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A Poet in the Land of the Sciences. Thinking About Human Nature with Wisława Szymborska

Poeta w krainie nauk. Myśląc o naturze ludzkiej z Wisławą Szymborską

Abstract: Is it necessary to have a notion of transcendence, a traditional metaphysics, to defend the human? This article addresses this question through an interpretation of the texture and rhythm of Szymborska’s language. Her poems are multi-faceted, and often playful, but it is difficult to ignore the poet’s insistence on ethics, despite the utter indifference of the natural world to good and evil. Humans are themselves a part of the natural world, and thus, if, like Szymborska, one does not accept a reality beyond nature, the strangeness of the ethical demand, which appears groundless, becomes shorn of any possible explanation. In the conclusion of the essay, the researcher puts Szymborska’s view of ethics in conversation with Emmanuel Levinas, whose position resembles hers and yet also sheds a new light on what the groundlessness of ethics might mean.

Keywords: Szymborska, ethics, Miłosz, metaphysics, Levinas.

The Polish poet and Nobel laureate, Wisława Szymborska, is renowned for the great variety of her themes. She herself, in one of her rare interviews, stated:

In the beginning, poetry could be anything. Crafted speech was used to express both feelings and the most basic information, ranging from prayers, through codes of savoir vivre and historical chronicles, to the rules of the art of writing [...]. Poetry then began shrinking more and more, and as the most extreme consequence of this process there only remains writing poems about writing poems [...]. I do not accept this [...]. It would be good to recapture some of those territories from which poetry withdrew or was pushed out.  

One of those territories, it turns out, is the natural sciences. That is, a good number of her poems engage with the images we receive of ourselves from biology, chemistry or physics, among others. Characteristic of Szymborska is that she does not strike a defensive pose against those images. On the contrary, she seems to take the materialist view they suggest for granted, or, to put it more precisely, she takes for granted the insignificance of the human being in a universe governed by physical laws utterly indifferent to our particular existence. We are a chance collection of matter, soon to disappear.

Our insignificance flits in and out of her poetry. In *A Speech at the Lost and Found*, (176), we are but a blip in evolutionary history, “one first-person sing., temporarily declined in human form.” In *Life while You Wait*, our lives occur on a stage lit up by “the farthest galaxies.” Who is watching us, one might ask, as we fumble about trying to get our lines right? In the other direction, at the microscopic level, entities we have no way of understanding, that defy our concepts of time and space, “still decide our life and death.” Given this situation, can we even speak of a meaning to life, a reason for which we have come into being? In *Possibilities*, it becomes a very fragile proposition. “I prefer,”

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the speaker writes, “keeping in mind even the possibility that existence has its own reason for being.”(273) Since this is the last sentence in a poem that lists the author’s other preferences—she prefers dogs with tails; she prefers cats (presumably to dogs either with or without tails)—the possibility that life has a meaning appears as arbitrary as all the other items on the list, a personal whim.

Szymborska’s acceptance of our insignificance, and the taken-for-granted images of a cosmos devoid of any kind of supernatural revelation, identify her as a poet who reflects “the scientific lessons of thinkers from Copernicus to Darwin,” as American poet Billy Collins put it. In this he echoes Szymborska’s fellow Polish poet, Czesław Miłosz, who characterizes her poetry as “coming after—after Darwin, after Einstein—after so many others.” We all live in that world, more or less, and so it is not surprising that a poet would give expression to it, give us a language to perceive our human situation. Miłosz, however, rebels against the image of ourselves that the natural sciences yield. He worries about the political consequences of reducing us to such insignificance, and he worries about the limits placed on imagination, whose nature is precisely to see beyond the physical to the final meaning of things. He criticizes Szymborska for undermining poetry itself, not because she does not see beyond the physical, but because she does not draw on a metaphysic, like Christianity, for instance, or even humanism, that affirms the significance of the individual voice, of the centrality of the human being.

