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Claremont McKenna College

*The Joy of Listening:*  
**Three Voices in the Poetry of Wisława Szymborska**

submitted to Professor Robert Faggen

by  
Mimi Thompson

for  
Senior Thesis  
Spring 2021  
May 3, 2021

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### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Professor Robert Faggen for his support and feedback throughout the thesis writing process. I am very grateful to have found a fellow Szyborska fan in the Literature department.

Thank you to Professor Seth Lobis for reading my work and for creating a space, through the colloquiums, to discuss this daunting thesis task with fellow Literature majors. A shout-out to Claudia Amber Taylor for being my literature confidant at CMC.

I would also like to thank Professor Nicholas Warner, Professor Lisa Cody, and Professor Kevin Moffett for teaching me how to become a better writer and emboldening me to embrace my own style— quips and all— in all my work these past four years.

Most importantly, thank you to my family for their unwavering encouragement during my academic career. To my mother, Alison Thompson, who has, night-and-day, edited all my essays in college, thank you for believing in my work and for being my second set of eyes on this thesis. To my sister, Lucy Thompson, a special thank you for your poetic eye and rhyming abilities. And, to Wave Vasiksiri, thank you for always cheering me on in whatever I do.

Thank you for your poetry, Wisława Szymborska. I hope this thesis inspires many more to read and hear your brilliance.

## Preface

*“Szyborska's poetry... [is one] of second glances”* — Billy Collins.

*“Thanks to Szyborska, I see the world through different eyes because she described the world in such a way that one cannot look at it as before”* — Clare Cavanagh.

On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, I attended a poetry reading at Claremont McKenna College’s Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum. Robert Hass and Brenda Hillman entertained the audience with their work, as well as with a few stories about their marriage. That evening, I learned that Hass was a prominent translator of Polish poetry, and my mind wandered to my sixteen-year-old-self reading Wisława Szymborska’s “The Joy of Writing,” thinking that these were the greatest “clutches of clauses” I had ever seen written (Szymborska, Wisława, “The Joy of Writing,” p.109, l.12, *Map: collected and last poems*, translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh; edited by Clare Cavanagh (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015)). After the reading, I approached Hass and asked, quite guilelessly, “Have you ever heard of the poet Szymborska?” He beamed and confirmed that, yes, he had heard of her and even knew her personally before her death in 2012 in Kraków, Poland. Hass described her as, “a woman far too humble for her greatness,” and, to my delight, he ended our encounter with the statement, “Szymborska would be proud to know that her poetry is continued on in young women like yourself.” That evening, I decided that my thesis would be dedicated to the work of Wisława Szymborska: a woman recast at the reading four years later, whilst I was studying in the United States and figuring out what my voice wanted to say; and a woman whose words I have read almost every day since, allowing me to embark upon a world, “not of this world,” and finally speak (“Map,” p.432, l.34). To all readers who will continue the poetry of Szymborska for years to come, I hope that this thesis can provide a source of inspiration to find your own voice, too.

I made a discovery quite early in my literary exploration of Szymborska: I am not Polish. I have not visited Poland before, have never met anyone from the country, and cannot speak the language. Not being able to understand Polish was a concern for me, as I wondered whether the English language could accurately express Szymborska's words and ideas, which are so deeply rooted in Polish culture. My bilingual upbringing underscored this worry: I know, for instance, how difficult it can be to translate a Thai idiom without losing the author's original meaning. A collection of scholars at a conference in Warsaw expressed a similar concern, believing that the "breadth and depth of Polish poetry" still remains somewhat unknown in English (Hinsey 35). Yet, the supposedly fragmented practice that is translation is what enables people to experience poetry in their own way. Aside from an evident change in language, the definition of translation itself is to express or render something "in another medium or form," adapting it to a different system or context ("Translation"). Thus, when prominent Polish translator Clare Cavanagh speaks of her "renderings" as *creations* that offer readers "a new way of seeing," she seems to agree that translations only enhance the original aim of poetry: to spark creative possibility for those who would be unable to find it in the untranslated version (Cavanagh 251).

As longtime colleagues and friends to Szymborska, Cavanagh and the late Stanisław Barańczak believed in the power of preserving form. Although the pair had to sometimes "move away from literal meaning" in their translations of Szymborska's poetry, a focus on all that form comprises—the rhyme scheme, rhythm, syntax, and repetition—meant that they could retain the poet's voice (Deardorff). And Szymborska's voice—the one the Nobel Prize in Literature Committee equated to having the effortless eloquence of Mozart's compositions (Nobel Prize)—is utterly distinct. Across any one of Szymborska's poems, Polish-speaking and non-Polish-speaking scholars alike agree that her voice is introspective, curious, and witty, indicating that

Cavanagh's and Barańczak's dedication to Szymborska's select technical devices successfully translates her ideas and spirit. A final thought on translation is that a perfect translation is near impossible, and yet, these imperfections become moments of "inspired improvisation" for translators like Cavanagh and Barańczak (Victorine). Their familiarity with Szymborska across language, time, and place, and subsequent poetic choices, is what I cling to, "like a redemptive handrail," when reading her work ("Some People Like Poetry," p.285, l.18). I now choose to worry less about not reading Polish.

## Introduction

American-Polish writer Bogdana Carpenter classifies Szymborska's voice as "unmistakably her own," and despite the persistent absence of "I" and lack of personal details in the content of her work, it is a voice that cannot be confused with that of any other poet (9). Even so, if you were to pose the question, "Describe Szymborska's voice" to her scholarly enthusiasts, I assure you that each would have a different answer. Yet, with each response, they would nod, confirming, "yes! That retort *also* describes Szymborska," and move to edit their notes. Voice is a complicated literary device to define. The word quite literally refers to the auditory practice of speaking—a sound produced in the larynx and spoken through the mouth—, so how can readers expect Szymborska's poems to have a "voice" if they have only ever read her poems in their heads or do not know how she sounded in person? Moreover, how is it possible for a poet to have more than one voice and *still* be recognisable across all her poems?

In this thesis, I aim to explore voice in Szymborska's poetry. Despite its phonetic definition, voice is an "oral *metaphor* employed in the description and analysis of the written word" (Greene 1525). Writing has previously been thought of as an "extension of speaking," which implies that our reading should also be accompanied by a distinct narrative speaker and the auditory and non-auditory characteristics that define them (1525). Thus, poetic voice does not necessarily need to be read aloud to be discerned, or even have an apparent accent, but it must be recognizable as belonging to one person through the use of repeated techniques, such as structure, tone, and imagery. In T.S. Eliot's essay, "The Three Voices of Poetry," he notes that this "one person" need not always be the poet, but a "dramatic character speaking in verse," and in Szymborska's poetry, there exist multiple characters or voices— human, animal, and otherwise— that can be grouped together, not only by their shared literary devices, but also by

the topical category which they discuss (Greene 1526). More specifically, Szymborska crafts three striking voices, which I classify as her “sub-voices” and, in the research phrase of this thesis, found to be the most perceptible when associated with the themes of political history, women’s rights, and language. By deconstructing and analysing the components of these voices in each chapter (a Political, Feminist, and Creative voice, respectively), I aim to show how readers can engage with the questions, moral implications, and, sometimes, references to Szymborska’s own life, which accompany each topic.

Having clarified how it is possible for Szymborska to embody multiple voices through her “dramatic characters,” I also wish to address how all three are still recognisable as her own. Even though readers “hear” the voice of another character in their minds— whomever Szymborska has appointed the chief narrator for the following thirty or so lines—, this voice follows a consistent pattern or framework that aims to uphold Szymborska’s chief goal in poetry: to challenge established truths and upend accepted narratives about society, history, and science. In other words, although the literary devices that compose her political voice are different from that of her feminist or creative voice, and therefore “sound” different due to the accompanying auditory and non-auditory nuances, the voices are structured in a way, which urges readers to ask questions and seek further clarification from the speaker. Regardless of the literary devices employed, the structure follows an empirical framework: in her poems, Szymborska, rather, one of her narrators, first makes an observation, and then tests it, experimenting with a toolkit of literary devices until he or she can uncover a new perspective, which leads to further discovery. This intense scepticism in the voice serves as a way for the narrators, and then the readers, to constantly question and challenge the assumptions they have learned from widely accepted narratives. Perhaps this interpretation departs slightly from the traditional definition of “voice”

and leans more into style; however, I believe that it connects to Szymborska's political, feminist, and creative voices, such that when readers "hear" one of her narrators, this questioning structure or framework that is characteristically "Szymborskean," enables them to connect further with the present theme and analyse more effectively the impact of the distinct literary devices.

There is value in analysing Szymborska's voices, and I argue that it is a quality, which readers can emulate to effectively assert their own political, feminist, and creative voices in writing. As someone who lived under two oppressive political regimes during her lifetime, was influenced by the societal pressures that contributed to gender inequality, and wrestled with the creative and intellectual limitations that come hand-in-hand with the role of poet, Szymborska has much to teach us about how to exercise "imaginative empathy," allowing her to divert between narrators and, ultimately, create a repertoire of voices that can still be named her own (Greene 1526). Overall, my analysis in this thesis will proceed as follows: I dedicate a chapter to the analysis of four key poems from "Map: collected and last poems" for each of Szymborska's three voices. Here, I also explore how aspects of Szymborska's personal life may have influenced her literary choices. Then, in an attempt to showcase how writers can imitate Szymborska's voice using the literary tools and questioning framework laid out in the analysis, I will write and present three poems, contextualized within my own world.

## Chapter 1 – A Political Voice

It seems inevitable that Szymborska would be read as political. Born in 1923, she was sixteen when Hitlerian Germany and Soviet Russia invaded Poland, signing a treaty of partition, and marking the beginning of World War II (Angel 427). When the Nazis shut down schools in her country, Szymborska took underground classes to continue her education in secret, and in order to avoid deportation to German concentration camps, she worked as a railway employee until the end of the war (Biele, 169; News Wires). Many of the “political” poems that we now know Szymborska by are focused on condemning oppression and the dangers of censorship; however, several of the works in her first two collections (“That’s Why We Are All Alive,” 1952 and “Questioning Yourself,” 1954) sang of socialism and praised the system, namely Stalinism, which she then believed “was a way to liberate everyone who had lived under the Nazi occupation” (Murphy; Biele 171). Socialist Realism dictated that art and literature should promote Soviet ideas (Dobrenko 40). Szymborska officially broke away from the Communist Party in 1966, though, because of her involvement, some Poles believe that she should “no longer be celebrated” (Biele 171). Yet, her poetry collections, from 1957 and beyond, already began to renounce the oppressive rule that subjugated Polish society by infringing on its people’s individual rights (Angel 435). I do not intend to extrapolate Szymborska’s relationship with a turbulent political history to all her poems, but in understanding her desire to reject the type of communist thinking that eliminates individuality and human complexity, readers should interpret her related poems as vehicles to clarify her previous beliefs and challenge systems of oppression in unexpected ways. Thus, through the techniques of an unusual narrative voice and setting, defiant tone, and the subversion of endings, this chapter examines the impact of Szymborska’s

political sub-voice in the poems, “Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition,” “Still,” “Hitler’s First Photograph,” and “An Opinion on the Question of Pornography.”

