comparisons, that is, juxtapositions of different worlds, also the human and non-human, have always had an educational value in her poetry and have served their interpretation. For more about this topic see Grądział-Wójcik 2010: 62-69.

- 7 Szymborska makes use in her poetry of various, peripheral and sometimes surprising points of view, believing in the importance of partial truths, neither of which is privileged in her poetry, thus leading to the dehumanization of the poetic perspective.
- 8 In this poem, Szymborska takes advantage of the discordance of the perceptual field of the speaking subject and the lyrical hero, i.e. the cat from whose perspective we see the empty room after the loss of the owner. The subject of sensual experiences does not have such knowledge of the world as the one who says in the poem: I do not realize the nature of death; I do not understand what really happened. The consistently used neutral verb forms, referring to sensual activities which sound unnatural in the Polish language (się zająrzyło (to look into), przebiegło (to run through), wcisnęło się (to squeeze into), złamało (to break), rozrzuciło (to scatter), emphasize the “non-human” and the otherness of the perspective.

accentuating literary forms help to emphasize the inalienable difference between “other-beings”. Anna Legeżyńska writes:

In *Salt* from 1962 man exists in two orders: nature and culture. The first connects him, the second distinguishes him from other living beings; the oscillation between biology and art charting out the space of evolution, thanks to which the human ancestor gained self-awareness and created everything which is called “culture” (Legeżyńska 2015: 22).

I propose to reverse this way of thinking, assuming the possibility of counter-thinking characteristic for this poetry: the first order, **the natural order leads to distinguishing man from other beings, and the second, the cultural order, allows man to belong to the community** and conceive a way to formulate stories that would make it possible to merge the multiplicity and diversity of beings, by means of an anthropological narrative, whose author would be the greatest aberration of nature: “a mammal turned up / with its hand miraculously feathered by a fountain pen” (“Thomas Mann” from the volume entitled *No End of Fun*).

The ability to think, on the one hand, “tears apart the original unity of all things” (Legeżyńska 2015: 22); on the other hand, it is thanks to this ability that the project of unification is at all possible, including the potentially ecocritical project, encompassing with a gaze beings that span out in time and space, from the fossilized shells of single molecule organisms found in “Foraminifera” (from the volume *Here*) and “the Sinanthropus’ jaw” (“Classifieds” from the volume *Calling out to Yeti*), to plankton, a sea cucumber, an octopus, a beetle, a turtle, a tarsier, a dog, a cat and a lioness (and this list is far from complete). In Szyborska’s poetry “plentitude” is not a metaphysical function of thought⁹, but merely a projection of our idealized, postulated vision of existence, whose poetic confirmation can be found in such poems as “I’m Working on the World”, “Joy of Writing” and “Sylvan Morality Tale”. Szyborska’s texts can be seen as intensely rewriting the world, benefiting from narrations which imbue life with meaning, one of them being **an ecocritical attempt to think/invent**; this is anthropological fiction, in which the reflexivity of man’s relation with the world is of prime significance. Szyborska therefore “projects the situation of partnership through empathy” (Legeżyńska 2005: 279) and remains within the precepts of this project. She does not want to humanize nature, anthropomorphize its entities, but she also does not want to identify with them. What is more, any attempt at unity or

⁹ A. van Nieuwerkerken writes about the empiricism of her poetry “typical for ironic moralizing [which] does not have to entail the necessity of accepting a theistic worldview”. (Nieuwerkerken 1998: 358)

conflict-free coexistence with nature is mockingly emphasized and opposed. It is precisely this ability to think of new versions of reality and to talk about the world of nature is a distinguishing characteristic of humanity, though it is sometimes dangerous. Every such story, “representational act, constituting a postponement of conflict, appears to be a fiction explaining the distinctiveness of humankind from the animal kingdom” (Iser 2006: 38)¹⁰.

A watershed moment in this natural history comes with the appearance of mankind; it is this moment that “distinguishes it from nothingness” (“Birthday” from the volume *Could Have*), “launched headfirst from the void” (“Cave” from the volume *The End of Fun*) *homo sapiens*, recounted many times in her poems, and establishes an origin myth, e.g. in “Born”, “Cave”, “Dinosaur Skeleton”, “Our Ancestors’ Short Lives”, “One Version of Events”, “Among the Multitudes” or in the unfinished poem about a Neanderthal in a posthumously published volume *Enough*. Szymborska willingly looks deep into the past of mankind, tracking its existence in the “Cambrian” and “Silurian” ruins (“Moment” from the of the same title), extracting it from the crowd of beings – schools, anthills, hives, landscapes – so that he would cease to be only someone “bred for my fur, / or Christmas dinner” (“Among the Multitudes” from the volume *Moment*), subjected “by blind heredity / and the tyranny of glands” (“One Version of Events” from the volume *The End and the Beginning*). In Szymborska’s final poems we can notice an intensification of this anthropocentric gesture to protect the conscious “I” that is endowed with the ability to think rationally but is also responsible for preventing unity and losing oneself in nature.