I have never been at ease with Miłosz’s reading of Szymborska. He himself expresses some unease, noticing how light her touch is, and how heavy-handed it is to pin her down to something like a “scientific world view.” Nonetheless, she remains for him representative of an imagination under the reign of the natural

6 Ibid., p. 37. The book in which he explores these themes most fully is his *Land of Ulro*, tr. L. Iribarne, New York 1984.
7 The criticism mentioned here is not of Szymborska alone but of twentieth century poets in general, who have grown up under the shadow of biology. See Czesław Miłosz, “The Lesson of Biology”, [in:] *The Witness of Poetry*, Cambridge 1983, 41–57. The section especially on Szymborska, pp. 44–49, centers most specifically on the first poem I discuss below, *Autotomy*. Miłosz considers her “a good example of the influence exerted by the lessons of biology” *Witness*, 44.
8 Ibid., *On Szymborska*, p. 17.

**sciences**. In response to Milosz, I would like to focus on a set of Szymborska’s poems in which what I call the ethical demand is central. Those poems, certainly place us in the world as the natural sciences allow us to imagine it, but we are simultaneously, and inexplicably, in a world that escapes their grasp. From Milosz, this inexplicability is the problem. Emmanuel Levinas, to whose thought I will turn in the conclusion, provides us with another way to look at the inexplicability, or groundlessness, of ethics. It escapes the need for the metaphysical support of ethics that Milosz calls for, but does not fully coincide with Szymborska’s view either. Despite Szymborska’s fabled lightness of touch, her poetry lends itself to such metaphysical questions about human beings, at once integrally part of nature, and yet at odds with it.

**The Ethical Demand**

*Autotomy*

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

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

An abyss appears in the middle of its body  
between what instantly becomes two foreign shores.

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9 Milosz occasionally qualified his views on Szymborska’s poetry, but retained his unease throughout. For a review of his attitude toward her, see J. Grądziel-Wójcik, „Lekcje biologii”, czyli Milosz czyta Szymborską, “Ruch Literacki” 2012, R. LIII, Z. I (310), pp. 99–112. His unease is well expressed in the second edition of his anthology of postwar Polish poetry, which he assembled in translation. In the first edition, he had only included one of Szymborska’s poems, considering her poems “too dependent on intellectual fashions” and encouraging “preciosity.” In the second edition, he includes a few more, praising her maturation as a poet. But his lack of personal enthusiasm is palpable. C. Miłosz, [ed.], *Postwar Polish Poetry*, Berkeley 1983, p. 109.

Life on one shore, death on the other.
Here hope and there despair.
If there are scales, the pans don't move.
If there is justice, this is it.

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

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

The throat on one side, laughter on the other,
quiet, quickly dying out.

Here, the heavy heart, there *non omnis moriar*–
just three little words, like a flight’s three feathers.

The abyss doesn’t divide us.
The abyss surrounds us.

*In memoriam Halina Poświatowska* (182–183)

The poem begins by describing a biological process, autotomy. A small sea animal, the holothurian, also known as a sea cucumber, sheds a part of its body to escape its predator. The remaining part survives and can even regrow the part it shed. “An abyss appears in the middle of its body between what instantly becomes two foreign shores.” In Szymborska’s hands, the holothurian’s division into two becomes a metaphor for the human being’s strategy for escaping mortality.

*Non omnis moriar*, “not all of me will die,” are words of the Latin poet Horace, who proclaimed that his poetry will keep his memory alive through time. [*Ode XXX*] Our bodies die but through poetry we do not die completely. Splitting into body and poetry is not restricted to poets. That split is the essence of metaphor. Here is the very physical split of the holothurian, and there is all the very unphysical meaning we see in that physical split–doom and salvation, two shores, one of despair, the other of hope. The very nature of poetry is to rise above the physical
to find in it an unphysical meaning. All of us split ourselves into flesh and poetry on a continual basis, as if positing a realm beyond the physical.