An unusual speaker or backdrop is characteristic of Szymborska’s poetry. We don’t often read about a computer debating what it means to be human (“Confessions of a Reading Machine”) or Charles Darwin indulging in a romance novel (“Consolation”). The following political poems are framed in unorthodox, sometimes shocking, perspectives and settings, which surprise readers and compel us to reimagine historical events. For example, we can compare the narrative voices in “Still” and “Hitler’s First Photograph” (“HFP”): two poems about WWII with omniscient narrators documenting Jewish people being transported to concentration camps on a train and Adolf Hitler’s childhood, respectively. The victims and the victimizer of the war. When asked to picture a “little fellow in his itty-bitty robe,” readers do not typically turn their thoughts to that of a dictator (p.254, l.1). By mimicking a parental figure who gushes about baby Adolf’s “teensy” hands and “tootsy-woots[y]” feet, Szymborska forces us, uncomfortably so, to make innocent the legacy of a horrendous man (l.6-8). The childlike and pure connotations of “school” and a “bride” naturally evoke wonder about baby Hitler’s future, and, in the first stanza, Szymborska lists rhetorical questions, posing alternative paths for him as a singer, doctor, or priest (l.9, l.4-7). The dramatic irony here is made more intense by the fact that these jobs are focused on bettering humanity through entertainment, health, and religion; professional qualities which Hitler did not exhibit in any form or amount. Through these “what if”-type scenarios, “HFP” demonstrates how Szymborska’s political voice rejects the idea of the Grand Narrative: a pattern of describing the past in only one way or from only one angle. Here, she supplies Hitler with multiple paths in order to underscore the idea that nobody, no baby, is actually born evil.

People *choose* that path for themselves, and it is often one overgrown with ignorance that keeps the individual from understanding the world in “all its complexity” (Biele 171).

In contrast, “Still” is devoid of alternative possibilities for the people on the train. The narrator jumps into the “sealed boxcars,” depicting a bird’s-eye-view snapshot of the distress inside the carriages (p.43, l.2). The three questions in this first stanza— “how long... how far... / [and] will they,” (l.3-4)— are punctuated with a dash instead of a question mark and preemptively answered by the speaker who says, “don’t ask, I can’t say, I don’t know,” which limits any chance to speculate about the people’s futures in the way we are able to do in “HFP” (l.5). This reflects the reality of the Holocaust but is still shocking to confront because the narrative voice speaks in such hopeless and absolute terms. By this, I mean the poem presents no chance for the “names” (metonymies for members of the Jewish population) to become anything other than something the Nazis considered “wrong”; they are simply an identity that “must be destroyed” (l.2, l.17, l.13). The present tense verbs, describing the actions of the people in the boxcar, emphasize this absoluteness because each reading reassigns the person to their suffering, as if that verb is all that will define them: “Nathan beats the wall... / Sarah begs [for] water” (l.6-9). The repetition of “that’s-a-fact” in the last stanzas contributes to the absolutism in the poem (l.24). This is an unusual narrative perspective because we expect Szyborska to grant the Jewish people the same wondrous possibilities she does for Hitler in his poem. However, she pursues a different route and does not even allow the fictional world of poetry to mask the horrors of persecution. The victims had no choice in either their lives or deaths, and by juxtaposing the various paths that Hitler could have chosen to the Jewish people’s singular path on the train “tracks,” Szyborska exposes the injustices of ignorance and how Nazis promoted the grand narrative of how Jewish people were perceived during WWII (l.25). Overall, the active

narration of such a lack of freedom evokes extreme sympathy for the Jews and reinforces hostility towards the Nazis.

It is not often that one examines political history in the context of the abominable snowman or pornography. Alas, there is a first time for everything and, Szymborska creates the opportunity to compare the unconventional settings in “Notes from a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition” (“Notes”) with “An Opinion on the Question of Pornography” (“An Opinion”). On a fictitious quest up the “Himalayas,” the speaker addresses the Yeti, telling him about ordinary life “down there,” referring to human civilization (p.48, l.1, l.9). She recites a seemingly trivial list of all the things which humans possess in an effort to persuade the Yeti to join them, alternating between the concrete (“bread,” “solitaire,” and “Shakespeare”) and abstract (“Wednesday,” “hope,” and mathematics) items that make everyday life pleasant (l.9-23). The specificity of these items is a “well-chosen representative of the miracle of the ordinary,” a quality Szymborska upholds in many of her works (Osherow 224). Moreover, the connotations of these markers of human existence are lively, fabricating images of families, friends, and children in school, and starkly contrast the bleak, arctic surroundings. Up there is “a white mute” where “tears freeze” (l.7, l.27). For such synaesthetic language, the descriptions are essentially lifeless: white is the absence of colour, muteness, the absence of sound, and freezing, a process to stop particles moving. Further, the choppy sentences disrupt a free-flowing, peaceful rhythm, contributing to the tense atmosphere at the mountain peak.

Upon my first reading, I did not classify “Notes” as political, but the context of the publication date suggests otherwise. In 1956-7, Poland was the “scene of dramatic political mobilisation,” when artists were rejecting the values of Socialist Realism and De-Stalinization reforms were ongoing (Machcewicz 99). Scholars often refer to this period as the “thaw”

because the country was warming from a period of icy domination. In “Notes,” it is the speaker’s chief goal to coax the Yeti down from his icy home, and in the process, thaw *him* with the hopeful images she lists, helping him see value in ordinary, human life. The peculiar Himalayan setting could be an extended metaphor for Stalin’s empire, with the Yeti as Joseph Stalin himself. In the hopes that he can appreciate “Wednesday, bread, and alphabets,” these treasured artifacts of human life, Stalin might also loosen his socialist grip, which attempts to destroy all individuality (1.9-10). Another interpretation is that the poem depicts the Space Race. Written two years after the highly politicized competition between the Soviet Union and the United States began in 1955, “Notes” opens with the image of Himalayan “mountains” pitted against each other in a race “to the moon” (1.2). Such colossal land masses could certainly be likened to two of the largest empires in the world, the USSR and the US, in terms of size and self-appointed importance, and this scene of mountains competing to reach a planet that has not yet been explored, reflects the twentieth-century battle to declare dominance of space. Thus, the Yeti figure, who lives at the top of these mountain rocket ships, steering the controls, represents the Soviet and US leaders, whose entire lives were dictated by the attempt to conquer the moon, even the universe, first; at the least to assert their superior technological and political skill before the other could. The items in stanza two and following are far more palatable than anything that might be used to fuel the exploratory— rather, exploitative— space mission, and Szymborska constantly calls out to “Yeti” to remind him of this life that already exists on earth (1.9).

Taking a similarly metaphorical approach, “An Opinion” likens thinking— the freedom to attain knowledge through reading and conversation— to watching pornography. The latter is considered a taboo topic, but during multiple periods in Szymborska’s life, the former was just as prohibited. “An Opinion” was published in 1986 during the aftermath of martial law, where

schools, the post, and mass media were severely censored (Ścierańska). Consequently, the poem is peppered with sexually charged language in order to mask the true meaning of the poem, which is the ridiculousness of censorship. Although the first line clearly, and wittily, proclaims that there is “nothing more debauched than thinking,” the subsequent diction provokes readers’ minds down a blush inducing rabbit-hole of sex, causing us to confuse the two topics (p.266, l.1). For instance, the “frenzied, rakish chases after the bare facts” is about the fact-searching research process, but the suggestive adjectives and implications of “bare” hint that we are searching for something slightly more provocative (l.7). One wonders if the synonym that creates the pun in English is present in Polish, which contributes to the ongoing discussion concerning works in translations. Likewise, “the filthy fingering of touchy subjects” describes the way people approach controversial academic topics, but the fricative sounds from the bodily words make us believe we are reading about a sexual act instead (l.8). Reimagining the illegal act of reading in this risqué pornographic setting is thrilling and makes us feel as though we are challenging the law, simply by turning the page. For readers in 1986, this is quite literally the case under censorship laws. In this way, Szymborska transforms her anger with a rigid autocratic system into a rebellious objection, offering ideas for how readers can develop their own political voices in restrictive societies. Thus, her bitterness towards the various regimes she lived under manifests itself in different tones, whether comedic or sorrowful, but always in a way that undermines oppression.

The tone of Szymborska’s political sub-voice is illustrated in the titles of “An Opinion on the Question of Pornography” and “Hitler’s First Photograph.” It is not common to have opinions about questions. People have opinions about their favourite novels or politics, which makes Szymborska’s, about questions, seemingly futile. Yet, in societies that value freedom of

expression, nobody has the right to dictate what another individual thinks. As Szymborska did not publish “An Opinion” in a society with these values, the title stands as a blatant objection to anyone who wishes to control thought. Attaching “Pornography” to this “Question” is Szymborska’s defiance, declaring, quite sarcastically, that if she cannot have opinions about her country or political leaders, she shall have them about sex instead. The use of the indefinite article, instead of the singular “The” or “My,” implies that there are likely more opinions pertaining to “question[s] of pornography” present. The tone of the second title veils the poem’s meaning in a similarly seemingly trivial way. “Hitler’s First Photograph” evokes the image of a scrapbook of a babies’ first experiences, which may be Szymborska’s way of patronizing what the man is actually known for in history. The simple words read like the title of a family photo album, adding to the imaginary collections of “Hitler’s First Step” and “Hitler’s First Day Out.” The reader thus adopts a childlike tone for the rest of the poem. For example, the nicknames, “little angel, mommy’s sunshine, [and] honey bun” compromise Hitler’s power as an adult man (l.11). Szymborska also affixes the German diminutive suffix “-chen” to the end of “heart” to create “little heart,” which belittles his character; we cannot fathom the thought of Hitler being in love, even as a boy (l.20). Overall, Szymborska does not allow her indignation with oppression to seep through the poems and instead adopts a spirited tone to reclaim her own political views and reframe a “powerful” man as an immature baby who should not be taken seriously.