Nature in Szymborska’s poetic world does not lead, therefore, to plentitude and metaphysical truth, and it also does not bring a melancholic “vision of a paradise lost” or a new version of “a postmodern landscape” (Fiedorczuk 2015a: 97). Gifted in its abundance to mankind (“So much world all at once – how it rustles and bustles!” (“Birthday” from the volume entitled *Could Have*), it is also transformed by mankind – consciously thought/invented, painted, written – filtered through a cultural image. At the same time, Szymborska forces her lyrical subject (and the reader) to critically analyze the relation between nature and man, to look innovatively at the multiplicity of being and the place that is occupied among *homo sapiens*. Our sense of exceptionalism appears to be our own narration, as is our desire to belong – “during the process of evolution we acquired a special status, but we also live with «other beings» in the same world” (Ligęza 2016: XCIX). If we call the knowledge about this world ecology

10 For more on this topic see Grądziel-Wójcik 2016: 197-206.

(Fiedorczuk, Beltrán 2015: 85), then we also need an ecopoetic mindfulness, which Julia Fiedorczuk¹¹ defines, following Lawrence Buell and Matthew Cooperman, as an attempt to “understand the relations between poetry and the natural environment” (Fiedorczuk 2015a: 122-123), “an interdisciplinary practice coproducing a human and non-human world which is not «a return to nature», but only the realization of a certain human potential” (Fiedorczuk 2015a: 137). Szymborska’s lyrical subject (much like Fiedorczuk’s) does not obscure its identity, does not attempt to identify itself with the non-human world. Its task is to compare and reinterpret, with the aid of described events and linguistic figures of speech, the relations between beings, when as a particular being – in the words of Julia Fiedorczuk’s poetry – “on its narrow, single path we come across another being” (“One” from the volume *Bio*). Szymborska says the same thing differently and it is precisely this “differently” that distinguishes the poetical projects of both poets: “one first person sing., temporarily / declined in human form” (“A Speech at the Lost-and-Found” from the volume *Could Have*) is characteristically surprised by the other begins – mockingly, though reflexively: “A miracle in the first place: / cows will be cows” (“Miracle Fair” from the volume *People on the Bridge*). Distance, irony, and humor are the distinguishing features of Szymborska’s ecological imagination, which tends to take on a frivolous turn only when important matters are at stake¹². What is also significant is that the essence of thinking in ecopoetic categories depends on this poetically constructed “differently”.

It is important how Szymborska tells the natural history of man. When she wants to convey the force and diversity of nature, ruled by its own laws, she releases the rhythm of speech and makes use of metric order, which is a departure from her free verse. This is what happens in the following works: “Nothing Twice”, “Astonishment”, “Motion”, “Allegro ma non troppo”, “Pursuit”, “A Speech at the Lost-and-Found”, “Sylvan Morality Tale”. In the world of nature, top-down

11 Julia Fiedorczuk is today one of the most well-known and prolific contemporary Polish authors, a poet, novelist, translator, literary scholar, essayist, literary critic, with a PhD in the Humanities. She debuted in 2000 with a collection of poetry entitled *Listopad nad Narwią* (*November in Narva*) (Legnica 2000), and her next poetic works were *Bio* (Wrocław 2004), *Planeta rzeczy zagubionych* (*Planet of Lost Items*) (Wrocław 2006), *Tlen* (*Oxygen*) (Wrocław 2009) and *tuż-tuż* (*Almost*) (Wrocław 2012). Fiedorczuk is also the author of four works of prose, translations and studies on American modernist poetry as well as two publications devoted to ecocriticism: *Ecopoetics* (along with Gerardo Beltrán, Warszawa 2015) and *Cyborg w ogrodzie* (*Cyborg in a Garden*) (Gdańsk 2015).

12 According to Jerzy Kwiatkowski, “Szymborska conceals a deeper, philosophical undercurrent in her poetry. [...] Conceals [...] – a tragic, bitter meaning of her poetry. She pretends that she is not really worried about anything” (Kwiatkowski 1996: 85).

mechanisms take hold, along with unremarkable repetitiveness, similarity and necessity, expressed by regular meter and the many alliterations and rhymes. It would seem that it is not thought that decides the shape of the sentence but the poetic demand to draw parallels, analogy and coexistence. When “everything here rhymes” (“Sylvan Morality Tale”) – harmonizes and fits together – one should beware, however, because complete identification is only possible at the cost of identity and meaning, and in this poetry there can be no acceptance of that. Mankind in her poetry does not want to be merely “foolish meat”, which “sees only with his eyes; / hears only with his ears”, because “his head’s full of freedom, omniscience, and the Being” (“No End of Fun” from the volume of the same title); he wants to distinguish himself from insects, which “sense the smell of bloody meat / no other mission than to be” (“Enough” from the volume of the same title) and matter which has “no other mission than to procreate” (“Matter” from the volume entitled *Enough*).