But it does not work, the poem proclaims. *Non omnis moriar* are but three words, “like a flight’s three feathers.” Feathers do not stay in the air very long, just as the laughter in our throats quickly dies out. The distance, the void between the physical and the metaphorical, is not a sign of something beyond death. The void created by death surrounds us. The transcendence of the physical momentarily acquired through metaphor is a strategy that does not afford us access to immortality of any kind. Is this a materialist view? It certainly accords with one. According to Miłosz, it is the direct result of the influence of the biological sciences. It certainly accords with the view attributed to Szymborska that “any claims about the essence of humanity or man’s place in the universe must be rooted in the physical, tangible repository of information that only a materialist and biological conception of nature can provide.”

Yet the great poignancy of the poem is hardly captured by placing it within a materialist point of view. If we pay attention to the epitaph that immediately accompanies the poem, “In memoriam Halina Poświatowska,” is it not better to understand *Autotomy* as a poem of mourning? Poświatowska was a beloved Polish poet who died at the age of thirty-two, after years of struggle with a debilitating heart ailment. On this reading, the poem is not so much a metaphysical statement about the utter lack of transcendence in a world regulated by physical laws as simply an expression of the void everyone feels when a beloved person dies, the inability to reach beyond that void.

I am not satisfied by this interpretation, however, although it may constitute a dimension of the poem. This is not primarily a poem about one’s subjective experience but about the way things are. But, if we take it at the metaphysical level, which, in the end, I think we must, why then write in memory of a person, when the poem clearly refuses the immortality that poetry supposedly bestows? It is here that we can address the ethical dimension of this poem, understood as obligation to another person. We are obligated to keep those feathers in the air as long as we can. That is, we must keep in the air whatever traces of the person that once was, attempt to save them from oblivion, protect them from utter dissolution. Where does this ethical obligation come from? No doubt an

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evolutionary theorist could reduce it to some sort of biological mechanism. The significant thing is that Szymborska doesn’t. The ethical obligation is simply there, giving rise to the poem. Poetry cannot vanquish death, and yet the poet is obligated to try.

In the poem *Possibilities*, Szymborska says that she prefers the absurdity of writing poems to the absurdity of not writing them. (272) It might be absurd to try to save someone else from inevitable oblivion. But it is also absurd to resist a call so basic that it defines our very humanity. “*Et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l’ange fait la bête,*” Blaise Pascal famously said “It is unfortunately the case that anyone trying to act the angel acts the beast.” To refuse to split ourselves in two, to refuse that gesture of obligation in order to be logically consistent is not to heighten ourselves but simply to reduce ourselves to animals, who do not attempt to save others. Yes, one might retort, but Horace was talking about his own immortality, and Szymborska, in writing the poem is also sending her own words into the future, like feathers into the air. The poem nonetheless is dedicated to the memory of someone else. It ties one’s own future fate to that other person.

If the ethical obligation in *Autotomy* lies in the relation of the poem to the epitaph, in the two poems cited below, published about thirty years apart, it is fully present as a theme in the body itself. In each case, the human is juxtaposed to the animal.

*In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself*

The buzzard never says it is to blame.
The panther wouldn’t know what scruples mean.
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.
If snakes had hands, they’d claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn’t understand remorse.
Lions and lice don’t waver in their course.
Why should they, when they know they’re right?


Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they’re light.

On this third planet of the sun
among the signs of bestiality
a clear conscience is number one. (227)

The playfulness of this poem gives it the appearance of a fable, in which animals stand in for human traits. It sounds as if the animals should be apologizing for their behavior but somehow it does not occur to them, introducing a note of humor since predatory behavior is in the order of things, the very sign that an animal is just that, an animal. To expect otherwise is absurd. The last stanza provides the moral we expect from a fable. It is not as simple as it appears. What does it mean to say that a clear conscience is the number one sign of bestiality? Bestiality is an accusatory term. Animals can’t be accused of bestiality since they are beasts to begin with. The verse is referring to human beings, of course. But, wait a minute, are we not animals, killing in order to survive, just like the others? Why use the term “bestiality,” if our behavior does not differ from that of other predators? Bestiality seems to refer, then, not to killing itself, but to the lack of a notion of good and evil, to instincts unrestrained by a moral sensibility.