Szymborska’s anger at oppressive regimes is exhibited through a more subdued tone in both “Notes” and “Still.” Since these pieces were published earlier than the other two (during Stalinism in Poland and only twelve years after WWII ended), we may assume that Szymborska could not make light of such recent events through irony. In “Notes,” something as exciting as being in the Himalayas is made to feel dismal. For example, the first line, “So these are the

Himalayas,” is anticlimactic and devoid of a sense of adventure (l.1). The drive from the verb “racing” to personify the mountains’ journey is halted by the destructive and phonetically harsh diction, “punched” and “thrust,” and the final destination is described as “nothing,” positing that the entire race— for glory and control if the Yeti assumes the role of Stalin; for space domination if the Yeti represents the prominent figures during the Space Race; or for whatever else the moon might represent to the Yeti who drives the race— is fruitless (l.2, l.5-6).

Szyborska recognised the ruthless reality of the late 1950s, when Stalin still reigned over Poland and the Space Race was just beginning, which is why she opens the poem with such bleak and hopeless language, hinting that she does not have much faith in this period of egotism and callousness. As discussed earlier, the descriptions of human life are animated against the cold environment, but there remains a serious undertone to this list. Szyborska writes, “we give / birth among the ruins” and “we turn the lights on,” as reminders that although humanity can be marked by everyday tragedy, it remains resilient and optimistic (l.21, l.25). The Yeti’s journey, however, is foreshadowed to end in “nothing,” implying that when he rejects, eventually even forgetting, aspects of humanity to pursue other activities, he will also lose the hope that is so present and precious in ordinary life (l.6).

A poem unclouded by metaphor, “Still” covers events, which instinctively provoke a depressing tone. The speaker reports from a privileged position: she is in a world of fiction, distanced from the realities of the war’s persecution. Thus, her omniscient voice urges the people on the train to be careful: “Don’t jump yet” (l.18-19), and the repetition only underscores her fear for them. Moreover, the train-inspired descriptions contribute to the grave tone of the poem and the reality of oppression. Szyborska writes the “clattering wheels / are mocked by the echoes of night” (l.20-21). A divergence into dark humour, the train (owned and operated by the Nazis) is

trying to mask the echoes (of what I can only assume are screams of Jewish people), but the voices are louder and compete with the onomatopoeic “clattering” to expose the horrors of their torture. The “clouds of people” passing over the country’s plains are clouds of ash, acknowledging the millions of Jewish people who were cremated in concentration camps (1.22).

Szyborska attunes her political voice to both light-hearted and sombre tones, but she rarely adjusts it to a personal one. However, the final rhetorical device that makes up her political sub-voice is the subversion of endings, either astonishing or troubling readers about the state of our political world, as well as offering a fleeting glimpse into Szyborska’s own thoughts about the poems’ subject matter. The final stanza of “Still” repeats “that’s-a-fact,” a phrase which mimics the noise of the train on the tracks, made more intense by the sibilance and plosive “t” sounds (1.26). It is also included to reinforce “the fact” that the poem is true, and perhaps a personal account. Although the poem only once includes the pronouns, “I” and “my,” I believe that the observer is Szyborska, recounting the events that she witnessed while working as a railway operator during the war (1.5, 1.29). When the tracks disappear into the “dark forest,” all that is left is an overwhelming silence and guilt that beats on Szyborska’s conscience like a “drum” because she could not do anything to save the lives of the people on the train (1.28, 1.32). Accordingly, Szyborska never gives the signal for them to “jump now!” which readers anticipate after reading “don’t jump yet” four times earlier. Because her employment at the railway station allowed her to escape the fate of those in the poem, it seems as though Szyborska felt complicit in the deportation of Jews, which adds meaning to the title of the poem. That is, she was “still” unable to help. Szyborska’s indications of guilt serve as a moral lesson. There are “still” atrocities like this occurring in the world due to political and religious

strife, and we “still” have the chance to act and tell those who are persecuted, in our writing and in person, to “jump now.”

“Notes” also include a personal reference at the end of the poem to subvert our expectations about Szymborska’s relationship to the communist regime or any domineering force of power. After calling out to the Yeti to re-join humanity, we realise that the speaker is alone at the top of the mountain. From the title, we know that this is a “nonexistent” expedition and that the creature in the poem is mythical, but Szymborska’s isolation finally indicates that she will never face the Yeti. It is pointless to believe in him, and since he may represent Stalin, the doctrines that the Soviet leader promoted are not worth believing in either. The poet Edward Hirsch summarizes it well: “Communism is like believing in the Abominable Snowman. Neither offers human warmth” (Hirsch). Yet, Szymborska does offer us an alternative reading of the poem, which compels us to pity the communist leader. Before we lose sight of the Yeti, we learn that he is surrounded by “neither moon nor earth”; he exists in a state of purgatory (l.26). Here, the moon represents a non-earthly environment, a space incapable of human emotion or pleasure. Bridging the two places, the “semi-moonman” still has a chance to “turn back” from the cold and inhuman depths of space (l.28, l.29). Stalin still has a chance to turn back from his domineering regime that aims to denude Poland of its individuality. Pitifully, he does not. Concerning the Space Race, at this point in the poem, both the Soviet and US leaders have the opportunity to surrender their mission into the depths of the unknown and relinquish the hostility that defines their relationship. Frustratingly, they do not, though, to contemporary readers, the refusal to turn back may instead be a sense of relief because of all the technological advancements made during the Space Race period. When asked about “Notes,” Szymborska refused to confirm that it could have been about any foreign political leader. In a 2007 interview, she said, “The yeti is the yeti...

the day I want to criticize the Kaczynski twins, I will call them by name,” referring to two Polish politicians (Biele 175). At the end of the poem, she is trapped “inside four walls of avalanche,” separated from humanity by the propagandistic noise of snow and communist ideals (l.31). But, unlike the Yeti, she continues “stomping [her] feet for warmth,” refusing to succumb to the divisive cold anymore; the onomatopoeia of her “stomps” emphasizes the image of political protest which readers leave the poem with (l.32). The “snow” is “everlasting,” indicating that we will always be faced with threats to democracy or the desire to explore and capitalize upon spaces far beyond our reach and comprehension. Yet, the double syntax in these final two lines suggests that what is first interpreted as “everlasting”— attempts to rule — might just be seen as something else: the ability to *resist* such domineering assertions of power (l.34, l.33).

In “An Opinion,” Szymborska successfully distracts us with her sexual innuendos (my favourite being, “such positions the Kama Sutra itself doesn’t know,” referring to the many ways we sit and read a novel (l.27)). Thus, the final stanza comes as a surprise to those who forget the poem is actually about censorship under martial law. Szymborska shatters the titillating vision by stating that the “only thing that’s steamy / is the tea,” using enjambment to delay the (for some) unfortunate reality (l.28-29). What follows is a detailed description of people reading together, but most interesting is the ritual “now and then,” of someone getting up, going to the window, looking through the curtains, and taking “a peep out at the street” (l.34-37). This drawn-out process suddenly signals the frightening and serious consequences of, say, reading a prohibited novel or discussing a forbidden topic in 1980s Poland. In comparison to the hyperbolic and euphemistic language that ties one’s tongue in knots in the previous stanzas, the simple and succinct final lines stand out to ensure that readers understand Szymborska’s hidden message: in hiding and in writing, she is not afraid to have opinions.

The ending of “HFP” also twists our expectations and subverts our thinking about the state of the world today. In the last stanza, Szymborska uses the image of a yawning “history teacher” to warn readers that “boredom can be politically devastating” (l.32; Stutz 129). This jump out of 1890s Braunau am Inn, Austria (Hitler’s birthplace) is sudden. What I believe this does is explain how people can possibly turn into political tyrants. When young people are not taught with vigour about what is right and wrong, or do not have their ideas challenged in a way that expands their worldview, they might choose a path that confirms their prejudiced, and possibly harmful, perspectives. Szymborska once wrote that “evil stems from intellectual and emotional stuntedness... and should be shunned,” confirming that a moral education, as hinted in “HFP,” is the solution (Szymborska 4). Another interpretation of the ending is that nobody, not even a bored, ordinary teacher, should accept explanations of fate in historical and political discussions. The poem is filled with such positive imagery, such as the “spring sun,” “geraniums,” and “a lucky fortune” (l.14-16), and the speaker labels these as “signs” that all will be well with the “bouncing baby” Hitler (l.13, l.22). The rare image that foreshadows anything but positivity is of the camera during Hitler’s first photograph, “click[ing] from under that black hood,” which symbolizes death and destruction (l.26). The abrupt “click” sound contrasts with the soft-spoken diction in this poem, setting into motion the appearance of “howling dogs” and “footsteps” that silently creep in the final lines (l.31). Barely noticeable amongst the overwhelming joy, the lack of ominous references proves that we cannot rely on fate to warn us about the rise of oppressive leaders. Instead, as Szymborska does, we must actively engage those around us in thoughtful and humanizing conversations, so that they do not choose the path of evil.

This chapter has examined the ways in which Szymborska utilizes the techniques of an unconventional narrative voice and setting, defiant tone, and the subversion of endings to craft her political sub-voice. Szymborska's political poems aim to uplift those who were and are bound by oppressive institutions and individuals, as well as twist our expectations about how we should study the past. That is, "Notes" implores us to treasure the ordinary aspects of human life in the face of divisive attempts to power; "An Opinion" emboldens us to rebel against any system that limits our imagination and expression; "HFP" reminds us that nothing can predict evil, so we must fight against it through education; and "Still" encourages us to take action for the powerless, even if it is simply in writing. Hirsch argues that because the Polish writers of Szymborska's generation shared a collective experience of war, their political poems are dedicated to defending "individual subjectivity against collective thinking" (Hirsch). I would agree that this personal experience allows Szymborska to strengthen her sub-voice, because she understands what literary devices can condemn and challenge autocratic and communist power. Most effective is her ability to develop a voice, which intrigues readers to revive or reimagine overshadowed perspectives in history, as well as evaluate our political systems as they stand today, aspects integral to Szymborska's sceptical questioning framework.

## Chapter 2 – A Feminist Voice

I regard Szymborska as a feminist poet. To me, feminist voices acknowledge the challenges that women, across time and place, have faced, and use literary tactics to reveal the inadequacies of our patriarchal society. Although the subject matter of her poems tends to focus on women, Szymborska celebrates, in refreshing ways, the “smallest details of the living world [human, animal, plant, or mineral] ... to validate [their] significance,” because these details have sometimes been misrepresented by widely accepted, male cultural narratives (Kostkowska 189). Yet, in Poland, a country where the feminist movement is “still fledgling and fragmented,” many scholars do not regard Szymborska in the same way as I do (Bystydzienski 501). Heightened by the first and second waves of the American Women’s Rights Movement, the 1960s and ’70s was a time of great awareness of women in the workplace, female sexuality, and body image (Burkett). Szymborska’s Polish reality was different. Restricted by a socialist government (see chapter one) and the Catholic church, both of which imposed traditional views about gender on its people— such as that a woman should be subordinate to a man, that she should dress a certain way, and that her primary role is “mother” and “homemaker”— women’s rights were overlooked. Actually, let me rephrase: communist propaganda made it so that many Poles believed that women’s rights were *unnecessary*. The state “belittle[d] the [American] feminist cause,” purposely misconstruing the concept of equality so that Polish women interpreted it as a “lesbian-dominated and anti-male” movement that did not reflect their day-to-day lives (Bystydzienski 503).