The main purpose of Szymborska’s intellectual poetry, which nonetheless takes into account corporeality and biology, is to provoke thought by means of poems and it is in that regard that I propose to include her into the ecocritical circle. I draw attention only to the metrical structure and stylistic operations which speak to the formal search for poetry that is self-aware and open to the world. The reader is compelled to divert from established trajectories and to rethink our relationship with the environment, which leads to the destabilization of the nature-culture dualism. This can happen as a result of not (only) the themes concentrating on nature, found in many of her poems, but also the methods utilized to realize these themes, possible only by poetic means, through the art of the word, which employing difficult forms¹³ and the frequent alliances with science. Szymborska’s and Fiedorczuk’s work (Fiedorczuk, Beltrán 2015: 33)¹⁴ could be placed, at least partially and unsystematically, in such an understood “third culture” which combines natural sciences and art. “Only thinking that steps beyond the staid patterns can co-create the future which grows from a deeply felt encounter with otherness, with what is not human [...]”, wrote Fiedorczuk, a sentiment with which Szymborska would have most certainly agreed (Fiedorczuk, Beltrán 2015: 16).

13 The majority of Szymborska’s poems are based on “defamiliarizing” techniques. This seems to confirm Viktor Shklovsky’s opinion that what makes something artistic is “what was created with the help of special literary devices”, and this “estrangement” of things, “the device of form made difficult” allows the poet to illustrate the awareness of artistic activity. (Szkłowski 1986: 13)

14 It would be interesting to compare the poetry of both poets in terms of ecology.

Fiedorczuk's concept appears to be close to Szymborska's worldview. Her poems are "sylvan morality tales", "conversations with a stone", "views with a grain of sand", framing fragments of nature culled from silence; they instill a reserved empathy and prepare us for an encounter with the non-human, with "other beings", for which we are also responsible, in relations to which we are not only "other" but also "guilty" ("Sylvan Morality Tale")¹⁵. Taking nature as its main topic with a large dose of humor, Szymborska's poetry teaches us, in accordance with ecopoetics, "[how to live] with others and to accept the fact that diverse others comprise our identity" (Fiedorczuk, Beltrán 2015: 89). Szymborska thus presents not only a natural but also a moral history of mankind, and her biology lessons turn out to be lessons in ethics as well. The lioness's pursuit of the antelope in "The Occurrence" is observed by "*homo sapiens innocens*". This "observer looking through binoculars" is mute, but not an innocent witness of the hunt. *Sapiens innocens* sounds oxymoronic and ironic. Though we can say that the "lioness breathless and hungry", the gazelle and the ebony tree, sky and the earth are "innocent", we cannot say the same thing about a person endowed with a moral conscience who has made a choice (Pietrych 294) – simultaneously other and guilty.

Conclusion

Szymborska's strong emphasis on this bond with nature is not, therefore, something she celebrates and affirms. Rather than succumbing to the rhythm and law of nature, she is more interested in careful observation and the art of drawing conclusions: "What is needed is a deep awareness of our relationship with other beings (people and non-people) and of our dependence on them, and then the actions which such an awareness elicit, inspired by a sense of responsibility and empathy" (Fiedorczuk, Beltrán 2015: 16). This poetry, which is a form of knowing that imposes on man particular responsibilities in coproducing his world, can be included into this way of thinking. Szymborska's "sense of contribution", whose origin is an ecological imagination, should constitute a foundation for an "empathetic bond with the world" and "a basic condition for dialogue" (Fiedorczuk 2015b: 69). Szymborska makes the reader aware that man, who wants to be *sapiens*, will never be *innocens*; she teaches responsibility for our common dwelling and opens the reader's sensitivity and thinking to "the

15 The lyrical subject of the poem enters the forest in order to get lost in it, to unite with nature, surrender to its rhythm, and when he leaves, "he is overwhelmed with anger among people, / as anyone who is different is guilty".

encounter with otherness, with what is non-human [...]” (Fiedorczuk, Beltrán 2015: 16).

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HOMO SAPIENS INNOCENS. WISŁAW SZYMBORSKA (EKO)POETSKI PROJEKT

Sažetak

Priroda je jedna od važnijih tema poezije Wisławe Szymborske, a njezin je junak uvijek situiran prema drugim bićima i u perspektivi dugog trajanja. Autorica članka, naglašavajući antropocentričnost gledišta toga stvaralaštva, istodobno predlaže čitanje pjesama dobitnice Nobelove nagrade u kontekstu ekopoetike. Kao i Julija Fiedorczuk, ekopoetiku shvaća kao postulat prevrednovanja odnosa među ljudskim i ne-ljudskim svijetom, razmatranja veza između poezije i prirodne okoline pomoću pjesme, kao i ukidanja dualizma između prirode i kulture.

Ključne riječi: Wisława Szymborska, Julia Fiedorczuk, suvremena poljska proza, ekopoetika, priroda