Where does this notion of good and evil come from? Szymborska positions us on the third planet of the sun, in a space empty of a god who might have revealed his commandments to us. Neither does she provide another explanation for the fact that ethics defines us. It just does. We are animals that refuse bestiality, at least in principle, since it seems that people with a clean conscience do exist, creating the need to praise those who know their conscience is not clean. Perhaps what defines us is not our moral standard but that we fall perpetually short. Animals just are. Insofar as we behave like the buzzard and the jackal, with a totally clean conscience, the fable animals are us. In this poem, an obligation to restrain our predatory instincts defines the human, but the line between human and animal nonetheless remains thin, given our failures to recognize this obligation.

The contrast between “the way things are,” and an ethical demand imposed exclusively on human beings reoccurs in a later poem. The line between humans and animals is at once clear and blurred.
An Occurrence

Sky, earth, morning,  
the time is eight fifteen.  
Peace and quiet,  
in the savannah’s yellow grass.  
An ebony tree in the distance  
with evergreen leaves  
and spreading roots.

A sudden uproar in the blissful stillness.  
Two creatures who want to live suddenly bolt.  
An antelope in violent flight,  
a breathless hungry lioness behind her.  
Their chances are equal for the moment.

The antelope may even have the edge.  
And if not for the root  
that thrusts from the ground,  
if not for the stumble  
of one of four hooves,  
if not for the split second  
of disrupted rhythm  
that the lioness seizes  
with one prolonged leap—

On the question of guilt,  
nothing, only silence.  
The sky, *circulus coelestis*, is innocent.  
*Terra nutrix*, breadwinner earth, is innocent.  
*Tempus fugitivum*, time, is innocent.  
The antelope, *gazella dorcas*, is innocent.  
The lioness, *leo massaicus*, is innocent.  
The ebony tree, *diospyros mespiliformis*, is innocent.
And the observer who watches through binoculars,
is, in such instances,
*homo sapiens innocens*. (360)

The poem begins with a description of the beauty of a landscape, filled with color, peaceful. That beauty will soon be filled with violence, as if nature intertwines those two aspects, not allowing us to focus on the beauty alone. Once again, as in the previous poem, a predator devours her prey. The human is missing in this description but reappears in the last stanza. As soon as the human observer appears, so does the question of guilt and innocence. Even if “on the question of guilt/nothing, only silence,” the poem introduces those ethical terms into our appraisal of nature, even when we negate their relevance. We can’t accuse the lioness for wanting to live, we can’t accuse the tree for having roots that become obstacles to the life of the antelope. This is simply the way things are. And yet, those terms haunt the poem. The silence is very loud. It is broken in the human realm, but in a problematic way.

The last lines of the poem suggest that our innocence is limited to instances of seeking knowledge. Presumably, in other situations, we lose our innocence, although those situations are not specified. All that the poem tells us is that we are not innocent in the way that the other actors in the drama are innocent. But maybe even acquiescing to nature’s ways is already a dubious enterprise. Of course, the person with the binoculars is not guilty of violence when observing one animal eating another. It would be absurd to interfere, to try to change the way nature is organized. But is not merely accepting “the way things are” a path to justifying the greatest crimes? The two poems that follow pursue that question. In these poems, we are in the human world and not in the world of the savannah. In the human world, is it possible to be *homo sapiens innocens*, simply reporting on the way things are?

*Tortures*

Nothing has changed.
The body is a reservoir of pain;
it has to eat and breathe the air, and sleep;
it has thin skin and the blood is just beneath it;
it has a good supply of teeth and fingernails;

its bones can be broken; its joints can be stretched.  
In tortures, all of this is considered.