This collective cultural misunderstanding allows us to theorize why Szymborska was not recognised as a “feminist poet” until the early 2000s and 2010s. Her voice comes across as neither “anti-male”—marketed by the socialist players as a synonym for feminist—, nor overtly

feminine and discussing such topics as mistresses and mothers— a characteristic of Romantic poems written specifically for women who could only tolerate reading about domestic life— (Karwowska 23). Since Szymborska’s voice “harmonise[d] with those of her male counterparts,” scholars did not feel the need to classify her as anything different simply because she was a woman (Jarniewicz 47). While I agree that one must discuss Szymborska in a context independent of her gender and the stringent classifications of Polish feminism, it is important to note that *because* of her gender, she writes from a unique vantage point, in a way no male poet will ever be able to express. But it is because of her idiosyncratic voice that she writes about a woman’s world in a way no female poet ever could either. Through the use of classical allusions, satirical tone, and descriptions of defamiliarization, Szymborska’s feminist sub-voice builds a completely new model of sensibility for women and men to perceive themselves through (Karwowska 315). In the poems “A Moment in Troy,” “Rubens’ Women,” “Soliloquy for Cassandra,” and “Lot’s Wife,” Szymborska’s sub-voice refuses to be constrained by stereotypes and attempts to alter history as we currently know or understand it.

Almost every reference to ancient Rome, mythological Greece, or the Bible in Szymborska’s poetry sheds light upon the women who inhabited these worlds or folktales. However, Szymborska’s classical allusions do not follow the pattern of how these female figures are typically portrayed: one-dimensional individuals who are either subordinate to men or completely reckless and catastrophic. Instead, Szymborska’s mythical women directly question the very stereotypes that they have been constrained by for centuries, adding depth to the “cultural image” of a woman and exposing any misogynistic narratives (Karwowska 326). For instance, in “A Moment in Troy” (“A Moment”), Szymborska uses the *Iliad*’s Helen of Troy to expose society’s unrealistic beauty standards for women. Here, Helen is idolized by “little girls”

who yearn for her beauty (p.63, l.1). It seems that unless girls have a “face to launch a thousand ships”— drawing upon the classical allusion, are so beautiful that men will fight, even die, for them— they are inadequate (Marlowe, XIII, l.87). But, in their daydreams, having “suddenly [been] taken off to Troy,” the girls have a chance to transform into “beautiful Helens” (l.11, l.13). Situated in this classical world, Szymborska does *not* berate these girlish aspirations and the chaos that ensues, as we would expect. Instead, the omniscient narrator indulges the girls in their newfound confidence and sophistication. On their arrival back in time, the atmosphere becomes wondrous and elegant, contrasting the slight dejection that exuded from the opening lines. As a Helen, the derogatory descriptor “skinny” turns into “light”; the girls no longer have to “walk,” for the Helens “ascend” (l.2, l.16, l.5, l.14). The superficial power the girls have attained spurs the narrator on further through longer sentences. The speaker even reports that these “small faces / [are] worth dismissing envoys for” (envoys being the plural for *envoi*, a literary term for the author’s concluding stanza) (l.21-22). Only in a fantasy where the girls are finally considered “beautiful” could they be worth more lines in a poem. At this point, readers realise that Szymborska does not seriously approve this Helen aspiration, which is precisely how she exposes the ridiculousness of the unrealistic, literally legendary, beauty expectations. While we are anticipating a line such as, “all girls are beautiful in their own way!”, we think how outrageous it is that physical appearance is so highly regarded. Why do “little girls” not want to emulate Helen’s strength or tenacity instead? There exist secondary narratives that highlight her as a warrior, but none are as explicit as the testament to her beauty. All women I know have experienced these pressures, which drives my sympathy for the girls in the poem, who at any ordinary moment in the “middle of” the day, could be whisked into this Hellenized, but contemporarily relevant daydream (l.8).

Through a classical allusion to the Baroque era, “Rubens’ Women” also explores beauty standards, but in a way that empowers women with different body types. Today’s “ideal” female body is tall and fit, somebody with curves and not an ounce of fat on them. Szymborska seems to laugh at this impossibly perfect physique by immersing her poem in the art of seventeenth-century Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. For those removed from the art world, Rubens was famous for his oil paintings that depicted fully figured, nude women: nobles, virgins, wives, and widows, all absolutely voluptuous and unashamed of it. The very first word, “Titanettes,”—the feminised version of “Titans,” a race of Gods—sets the tone for how Szymborska views the succeeding women: as large as any male deity, in both size and presence in history (p.82, l.1). My brief etymology investigation indicates that “Titanettes” is an invented classical word. Philhellenes tend to use the word “Titaness”; however, the diminutive suffix “-ess” was only added to the male “Titan” over 200 years after the word was first used by Chaucer, suggesting that its meaning did not originally encompass all genders (“Titan”). Thus, Szymborska reclaims the word, in a bold and humorous way, to intentionally classify it as female to show that women have their own race of Goddesses. Also, the hard “t” sound in this new “-ette” suffix is much more forceful than the soft “-ness,” reinforcing the power readers have purely by pronouncing the first word aloud. The Baroque era claims these “Titanettes” as its own “daughters,” asserting that the members of this period are proud to deem prestigious what Ruben has birthed on a canvas (l.8). To embody this seventeenth-century passion, Szymborska writes as though the subjects of Rubens’ paintings, or even their admirers in a gallery, have spoken aloud. The exclamatory ecphronesis (“O pumpkin plump!” to start us off) reflects the extravagant confidence of the gloriously fat women, and the depiction of “pudgy angels and... chubby god[s]” in the foreground of Rubens’ scenes puts the subjects on a higher pedestal (l.12, l.27). Across time,

both art and “unideal” body types have been criticized. Szymborska voices that *through* art, we can celebrate them instead.

While Szymborska uses classical allusions in the above poems to raise issues of self- and body-image, Greek and Biblical references are drawn upon directly in “Soliloquy for Cassandra” (“Soliloquy”) and “Lot’s Wife” to show the damaging effects of the misrepresenting female figures. A Trojan princess, Cassandra was cursed by the god Apollo to “speak true prophecies that no one [would ever] believe” (Bodin 4). Her most famous prediction was the destruction and subsequent fall of Troy during the Trojan War. Cassandra’s “inconvincible” clairvoyant capabilities are widely referenced throughout Polish and European literature, most notably in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. In this play, Cassandra is mocked and degraded by her fellow Trojans, making her feel disheartened and despondent (Bodin 4). From this portrayal alone, some readers might adopt the impression that her character is weak, and she should have done more to make the city believe her. In later narratives (such as Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*), Cassandra is labelled as *the* face of tragedy, blaming her and her female counterparts for “weav[ing] the threads of tragedy of the fatal destiny of Troy” (Peyton 8). In contrast, Szymborska subverts this archaic portrayal and establishes Cassandra as a powerful force, who is feared by those around her. “Here I am,” she states boldly in the first line, unapologetic for all that is associated with her presence from the play and other texts (p.126, l.1). Even the line, “And this is my head full of doubts,” emits a paradoxically self-assured tone that makes the readers want to believe her; the repeated phonetic emphasis on “my” from the previous two lines contributes to this confident image (l.4). We are not used to seeing brazen and commanding women being given a voice in literature because the male-gaze— “patriarchy’s portrayal of its [heroines]” (Karwowska 321)—usually dominates, dismissing any depictions of women that are unfocused on her sexuality or

subordination. Not only is this Cassandra strong, but she is also a caring (for example, she cries twice to her people to “look down on yourself from the stars,” the heavenly bodies, which represent the human fate she has predicted (l.26-27)), and lonely character because people, upon seeing her, “break off in midword” and flee (l.13). Thus, Szymborska constructs a nuanced, multi-faceted woman who, in the midst of chaos, does not let other people’s (or narratives’) perceptions affect how she views and values herself. The repeated use of “I” suggests that we can treat the poem as a primary research source, retroactively discrediting the historical poems and plays that say anything different.

In “Lot’s Wife,” Szymborska adopts the persona of the titular character to reframe this Biblical story and redeem this unnamed character. Lot’s wife was a “disobedient” woman who turned into a pillar of salt after looking back at her city Sodom, which she and her family were fleeing from, even after the angels warned her not to (Britannica). Aside from an appearance in the Russian Anna Akhmatova’s poem by the same name, Lot’s wife rarely features in literature, so readers have little opportunity to classify her as anything other than a foolish, defiant woman; as anything other than a wife. The title of the poem, “Lot’s Wife,” acknowledges the lack of information we have about her since there are no other unique descriptors written. The blunt reveal of the classical allusion from which the poem emerges, gives Szymborska the chance to overturn most readers’ expectations about this female character. That is, anyone who believes that Lot’s wife simply “looked back out of curiosity,” is suddenly offered a new perspective. Unlike the mainstream religious narrative says, she “could have had other reasons” (p.203, l.1, l.2). Indeed, the almost-thirty reasons as to why Lot’s wife may have turned around are listed using the anaphoric “I looked back,” revealing the potential explanations, which would have changed the course of her life, reputation, and story. For example, Lot’s wife could have “looked

back mourning [her] silver bowl,” hinting at her sadness having to leave behind items which were precious or that defined her identity as a mother, a cook, a collector, or an artist (l.3). This line also reveals that the family were in a rush to leave, ejected from their home without much choice in the matter. Another reason she looked back could have been to “[check] for pursuers” (l.10), revealing how much she cares about her family and how much faith she puts in a higher power to transport them to safety (not much... Szymborska’s own religious views might just gleam through here). Just as with Cassandra, Szymborska enables Lot’s wife to become a more nuanced female figure through characterizing details.