Nothing has changed.  
The body still trembles as it trembled  
before Rome was founded and after,  
in the twentieth century before and after Christ.  
Tortures are just what they were, only the earth has shrunk  
and whatever goes on sounds as if it’s just a room away.

Nothing has changed.  
Except that there are more people,  
and new offenses have sprung up beside the old ones—  
real, make-believe, short-lived, and non-existent.  
But the cry with which the body answers for them  
was, is, and will be a cry of innocence  
in keeping with the age-old scale and pitch.

Nothing has changed.  
Except perhaps the manners, ceremonies, dances.  
The gesture of the hand shielding the head  
has nonetheless remained the same.  
The body writhes, jerks and tugs,  
falls to the ground when shoved, pulls up its knees,  
brui ses, swells, drools, and bleeds.

Nothing has changed.  
Except the run of rivers,  
the shapes of forests, shores, deserts, and glaciers.  
The little soul roams among those landscapes,  
disappears, returns, draws near, moves away,  
evasive and a stranger to itself,  
now sure, now uncertain of its own existence,  
whereas the body is and is and is  
and has nowhere to go. (260)
The great refrain of this poem is that nothing has changed, repeated at the beginning of each of its five verses. Every time, it refers to the perennial practice of torture. Each stanza not only repeats that first line but adds a description of the practice of torture. The reasons given for inflicting it might have changed, and we might be more aware of it as a global phenomenon, but the act of inflicting unbearable physical pain on another human being has not gone away. It is as if nature has so arranged our bodies that this is the way it had to be. Is the speaker in this poem, in reporting on the universality of torture, its law-like nature, not an instance of *homo sapiens innocens*? We are wearing our binoculars when we notice “nothing has changed.”

Yet the voice in the poem is not merely observing. The refrain “Nothing has changed” is a cry of frustration. The insistent description in just about every stanza, of bodies writhing, jerking, the hands raised to protect the face, the teeth and fingernails waiting to be taken off, vividly evokes the violation that torture is. What is being violated in this description? Our bodies, to be sure. But why would violating bodies, an example of the law of the powerful taking advantage of the weak, be wrong? Where would our moral repulsion come from, if this is indeed a law to which we cannot but submit? We could posit the existence of something beyond our bodies—the soul—the putative source in us of the concepts of good and evil. But Szymborska makes short shrift of the soul. It is ill-equipped for such weighty matters. It wanders about, evasive, uncertain of its own existence. It has nothing like the self-evidence of the body, “which is and is and is/and has nowhere to go.” Might not the lack of evidence for the soul lie in that it cannot turn “what is” into “what should be?” Twenty centuries of Christianity have made no dent in our willingness to inflict torture.

It is crucial, it seems to me, that although the soul is a small, idle creature with no firm ground to stand on in the face of the immense vistas of nature and its laws, Szymborska does not deny its existence. Perhaps, in this poem, the ethical demand is its preeminent sign. It cannot undo the law of nature but the soul appears whenever those laws are not accepted as the final word about human beings. The poem, seemingly so intent on describing “the way things are,” embodies our refusal to give up on an ethical demand. The knowledge of the ubiquity of torture does not stifle our protest against it. On the contrary, it brings it out, in all its weakness, and in all its counter-natural reality.
In the poem *Discovery*, the question regarding the innocence of homo sapiens, the human who seeks knowledge, becomes more pointed yet, and the ethical claim distinguishing us as humans seems even more problematic than in the previous ones. Every stanza in this poem proclaims the speaker’s belief in the responsibility of the scientist to other human beings.

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

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

I believe in the burning of his notes,
burning them into ashes,
burning them to the last scrap.

I believe in the scattering of numbers,
scattering them without regret.

I believe in the man’s haste,
in the precision of his movements,
in his free will.