Szymborska’s feminist sub-voice calls for a “multiplicity of viewpoints” to assert that no “one way of looking at a phenomenon can be satisfying” (Kostkowska 201). As demonstrated in “Lot’s Wife,” her “I looked back...” viewpoints project alternative realities, enabling readers to expand their perception of what a “disobedient” woman does, says, or looks like. Despite this hefty thinking process that readers may encounter with each poem, the reality is far less serious. These feminist poems are satirical and upbeat. This tone, as the second marker of Szymborska’s sub-voice, is light-hearted and inclusive, so that every reader, regardless of their gender, feels a connection to the subject matter in some way or another. In “A Moment,” Szymborska perfectly captures the feeling of being an angsty teenager in the first stanza: “resigned / to freckles that won’t go away,” girls look “just like Mom or Dad, / and [are] sincerely horrified by it” (l.2-l.7). Older readers chuckle, remembering their own, awkward adolescent experience when, in horror, they realised they had inherited their mother’s knobby knees or father’s big nose. The reader carries their nostalgia throughout the poem, sheepishly recognising a younger version of themselves when the girls fantasize about “movie stars” or their “teacher from art class” (l.24, l.26). These accessible and youthful images make the message about beauty standards more

personal, in a way where we can laugh or cringe about the superficial dreams we once had, while also realizing the damaging effects of these dreams on a young girl's self-image. Szymborska's voice seems to mimic the tone of beauty advertisements. When in the Troy trance, the speaker promotes the ingrained rules that the girls know by heart and abide by. For example, "beauty equals rest," implying that attractive people have an easier life (l.17). Or "gestures" should be used to "sculpt themselves / in inspired nonchalance," hinting that it takes extreme care and poise to look indifferent (l.19-20). These lines echo the contradictory, sexist phrases women hear in real life: look pretty, but not too pretty, or be confident, but not assertive. We can never seem to win.

In "Soliloquy," Cassandra never wins either, but, in a snarky tone, she makes it known that she will persist, nonetheless. That is, Cassandra foreshadows her own reputation in the second stanza. Although we know that it is Szymborska writing from the future, readers lean towards believing Cassandra because of the opening bold statements and our own insider knowledge about Greek mythology. Her self-empowerment stems from the future recognition that she "was right" (l.38). She besmirches the people "whose predictions turned to fact so quickly," because they will not be remembered as strikingly as she (l.10). For an article review, Szymborska once wrote: "from our vantage point, we know which scientist was right and which was shamefully mistaken," and still, members of the latter descriptor stand out in more vivid, "one-of-a-kind" detail (Szymborska 1). As established in all Szymborska's work, she chooses to write from perspectives not often labelled as "right" anyways. Cassandra's sarcastic comments continue in succinct and choppy sentences, which establish her authority and unassumed power over the Trojans who did not believe her predictions. For example, in detailing how the city views her, she says, "Laughter died. / Lovers' hands unclasped. / Children ran to their mothers"

(1.14-16). I do not believe that these observations are meant to evoke sympathy from readers because Cassandra has been introduced as a confident, solitary figure already; however, they do reveal how people in real life tend to react to women in power: with suspicion and seriousness, a sterner eye than what they would give a male leader, which is exactly the treatment Cassandra receives when her fellow citizens “lowered their eyes” (1.28). Overall, the satirical tone manifests itself as Cassandra’s scorn for Troy, which readers not only emulate, but from our position in history, use as rightful evidence to confirm the prophet’s projections.

Cassandra counters the Trojans’ reactions with playful jabs, such as by labelling them as “short-lived names,” confirming that her immortality will allow her to eventually forget those who wronged her (1.17). Similarly, Lot’s wife cannot help herself from weaving satire throughout her reasons for looking back at Sodom. For example, she undermines the seriousness of her own death by saying that she simply no longer wanted to stare at the “righteous nape / of [her] husband Lot’s neck” (1.5-6). Such a reason appears so early in the poem, immediately colouring Lot’s wife as a witty woman. Also, we know who Lot is, but he is deliberately introduced as Lot’s wife’s “husband,” perhaps in an attempt to equate their power as, for centuries, she has only been introduced by her marital status. These brisk sentences introduce a rhythm to the poem, mimicking the physical action of Lot’s wife running and looking back, as well as speeding up the reader's pace. We are eager to hear all her reasons— the funny and serious ones— so that we can understand her character better, which is how one produces a multifaceted and historically accurate picture of women in general (Karwowska 326). Another moment of humour to diffuse the tragic situation is when the wind gushes, “unbound[ing] [Lot’s wife’s] hair and lift[ing] her robe” (1.25). This embarrassing incident humanizes Lot’s wife and allows readers to sympathize with her even more. In fact, all the scenarios of Lot’s wife looking

back capture some form of human emotion, whether it is frustration, joy, or fear. Thus, the first-person “I” narration becomes a person “not categorized by sex or gender,” not even by Lot’s wife’s situation, but by universal, human feelings (Karwowska 318).

Universality does not seem to exist in the beauty industry and Szymborska satirises the ever-changing “ideal” female body type in “Rubens’ Women.” Although this poem empowers women with larger figures, who are not ordinarily the muses in mainstream literature, it also hints how quickly they may lose the centre portrait position. The focus shifts away from the Titanettes in the fourth stanza to follow their “skinny sisters” (l.16). These women do not fit the ideal beauty standards of the seventeenth century, which is why they only enter the conversation towards the end of the poem. Visually, they shrink in size compared to Rubens’ women and are only permitted to occupy a “single file” amount of space on the “unpainted side” of the canvas because their lean bodies require so little paint (l.18, l.19). This dichotomy of female bodies, the division between the “fat” or “skinny,” is emphasized in the poem’s structure for both kinds of women are never discussed in the exact same stanza. This is because both cannot exist, or rather, be considered “trendy” by mainstream beauty in the same century. Mainstream “style” means what is considered conventional and normal, marking any other type of body in that era as strange and freakish. Quite literally, those women are “exiled”: cut out of beauty advertisements, out of art and literature, and out of everyday conversation (l.20). Szymborska dips into these periods of exile to give readers a snapshot of the changing fates for women. For example, the “thirteenth century would have given them golden halos,” nods to the most popular pieces of art in the Late Medieval period, where the iconised Virgin Mary, with a glowing ring around her head, became the ideal standard of beauty (l.23). Returning to the seventeenth century, Szymborska pauses with the exclamation “alas,” which exudes a sense of false pity for the

“unvoluptuous” (l.25). It seems sarcastic because we know how quickly, in a matter of lines in fact, the trend will change for either the voluptuous or the un. Additionally, “unvoluptuous” is an invented word, which tangibly demonstrates how one type of body can be exiled from the beauty narrative: skinner women were not favoured in Rubens’ time, so it seems pointless to create any synonyms for them.

The sphere of art provides Szymborska with the creative freedom to explore and recognise feminine beauty in new ways, ones not been taught to us by a patriarchal system. Thus, the third device she uses to construct her feminist sub-voice is descriptions of defamiliarization, an artistic tendency to present common objects or concepts and render them in a way one would not normally view them. This technique illuminates the creative genius of the poet, for we gain insight into how they see the world. The ekphrastic descriptions in “Rubens’ Women” visualize the female body as feral animals. Mimicking the sounds of a stampede in the wild, the Titanettes are as “naked as the rumbling of barrels,” already warping the traditional depiction of women as delicate and modest (l.2). What follows is an amalgamation of uncouth and carnal imagery, framing the woman as birds who “roost in trampled beds /... mouths agape, ready to crow” (l.3-4). The secrets of the female bedchamber are revealed... who knew to expect feathers and beaks? In contrast, the skinny sisters have “birdlike feet” and “jutting shoulder blades,” moulding them as frail birds, rejected from the community of fat hens and, again, from seventeenth-century ideals (l.21, l.22). The unsavoury, corporeal language, such as “flesh,” “glandular,” and “blood,” humanizes all women, confirming that any body, whether it is idolized by society or not, undergoes natural bodily processes (l.5, l.6, l.7). We cannot hold women up to these absurd standards, where their flesh and blood must be perfect. The thick “d” sounds slow the readers down to immerse themselves in the women’s roosting house. This pace also simulates the act of

looking at one of Rubens' paintings, or any painting for that matter, to capture all the individual details of the piece. Indeed, these details situate the women within a heaving frame, surrounded by objects that emanate their sensual desires, another human process, which we can incorporate into the umbrella of femininity. For example, "wines blush" and the bedchamber "seeth[es]" to the tune of the "carnal alarm" (l.9, l.29, l.11), expanding our "visualization of the female body" not just as a sexual object, but as a body empowered by its own sexuality (Karwowska 330).

"Soliloquy" expands the readers' perceptions of what women are capable of looking like or feeling through defamiliarization. Szymborska uses the setting of Troy to depict women in warlike situations and distance them from stereotypically submissive portrayals. Cassandra's words, an extension of her intellect, "burn like fire in the sky" (l.6). Fire symbolizes destruction (and was, precisely, used to burn down Troy), but here, it preserves Cassandra's legacy in history. Szymborska hints that these flames of truth might even be subconsciously present in the Trojans. Deep down, they bear a "moist hope / a flame fueled by its own flickering" (l.33-34). I interpret this hope as being diluted, or made "moist," by a refractive liquid that makes things, such as the truth, blurry. Yet, as long as there exist people who seek knowledge, like scientists, philosophers and some sceptics, the fire has a chance at being ignited. These inversions of the roles of nature stress that patriarchal societies, including ancient Greece, will be unable to see the truth because its people are enclosed in a "great wind," that does not carry an uplifting breeze, but extinguishes veracious, female voices (l.30). The title and ending also renew readers' perceptions about this myth. Since the soliloquy is "for" Cassandra, we learn that a speaker is taking on the prophet's role and speaking as though she is her. The final stanza mirrors the first, repeating, "And this is," but finishing the phrase with a doubtful tone. To combat this, the

speaker emerges and asserts that Cassandra's was a face "that didn't know it could be beautiful." If the legend does not limn the prophet in the best light, Szymborska certainly will.

War imagery also surprises readers in "A Moment" because we are not familiar with seeing little girls "against a backdrop of destruction," not to mention the fact that they are the source of the destruction, just as Helen supposedly was (l.36). However, Szymborska blends this language with stereotypically feminine details to expose the damaging impacts of the beauty "ideal." For example, the girls "observe disaster / from a tower of smiles," to represent the expectations for women to always look attractive, even in moments of pain (l.30-31). In a setting that encourages girls to "slay" men with their beauty, their everyday accessories re-materialize as war metaphors ("flaming towns for tiaras" and "earrings of pandemic lamentation" (l.37, l.38)). Notably, presenting these feminine items in a, shall we say, masculine way expands the type of descriptors we can use for women. By this, I mean we should not solely attribute a woman's world to her clothing or fashion; there exist many other, non-gendered descriptions. When Szymborska uses them, she does so ironically: "in the grand boudoir of a wink," plays off the original saying to jest that everything we consider to be "womanly" can be found in her wardrobe (l.12). In the final two lines, the little girls are "returning" from their daydreams (l.44). The only gerund used in the poem highlights that the returns are ongoing, which is why we must continue to fight against toxic beauty standards. There might always be the chance of them "departing" to Troy again.

Finally, the defamiliarization in "Lot's Wife" comes through Szymborska's plot choice to uphold the Biblical truth at the end: that is, have Lot's wife turn around and turn into a pillar of salt. Readers expect the opposite from the inkling hope that a "hamster" (of all possible animals) incites. Seeing this rodent "totter[ing] on the edge" like a circus animal causes Lot's wife to

suddenly break the anaphoric pattern of the poem and run, fly, spin around, do anything except to look back (l.34). Syntactically, it seems as though these active verbs in the past tense override “looked” and change the direction of the narrative for Lot’s wife. Symbolically, the hamster is a whimsical spiritual device that she uses to escape her fate and that Szymborska uses to gently mock religious faith. Even so, Lot’s wife still turns around. Why does Szymborska dedicate so many lines to project alternative reasons and realities for Lot’s wife to then abandon the best possible one that would enable her escape from the didactic “disobedient” woman narrative? Here, I believe that Szymborska is presenting feminist choice in a new light. Furious at a higher power that dictates how she might die, Lot’s wife relishes her final “look back”: she chooses with awareness, as indicated by the “open” eyes and physical position “facing the city,” how her fate will play out (l.42, l.43). No matter the result, all women should choose their paths and Lot’s wife chooses death over a predestined and uncontrollable life.

This chapter has examined the ways in which Szymborska uses classical allusions, a satirical tone, and defamiliarization to craft her feminist sub-voice. She is not widely recognised as a feminist poet in Poland or around the world, though I assert it is because she creates a new form of feminism that people are yet to appreciate and hear as a new form of sceptical activism. Nevertheless, readers who engage with any one of Szymborska’s poems that uncover patriarchal tendencies will eventually realise how they can emulate her sub-voice in their writing. “A Moment” urges readers to bring back young girls from Troy by highlighting other qualities that make women beautiful in mainstream media; “Rubens’ Women” empowers all women to unabashedly celebrate their bodies, even when the paintings or novels of their time do not; “Soliloquy” advises us to seek the truth about archaic heroines to bolster their reputations; and “Lot’s Wife” reminds us that a woman is in complete power, as long as she chooses her own

fate. The light-hearted quips that pepper these poems certainly affirm one thing: Szymborska does not treat “the male (or patriarchal world) with absolute seriousness” (Karwowska 325). Neither should we, for that is how women, men, and all genders, can listen to and emulate the voices that redefine a feminist future.

### Chapter 3 – A Creative Voice

Szyborska's poems ground reality in imaginative worlds, where, unrestricted by time or place, readers can "eavesdrop on Montaigne's arguments or take a quick dip in the Mesozoic" (Szyborska xii). Szyborska began writing as young as five, when her father would pay "some 20 groschen" for her "little poems" (Dąbrowska). Seventeen years later, she published her first "big" poem, "Looking for words" (*Szukam słowa* in the Polish) in Krakow's "Polish Daily" newspaper (*Dziennik Polski*). Unbeknownst to many readers, Szyborska worked at the periodical *Literary Life* (*Życie Literackie*) from 1953-1981, where she had her own column called "Non-required Reading," publishing feuilletons about science, the arts, and society (Poets.org). An observant reader of this thesis may notice a few quotations from this collection scattered throughout my analysis, one in this very paragraph. Szyborska's roles as editor and literary critic, alongside author and poet, signify her shrewd expertise with the tool that is language. By this, I mean, she understands how other authors wield words and shape syntax to, for instance, present a philosophical idea or transport a reader to eighteenth-century England. Szyborska uses the tool for these reasons, but also to discuss the idea of language itself. A handful of her poems document the most creative— and at times, frustrating— activity of all: the writing process. Therefore, I define "creative voice" as the ability to immerse readers not into a fictional world, but rather, into a writer's mind at the time of writing. Szyborska's creative sub-voice sheds light upon her relationship with language and the power it can provide an individual, who may not currently have their own voice. Through paradoxes, a meta-poetic style, and sensory language in the poems "The Joy of Writing," "Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem," "The Three Oddest Words," and "Everything," readers glimpse over Szyborska's shoulder, where, with a pen in one hand and a cigarette in the other, she begins to write.

Szyborska uses paradoxes to show how commonplace language can reveal universal truths in “The Three Oddest Words” (“Oddest”) and “Everything.” A writer occupied with the smallest details of the world, Szyborska spots “ever-new complexities... and possibilities” that readers typically brush over, and which, unassumingly, bewilder our perception of language (Karasek 194). As in the title, there are three words in “Oddest” whose existences are inadequate to convey their meanings and Szyborska pairs each one with a contradictory statement. For example, the word “Future” is generally understood as time still to come, yet the next line points out that “the first syllable already belongs to the past” (p.328, l.1, l.2). The moment we utter “Future” is the moment we restrict the word to a time that can no longer be accessed: the past. By qualifying the statement with the unnecessary “already,” the speaker draws out the moment for readers to register the veracity in the statement. Additionally, the word “past” is not capitalized like “Future” is, signifying which concept of time is the focal point of analysis. The past is used to gain a better understanding of the future, and on a broader level, this indicates that our past actions shall never be without consequence. Szyborska comments on the paradoxes in the words, “Silence,” and “Nothing,” too, highlighting how their meanings do actually consist of sound and “everything” (l.3, l.5). Speaking of “everything,” Szyborska’s seven-lined poem focuses on this very word, satirizing its ability to encompass all possible things in the universe because, definitively, that is what “Everything” means (p.352, l.1). By placing this word alone on the first line, Szyborska acknowledges that it does the poem’s job for her: it captures all the potential narratives, themes, and implications, as well as all matters irrelevant to this poem. If it is about everything, then, surely it must be about *everything*? The dash that follows, to explain the usage of the word, thus shows how people, especially writers, use “everything” imprecisely. When we ask friends, “how is everything?” we do not actually mean “everything,” do we?

Szyborska investigates how everyday language is used and, through these poems, I have realised that words and syntax are an arbitrary and strictly human practice. The natural or conceptual world is “independent of language” and does not need to, nor ever will, alter itself to fit man-made definitions exactly (Kostkowska 195). Szyborska’s writing humbly honours the truth that nobody can put “future” in the future or use “everything” as it should be. When we re-read “Oddest” and “Everything,” trying to wrap our heads around meaning and classification, we must accept that we simply cannot.

Paradoxes in “The Joy of Writing” (“Joy”) and “Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem” (“Evaluation”) urge readers to question how fiction mirrors reality, and vice versa. Instead of using words to contradict their implied meanings, here, Szyborska crafts seemingly illogical arguments about the idea of existence. In “Joy,” as a “written doe bound[s] through... written woods,” it is reinforced through the “written” repetition that the character and setting are fictional (p.109, l.1). Even if this poem was to be a nonfiction report about wildlife, the moment the story touches paper, it becomes its own version of reality, able to be influenced by the poet’s own experiences or the readers’ interpretation. This scene in the “written woods” is phrased as a question, asking the readers “why” these events with the doe even take place; the chewy “wr” alliteration slows down the readers’ pace, forcing us to dwell on the query. Although these questions are never directly addressed, we, at least, learn how the doe drinks the “written water” (l.2). Szyborska creates the animal from “four slim legs borrowed from the truth,” because it is a fact that does have four legs. She records the doe’s instinctive and natural ear movements, but still reminds us that *she* is the one who “[pricks them] up” from “beneath [her] fingertips” (l.6). This paradox—the logic behind the statements of creation—exemplifies how the writing process can often produce such vivid reimaginings of reality, so it feels as though we are reading

the truth. However, by assigning human influence to each line, we are constantly reminded that someone else controls how we interact with the natural world. Szymborska directly reinforces this when she says, “they forget that what’s here isn’t life” (l.18). She does not clarify who “they” are, but I have my suspicions. Aside from “they” being the characters in the poem whose actions are animated within the confines of their lines, “they” may also be the readers. Caught up in the emotional narrative of the doe being hunted in lines thirteen onwards, we do, indeed, forget the initial precaution that this world is simply “written.” Or perhaps “they” are poets. Szymborska entraps her choices at the time of writing into her lines, feeling them a crucial part of the process to state how she, for instance, pricks up the doe’s ears. If Szymborska’s visions of nature become all too realistic for her, she is safeguarded with the written proof of her own actions.

There are two characters, or versions of Szymborska’s conscience, in “Evaluation”: an unnamed speaker (referred to as he) and an authoress, whose poem is currently being reviewed. This speaker criticizes the authoress’ paradoxical arguments to encourage readers to form their own opinions about the topic. He believes that her contradictory observations about the natural world are a sign that she is aimless and naïve. For this, we should not take her mind, “which can only be called imprecise,” seriously (p.219, l.8). The speaker rebuffs the first paradox that “while the Earth is small, / the sky is excessively large” (l.2-3). In the grand scheme of space, we know scientifically, that the Earth is miniscule; if we read “small” as a measure of time, Earth was created 9.26 billion years *after* the universe was (International Planetarium Society). Yet, when one looks at the sky, or even the ocean, we are unable to see an end point, making it seem like the cosmos never stops expanding. The overtly critical tone of this small-Earth-large-sky statement urges readers to defend the authoress because it reassuringly pinpoints a “collective

[human] experience” of feeling insignificant on this colossal planet (King 60). In her Nobel Prize speech, Szymborska suggests that a speaker unable to embrace his vulnerability is one unable to discover the possibilities of his own existence. If Newton had never questioned the Earth's relation to other planets by first postulating, “I don't know,” we might never know the law of universal gravitation (Nobel Prize). The physical presence of two voices is paradoxical, encouraging the readers to question Szymborska's role as poet. “Evaluation” in the title refers to the writing process, as well as the critical position that the speaker (“I” (l.4)) takes. In reality, Szymborska has written the speakers' comments, thereby assigning his exegesis to herself. She also crafts the authoress' words that the speaker (i.e., Szymborska) is evaluating, which perpetuates a cycle of “implicit dialogue” between critic and poet and implies that Szymborska is just as vulnerable and invulnerable as both voices (Mullen 114). The title confirms the puzzling tone: we are currently reading a poem, but it is about a poem that is “unwritten,” perhaps because we never see it in print. Or it is “unwritten” because Szymborska's dual role means she has already criticized the poem in her head, and faced with such harsh feedback, she did not feel compelled to write what she intended. Peppered with paradoxes, “Evaluation,” cannot be interpreted through one lens and I am left disoriented by all the roles Szymborska may take and all the existential opinions that the poem inspires.