I believe in the shattering of tablets,
the pouring out of liquids,
the extinguishing of rays.

I am convinced this will end well,
that it will not be too late,
that it will take place without witnesses.

I’m sure no one will find out what happened,
not the wife, not the wall,
not even the bird that might squeal in its song.
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I believe in the refusal to take part.
I believe in the ruined career.
I believe in the wasted years of work.
I believe in the secret taken to the grave.

These words soar for me beyond all rules
without seeking support from actual examples.
My faith is strong, blind, and without foundations. (170)

If we did not sense the irony of the poem, it becomes crystal clear in the last stanza, turning on its head what the narrator is proclaiming. There is not a shred of evidence, in these lines, that any scientist has ever given up fame, career, livelihood to avoid the great harm which would result from the knowledge thus obtained. How very naive, or perhaps better put, how irrationally stubborn to cling to the idea that the good of the human race will prevail over the self-interest of the scientist, or even over the thirst for knowledge. It is to behave like a religious believer, for whose object of worship there is no corroborating evidence. On second thought, however, the irony of the poet might not be so unidirectional. In the process of appearing to mock our naive trust in the good, it also deconstructs the innocence of the scientist merely observing with his binoculars. The researcher continuing his research in the face of catastrophe is not homo sapiens innocens.

What, then, are we supposed to do, given the ungrounded nature of ethics, the lack of evidence for it as well as its unreasonable persistence? Reason would require us to give up on a good that is never enacted. Just as likely, however, reason would require us to give up our naive ideas about the pursuit of knowledge. This is not a condemnation of the pursuit of knowledge in itself but a questioning of the ethical pass given to it. It does not rise above our naive morality. The fragility of ethics vis-a-vis the way things are does not make good and evil disappear. Discovery preserves the tension between ethics and “the way things are.” It does not dissolve it.

One last confrontation with homo sapiens innocens occurs in a poem whose setting is the aftermath of the horrors the Germans perpetrated in the Second World War. We seem far removed from the question of nature and counter-natural ethics, but, from a different angle, this is the central issue here as well.
Innocence

Conceived on a mattress made of human hair.
She doesn’t know, no, not a thing about it.
This kind of knowledge isn’t suited
to being passed on or absorbed.
The Greek Furies were too righteous.
Their birdie excess would rub us the wrong way.

Irma. Brigitte. maybe Frederika.
She’s twenty-two, perhaps a little older.
She knows the three languages that all travelers need.
The company she works for plans to export
the finest mattresses, synthetic fabric only.
Trade brings nations closer.

Berta. Ulrike. Maybe Hildegard.
Not beautiful perhaps, but tall and slim.
cheeks, neck, breasts, thighs, belly
in full bloom now, shiny and new.
Blissfully barefoot on Europe’s beaches,
she unbraids her bright hair, right down to her knees.

My advice: don’t cut it (her hairdresser says);
onece you have, it will never grow back so thick.
Trust me.
It’s been proved
tausend-und tausendmal. (132)

The poem describes the generation of young German women born during or right after the war. Presumably they know about Nazi war crimes. How could they not? But they do not know about the mattresses filled with human hair upon which they were conceived. They are unaware of the intimate penetration of the crimes into their own families. Their parents never transmitted it, as if to transmit would...
be to introduce excess into otherwise balanced lives, to introduce impurity into what is otherwise clean.

As the irony marking the poem and the violent lines of the last stanza make clear, the carefree lives of the young women disturb the poet. What is there to be disturbed about, one might ask. What reproach can be made to young women for learning three languages, for being good at business, for reveling in their own young bodies, in their long hair, in the beaches of Europe? They were not the ones who committed the crimes. They were not even the ones who looked the other way, buying mattresses stuffed with human hair, as their parents did. Besides, their parents did not tell them anything. Berta and Ulrike are indeed irreproachable, innocent, selling mattresses with synthetic fabric only. Yet the poet acutely feels the injustice of it all. These young women have individual names. They have young healthy bodies, they have a future. They have everything that their parents brutally crushed in millions of others, over and over and over. Is Szymborska insisting that children are, after all, responsible for what their parents did? What an unbecoming desire for revenge.