Meta-poetic style is the second device prevalent in Szymborska's creative sub-voice. There is not yet consensus in the literary community about what defines “meta-poetry,” but I refer to it as a self-referential mode of writing where the poem is aware about itself being a poem. In other words, the poet refers to the conventions of writing or the fact that they are the writer explicitly. Szymborska is neither a “confessional nor autobiographical” poet, so the rare, personal glimpse of her authorial awareness is worth analysing (King 60). In “Joy,” Szymborska

draws attention to the writing process in how she builds, in real-time, the pieces of the narrative. The doe emerges from her “fingertips,” the “hunters” from “drop[s] of ink,” but Szymborska only fully embraces her role as creator in stanza four (l.6, l.15, l.14). The pronoun “I” places the speaker in the forefront, and therefore in control, when she says, “the twinkling of an eye will take as long as I say” (l.20). Refusing to shy away from her literary power, she has the ability to change the speed of an act that would usually last a second in reality. The presence of “g” and “y” in the words slows down the rhythm of the line, also forcing the readers to recognize and fully appreciate how they must change their pace. For the time in which we are immersed within “Joy,” we are subject to “black on white” “laws” that the poet sets. Essentially, these meta, linguistic laws highlight the ubiquitous control of the poet over the creative elements, not only in the lines, but also in our reading experience. If the poet “wish[es],” not even the laws of physics or nature can prevent her from stopping a swarm of bullets “midflight” or permitting a “leaf” to “fall” (l.21, l.22, l.24). There is an emphasis on the “if” in the syntax to show that Szymborska has not necessarily pursued these actions, but she has an unrivalled power to do so *if* she wants to in fiction (l.21).

The rhetorical questions that follow serve to reinforce the idea that language is a mode of power. Szymborska asks if there is a “world / where [she] rule[s] absolutely on fate?” (l.26-27). In this context, “rule” and “fate” seem contradictory, but because Szymborska already set herself up as the kismet being— the meta *poet*— we realise that her query is redundant. “Joy” *is* this world. Ordinarily, questions evoke a tone of uncertainty, yet, the last two in the poem seem more like statements than inquiries, which reemphasize the speaker’s authority and ability to manipulate anything in fiction: “an existence becomes endless at my bidding?” is certainly not a question, but we accept it to be marked as one (l.29). These quasi-questions intimately engage

readers who want to confirm that they witnessed Szyborska's "rule" from line one. In the final line, she answers the title by stating that the "joy of writing" is the "revenge of a mortal hand" (l.30, l.32). Nobody can live forever, but their presence can be reanimated by the laws of fiction, if they are privy to such literary skill; Szyborska uses the article "a" instead of "the" to show that it is possible for anyone to have the revenge that is immortality. Szyborska's demonstrations of power in the poem are to immortalize herself in history on her own terms. The retrieval of autonomy in the context of creation seems to oppose the lack of autonomy Szyborska felt at other times in her life, namely during WWII and Stalinism. Now, her voice is defined by personal control over her actions and the enjoyment—the "joy"—in doing so.

"Oddest" uses the meta-poetic style as a tool to assert power, not only for Szyborska as the speaker, but for anyone who wishes to explore language for its true meaning. With an emphasis on "I" in the repeated phrase, "When I pronounce the word," the speaker admits that she is aware of her unique ability to alter the readers' perception of the following lines (l.1). Since readers also adopt the "I" persona in their private reading, we feel included that the peculiar observations paired with each word could emerge from our own thoughts. This ownership also demonstrates the deliberate choices Szyborska makes when "I destroy" or "I make," further highlighting her power over the creative elements (l.4, l.6). The present tense reinforces this sense of shared ownership about the ideas in the poem. For example, when she pronounces "Nothing," she "make[s] something no nonbeing can hold" (l.5, l.6). I, myself, am consistently stunned by the double negative oxymoron in this line, but I believe she means that the word "Nothing" fails to uphold its intended meaning the moment that an individual thinks it. Since it is impossible to think of "nothing"—the only way I can do so is to think of a black void, and even that is thinking of "something"—the reader realises that it is their engagement with the

poem, their thinking of “nothing,” that enables the line to work. The “no” cancels out the “non,” rewriting the line as “something [a being] can hold” and affirming our necessary involvement, as the “beings” in the poem. Moreover, the word “pronounce” is specific (l.1). Szymborska could have easily chosen “say,” but “pronounce” is associated with a distinct accent or style, further highlighting how each reader can take ownership of their reading, pronouncing words in a nuanced voice and hearing it through the sub-voice. Finally, the title can be classified as meta because it draws attention, in a most authoritative way, to what the poem is doing: analysing the “three oddest words.” Established that readers are included in the analysis process, the “-est” suffix may be present to challenge our engagement with language. Are there other words that we “pronounce” privately that could take the title of “oddest”? Readers have always been part of the process that Szymborska takes to establish her own repertoire of odd words and, now, feel inspired to seek their own.

The meta-poetic style in “Everything” emerges through the speaker’s analytical definition of the titular word. As noted earlier, Szymborska focuses on “everything” because, without specific context, she does not believe that it can encompass its intended meaning. The word is falsifiable: it can never represent every single thing in the world because one can always produce a new thought or invent something new that was not previously counted in the “everything” category. Following the format of a dictionary— though her comments would certainly not be appropriate in a traditional lexicon— the speaker classifies what “everything” means to her in a satirical way, showing readers how they can have a playful relationship to language (l.1). For example, she first personifies the word, assigning it the qualities of “smug and bumptious,” so it feels as though we are reading about an overly arrogant person (l.2). We use dictionaries to better understand the meaning of a word, but by assigning “everything” a human personality, readers

gain a more accessible and emotive sense of how the speaker feels: this self-important character cannot live up to its promise to be “everything” at once. This linguistic analysis makes it seem as though there exists an entire set of alphabet personalities, and the witty tone and short sentences cater to readers who form opinions, often groundless, about random words they like or dislike. Szyborska presses onwards with her critique, stating that “everything” “should be written in quotes” to ironically signify its inefficacy (l.3). As the poet, she chooses not to insert quotation marks, likely to draw out this definition-ruse that the word believes it can uphold. Szyborska exposes how “it pretends to miss nothing,” the plosive in the second word, emphasizing again that she knows the truth of what “everything” can “hold [or] contain” (l.4, l.5). This commentary about “everything’s” egotism is light-hearted, but the word may be a metaphor for people who think they know absolutely everything. In the end, these people will “just” be defined by what is in the contents of their own mind (l.6-7).

In “Evaluation,” the elements of meta-poetic style emerge through the voice of the speaker. Although readers are led to believe that the “unwritten poem” will always remain unseen, we experience it in another way, which is how one is often exposed to poetry: via literary analysis (take this thesis as your chief example). When the speaker says, “in her depiction of the sky / ... the authoress is lost in a terrifying expanse / ... startled by the planets’ lifelessness,” the straight-forward and pre-analysed review still communicates a rich and vivid description of the setting, which is desolate and dystopian. Later, we infer that planet Earth has become depopulated because it “makes its rounds” (orbits around the sun) “without / eyewitnesses” (people to confirm the revolution) (l.17-18). Oh, yes, by line twenty-three, we can confirm that ours *is* a “solitary existence.” Additionally, the speaker uses temporal and spatial language to simulate the reading experience. He notes that a “question soon arises” after the

authoress' encounter with the sky and designates her back on "Earth," so readers can mark where she is and what she is thinking with accuracy (l.9, l.16). This manner of reading poetry through someone else's eyes may seem restrictive because we do not have the opportunity to parse out what we believe are the most important images of a poem. However, it also focuses our attention on the main "thesis" of the poem (l.37). If the speaker and the authoress are interpreted as the voices of Szyborska, then she seems to be directing us in the way she wants her poem to be understood and engaged with. Quite blatantly, the speaker states how the authoress feels—"distressed" and "worried" (l.28, l.31)—but the unsympathetic tone that delivers these emotions posits that Szyborska is trying to distance herself from any personal "sentimentality" or confession (King 60). Characterizing her pen as "naïve" confirms this self-deprecating nature (l.36). In the final stanza, parentheses are used (a rhetorical feature to include additional information) to mimic the speaker's critiquing process. Here, he reminds himself about how he defines the speaker's style: as "unpersuasive" and "(a mixture / of loft rhetoric and ordinary speech)" (l.37, l.40-41). We end on a critique, leaving readers pondering what Szyborska truly believes about her own poetry and astonished that she has the power to embody two voices at the same time, so that we hear both a pedantic and a self-conscious one.

Sensory language is the third device that characterizes Szyborska's creative sub-voice. Through it, she demonstrates the "ability of language to express the totality of experience" (King 61). Poems depend on the ability of readers to form a personal connection to the overall message and this experience is fortified by having them "sense" the poem, either visually or auditorily. The imagery in "Joy" to describe the environment is vivid, but more prominent is its connotations to the idea of writing. The language possesses double meanings so that readers can draw contextual links to reality. For example, the "boughs / that have sprouted from the word

““woods”,” literally do sprout from trees within woods, but this image reminds readers about the way connotations appear in our minds upon hearing words, such as “woods” (1.9). Our automatic inclinations to think and for our thoughts to grow are emphasised with the connection to the natural world and the continuous cycle of growth. These literary double meanings pepper the poem to hint at the importance of seeking the truth from and searching for the deeper implications in the language we interact with. The speaker references “letters up to no good,” which crafts an image of mischievous members of the alphabet colluding to turn themselves into harmful or divisive messages (1.11). Indeed, the letters form “clutches of clauses” to entrap the deer: a mechanical clutch is most often used to connect parts of a vehicle together, but the meaning here is subverted, used instead to restrain a creature from escape, perhaps mirroring moments in history where language was used to oppress certain groups of people (1.12). The harsh “c” alliteration emphasizes the entrapment, but reading this line aloud, with the guttural sound in the back of our throats, feels powerful. It reminds us that how we write, how we speak, has an either a positive or negative impact. Despite the sinister sibilance that sneaks out from the words, “swarm” and “sloping,” (there is a sea of “s” words in stanza three), by refusing to present a final image of the doe being captured, Szymborska confirms that language and its interconnected visual connotations are enough to undermine oppressive encounters (1.16). The poet’s power in “bind[ing] chains of signs” (representing sentences and letters, respectively) to craft freeing messages is what all readers should “sense” as being the goal of language (1.28).

The presence of Latin words and scientific language in “Evaluation” incites readers to think more deeply about the existentialist themes within the poem. For example, the italicised words, “*et cetera,*” “*sic,*” and “*QED,*” stand out, making it seem as though the reader should focus on the stanzas that include this technical vocabulary (1.24, 1.34, 1.43). In fact, much of this

poem is filled with hyperbolic, scientific phrases, such as “laws of probability” and “irrefutable evidence” (l.12, l.14). Therefore, it seems that the sensory language is focused on conjuring up scientific and technical meanings that many readers do not ordinarily encounter in fiction. We gravitate more towards the concretely imaginative paradoxes and accessible images of nature, proving that the language of science or rhetoric is invalid and incapable of debating existentialist issues. A “rational discourse” does not make up the human experience and the exclamation points in stanza three, which gently mock the scientific expressions, indicate that Szymborska—as neither speaker nor authoress, but poet—knows it, too (King 62). By the time we reach “*QED*,” to show that the speaker has logically proven his argument that the authoress’ piece has convinced “no one,” readers are not entirely sure of their own positions in the matter (l.43). We need more than a Latin phrase or scientific transition sentence to make sense of the world.

The auditory elements in “Oddest” and “Everything” make them the most sensory poems of all, encapsulating what it means, in terms of human experience, to have and develop a voice. The physical act of “pronounc[ing]” creates sound, in particular speech, asserting that this poem deserves to be read aloud (l.1). In fact, the fricative within the key words, “Future” and “Nothing,” and the sibilance within “Silence” and “pronounce,” imitate a voice, more importantly, an individual and unique voice dependent on the reader (l.1, l.5, l.3). The emphasis on breath heightens the experience of speaking aloud, and the repetition of the three lines speeds up the pace, increasing the excitement that arises from embracing this voice. Szymborska has previously been likened to a sceptic because her poetry places “emphasis on the process of inquiry rather than... [final] results” (Kostkowska 196). This idea of scepticism, essentially asking yourself questions—especially the valued phrase “I don’t know” (Nobel Prize)—and seeking the truth, is what Szymborska values most about the human experience. She

demonstrates her hands-on research when she “pronounce[s] the word Silence,” destroying it in the process (l.3). Indeed, “Silence” ceases to be *only* when it is spoken aloud, an act we are encouraged to take. In this auditory space, the greater implication is that readers should break silence, dismantling any systems that limit freedom of speech. “Everything” embodies similar auditory aspects, namely the breathy sibilance in each line (“smug”; “miss” (l.2, l.3)) and investigatory nature from the deconstruction of the word. However, the speaker disrupts the rhythm, the illusion even, of the word analysis in the final two lines. Despite the fact that “everything” embodies seemingly superior qualities, the entire time, “it’s just [been] / a shred of gale” (l.6-7). The word is reduced to a meaningless burst of sound. Instead of claiming a voice by speaking aloud, here, Szymborska underscores the notion that oppressive, conceited language should not have the power to dominate people, especially when it is simply a vibration in the air.

This chapter has examined the ways in which Szymborska uses paradoxes, a meta-poetic style, and sensory language to craft her creative sub-voice. As someone who did not necessarily hold a lot of power during her lifetime, at least in a traditional bureaucratic sense, poetry and mastery over the written word becomes the realm for Szymborska to assert all that represents herself, especially her voice. “Evaluation” demonstrates how one can control both sides of a narrative and blur the line between which perspective is most valuable; “Everything” suggests that people have far more power when they reframe language for what it really is; while “Oddest” compels us to seek out the many ways that language can contradict and transform our perceptions of the world. Finally, “Joy” urges readers to embrace the ability of language to craft worlds, and to capture an imprint of ourselves within them. Overall, the writing process is many things to Szymborska: a way to reassess her relationship with language, share her technical and inventive craft, and most importantly, place her at the forefront of the narrative. Re-reading, and

thus hearing, this perplexing, critical, and masterful sub-voice will always reanimate Szymborska in all her literary power.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the literary devices that craft each of Szymborska's sub-voices. Her political voice examines history from unusual and surprising lenses, reframing what and how we can learn from the past. Her feminist voice draws on classical allusions, but satirizes their traditional, patriarchal portrayals, which in turn, subverts the demeaning stereotypes about women they hold. Finally, her creative voice is self-referential, immersing readers into the poet's mind at the time of writing and revealing the power, or the limitations of power, that writing can provide. Although each sub-voice adopts the particular elements that enable readers to discuss its broader themes and ideas, the questioning framework discussed in the introduction still applies. Szymborska hints to us that it is the reader with a curious and compassionate mind—who is intent on altering history for the better and dismantling systems of oppression; on upending accepted narratives that harm the way society views women and how women view themselves; and on questioning the language we use every day and how to draw power from the written word—who, most admirably, will progress the world forward.

Whomever we hear discussing political strife, gender, or the act of creation, Szymborska's poems inspires us, rather, *challenges* us, to claim these thoughtful voices in writing, and I have outlined the literary framework to do so in each chapter. As promised, in the postlude of this thesis, I have written three poems that imitate Szymborska's sub-voices, but that are contextualized within my own life. In reading them, perhaps they will provide you, reader, the same puzzling, surprising, harrowing, thoughtful, and enchanting experience that I had with Szymborska, where you will hear specific narrators and feel compelled to evaluate the systems and norms that exist in our society. I know they provided me with the platform to contemplate

Thailand's current political state, the double standards women often face in society, and the role of imagination during the writing process.

Since much of the academic literature about Szymborska is in Polish or was written just before or just after her Nobel Prize win in 1996, I believe it is important for her life's work, including her many voices, to be revisited. I cannot hope to articulate all Szymborska's brilliance in this singular thesis and urge readers to delve further into her collection "Map" to uncover the tens of sub-voices that I know are lingering within the lines of her poetry that discuss the environment, media, biology, family, and more. I reiterate that Szymborska was not a sentimental poet and did not dwell her pen, for too long at least, in her personal life. We will never be certain if she intended for readers to use her narrator's voices to create arguments about oppression, gender, or even her own writing style. However, is this not what Szymborska's three sub-voices and her overall structure whisper for us to do anyway? Ask a question, make assumptions, reframe those assumptions, ask more questions, and in doing so, you will discover an entirely new world and perspective before you. I hope you discover your own voice, too.

## Postlude

As promised, I present to you my own Szymborska-inspired poetry. I hope you enjoy reading and analysing them to discern the elements of her three sub-voices. They were a joy to write.

### The Woodworker's Throne

This is his workbench, his saw, his file, his mallet.  
 Stifled by sawdust, his room is a forest enclosed  
 by the imperial canopy, shading its seeds from the sun at daybreak.  
 Fallen teaks lugged into logs sit idle for their dynastic debut,  
 while mismatched pieces accept their fate as rocking chairs.  
 A throne awaits,  
 he resumes his carvings.  
 Scratching, smoothing, polishing.

Patinated in dark oil,  
 etched rice farmers have never been treated so graciously by a tool.  
 Chiselled monks weigh under indents of oranges and mangoes.  
 Splintered elephants are lathed into herds.  
 Their village, impressed with temples and markets, sustains the seated  
 with prayers of peace and humility, ivory  
 exchanges, silken gowns, hastily stitched for the trade,  
 metal and rubber,  
 bleached rice grains, the roars  
 of a tiger.  
 All attend to their everlasting duties  
 across the armrests and underneath the cushions.

It's not yet fit for a King. Though bestowed to the crown, gavel, or rifle,  
 the legatee remains unknown.  
 He inscribes jubilant characters along the base,  
 ones with round heads and stalky necks, the occasional flourished accent,  
 but his neighbours' children scoff silently at the scripture.  
*Vive le roi.* Seeds spring with red petals.  
*Vive le roi.* Clasped palms are in shackles.  
*Vive le roi.* *Les grands boulevards* are no match for the youth, who bombard  
 the estate with novelties: umbrellas, ducks, and tea, reverberating melodies.

It's not yet fit for a King. The headboard, this righteous space, remains unmarked.  
 Seizing his chisel, he scrapes three grooves into the bare wood and

a strand of sunlight illuminates the shadow of a head from beneath his fingers.  
The throne complete, he dusts the final imprint in golden paint.  
An arm raised high, a hand unveils  
a three-fingered salute,  
one to match the throngs of fingers that march, shouting and dissenting, throughout the forest.

—*Mimi Thompson, 2021*

## My Gift

Sincere congratulations are in order, my dear.  
 One moment a pile of dirt  
 (clay to some, earth to others, but what does it matter?),  
 trampled upon by the wayward lions and turtles,  
 distantly dreaming of their own grimy beginnings,  
 and the next, a Bride,  
 rushed right to the altar to become the next Mrs. Pandora Epimetheus.

Welded by the divine blacksmith,  
 your torso seethed in the Olympian sauna,  
 globules bubbling from heavenly catalysts,  
 O all-giving! Fingers needled with dexterity,  
 lips stuffed with lies and crafty words,  
 embryonic brain doused in treachery,  
 O send us our gifts now, will you!

In the shudder of creation,  
 it is you who carries the box into the small village.

It is you who cannot ignore the raspy murmurs on a solitary Thursday.  
 It is you who presses a bejewelled ear to the lock, whose hands  
 stroke the lid, broaching it open, for one, quick moment.  
 Foolish and in your nature, it is you who is the deadly race.

A hundred gifts deluge out, festering like fleas on dogs and babies,  
 a syrupy strain plagues the trees and flowers,  
 leaches fear and sorrow and hatred into the ears of good men.  
 It is you— not us, who are hounded by prayers—  
 who smiles, the corners of your mouth tilted up with a flourish.

O it could have been you to block your eyes and ears in the fetal cauldron!  
 To spit back the speech priming in your throat,  
 to turn your head from the silvery veil and twist your legs from shapely stockings,  
 to thrash the box, to clasp it in chains, to fling it over Caucasus like a soaring eagle.  
 This could have been you.

A singular gem rests in the open box, white and fluttering.  
 I don't recall smiling.

—*Mimi Thompson, 2021*

## A Weather Report

When I feel under the weather,  
 I cannot suddenly expect a great raincloud to erupt above me,  
 meows and woofs drenching my skin in  
 some sort of silvery polish,  
 can I?  
 I do not claim to be a meteorologist,  
 but when storms gush out from the base of teacups,  
 I suspect that the barometer will still read 30 inches  
 and the dew point 16 degrees Celsius,  
 because the cyclones that whistle in froths above the stove  
 are cursively constrained, only freed to taunt budding villages or emergent seas if  
 one tickles the air with their tongue decided upon  
 whether the cups are dainty or thick rimmed,  
 and that's just to, *e.g.*, set the scene.

The reader must simply do more than dwell like a slug in this copious well,  
 while the poet shrieks into the tundra,  
 reorganizing and renibbing her gear,  
 tapping a trail of inky fingerprints on yet another white door,  
 until all at once, she uncovers a rainbow  
 from underneath a pillow or torn dog-ear,  
 coloured orange and purple from black and white, an imprint of  
 a refracted world that we too often omit but will never cease its hum.  
 For those who cannot see the pigmented stretch peeking from behind the rhetoric,  
 all you need is a “hot, sunny day” after a “dark, stormy night.”

How can I spout such fancies  
 when my spectators are not dressed for inclemency?  
 How can I sip calmly from my brew  
 when they are still perplexed by line seven?  
 The hail jamming my ears and the wind peppering my throat,  
 the raging tornado that parts the stanzas,  
 it's self-inflicted, I must remind you.

The pen only braves the storm when it supposes  
 that another will soon draw me an umbrella.

—*Mimi Thompson, 2021*

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