I think that Szymborska is indeed insisting that children are responsible for the crime of their parents, which does not equate to enacting revenge upon them. These young women behave as if they have no past. “She does not know, no, not a thing about it,” as if these were the young women answering an accuser. This denial makes them akin to animals, who also have no past. To have a past, in the case of Ulrika and Hildegard, and no doubt in all cases, is to become aware of the evil that lurks in the most ordinary activities, within the very mattresses upon which the girls were born, within all those good intentions to spare them difficult dilemmas. The poet, in yelling out that an unimaginable evil occurred, *tausend-und tausendmal*, refuses to reduce human beings to the cycle of nature, to the perpetual round of births and deaths and births again, as if all ethical concerns disappear and we are left only with biology.

This poem, like the previous ones, confronts what seems to be a law of nature—the inexorable cycle of birth and reproduction oblivious to good and evil—with an ethical demand. Life, of course, goes on, but past crimes should leave a trace in the conscience of the living. Yet is not the ethical, here, as in all her poems, powerless? It will not make those young women more conscious of evil, it will not make scientists give up their careers to fend off the effects of a dangerous discovery, it will not stop torture, it will not save human beings from oblivion.
The ethical demand nonetheless persists, illogically, insistently, in defiance of nature, aware of its own lack of ground, its own lack of justification. We will return to this groundlessness below. For now, it is enough to notice how central this theme is in Szymborska’s poetry, appearing in many different contexts. Her poems reflect a universe devoid of consolations, ruled by implacable laws. At the same time, they express her refusal to give up on a good not explicable in terms of those laws. Although different facets of the good appear in the poems, in each case, they involve the demand to protect another human being from suffering and death, and perhaps equally so, the responsibility for becoming aware of how short we fall of that responsibility, as a means of keeping it alive. In each case, also, good and evil are anti-natural categories. Nothing in “the way things are” supports a commitment to ethics.

**Conclusion**

We recall Miłosz’s claim that without an explicit grounding of the human in a realm beyond nature we cannot save ethics, or the human being, for that matter, from the ravages of nihilism. A counterargument might be in order. When it comes to ethics, for instance, does it really matter which metaphysic, Christianity or materialism, is in place? In those metaphysical systems grounding ethics in a realm beyond nature, have people necessarily treated each other better than they do in a world that rejects that realm? A poem of Szymborska indirectly addresses this issue. In it, a boy and his mother are walking in the park, past a dilapidated statue of a woman. The mother explains that it is a statue of Charity. To the boy’s question as to why it is in such bad shape, she explains that it has always been this way. “Don't dawdle,” she says to her son. No use spending too much time on this. Charity is always in bad shape but is never completely removed from view either. “The city should do something about it, get rid of it, fix it.” (340) But clearly, it is going to do neither. We can stretch the mother’s affirmation, “it has always been this way,” to mean that whether we live in a world which affirms ethics as part of the very intention of the Creator, or one in which ethics is merely a useful survival mechanism, it will be in short supply in either case. The statue will remain in the park, neither fixed nor removed.

Along those lines, and yet addressing the question from another angle, the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas tells us that ethics is by nature groundless. That is, the responsibility for another human being does not arise on
the basis of a prior world view–be it natural or supranatural–but as an unmediated response to the vulnerability of the human being facing me.

The epiphany of the other person is ipso facto my responsibility toward him: seeing the other is already an obligation toward him. A direct optics–without the mediation of any idea–can only be accomplished as ethics.  \(^{12}\)

Levinas even claims that the discredit into which religious and thus supernatural claims have fallen in the modern world liberates us to focus on the ethical act as itself the source of transcendence rather than the other way around.  \(^{13}\) That is, belief in God is not the source of our responsibility. Rather it is the command to protect the other that suggests to us the idea of God in the first place. “It is in this ethical perspective that God must be thought, and not in the ontological perspective [...] of some supreme being or creator correlative to the world, as traditional metaphysics often holds.”  \(^{14}\) God is our term for the source of a command whose beginning in time human beings can never retrieve, beyond us by definition, since we did not impose it on ourselves. That source is always gone by the time we respond to the command. But even if we did not give the source the name “God,” the command would address us nonetheless. There can be Silence from on high, an expression from one of Szymborka’s poems, “Plato or Why?” because the transcendent message comes from the human face confronting me.

Responsibility to another is certainly not in conformity with nature either, in Levinas’s understanding of it. “Ethics is, therefore, against nature because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my existence first.”  \(^{15}\) Nature would have us perpetuate ourselves, concern ourselves with our own survival. “The irruption of the human in being is the interruption of the being that perseveres in being–and of the violence that this notion of perseverance and _conatus essendi_ [right to existence, a.a.] connotes somewhat.”  \(^{16}\) Responsibility, on the other hand, is turned, not toward perpetuating the self, but toward the other. In

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 24.

\(^{16}\) E. Levinas, _Hors Sujet_, Paris 1987, p. 11.
our response, to and for another person, says Levinas, the “I” arises. Only “I” can answer. In that answer, I become an integrated self. “Responsibility for the creature—a being for which the ego was not the author—which establishes the ego.”\(^{17}\) From this perspective, the ungrounded, anti-natural ethics in Szymborska’s poetry is simply the way the ethical manifests itself. “Ungrounded” here does not mean lack of evidence but the way response to vulnerability is unmediated by a prior cultural perspective.

Like Szymborska, Levinas does not think that obeying the command is very frequent. Acts of responsibility, those that truly protect the vulnerability of the other, independently of self-interest, are very few, and yet that command to protect the other orients us, making social life possible, even if we fail it most of the time. The dilapidated statue in the park, neither fixed nor removed, testifies to the permanence of ethics and to our falling short simultaneously. Metaphysics embedded in a given time or culture has nothing to do with it. If it happens, it happens at any time and place.

And yet, and in this he differs considerably from Szymborska, for Levinas, that gesture of responsibility needs to be protected by a tradition which proclaims it, and in his Talmudic readings especially, he claims that Jewish teaching is necessary to the world precisely because it brings to expression the nature of the responsibility all human beings always already have, before they have consciously chosen to be responsible.\(^{18}\) Without a tradition that reflects on it, the little good that there is in the world stands to be even less visible. In other words, an articulated metaphysics—in his case, describing the transcendence inseparable from responsibility—is necessary to protect the very notion of responsibility, and, by extension, the irreplaceable “I,” even if acts of responsibility arise quite independently of any tradition. This metaphysics does not establish the existence of God. It establishes the transcendent nature of the ethical itself.

In the end, I would like to think of Szymborska’s poetry as part of an ongoing tradition reminding us of the absolute nature of the ethical demand in a natural world in which such demands, far from being absolute, are explicable through other terms, usually evolutionary theories. There may be better defenses.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 70.

\(^{18}\) He does not think it is the exclusive prerogative of what he calls, in some places, the Judeo-Christian tradition. That is, associating ethics with transcendence can be find in other religious and even in philosophical systems. R.A. Cohen [ed.], *Face to Face with Levinas*, p. 25.
for ethics than Szymborska’s, ones that like Miłosz’s, require an explicit religious tradition, or ones like Levinas’s, which do not, at least in the usual understanding of religion. Nonetheless, in a world in which the authority of the sciences cannot be ignored, Szymborska’s poetry remains one of our available strategies to keep ethics a given not explainable through anything else. In the process, since ethics is indissoluble from our humanity, it also dislocates that humanity from the natural scientific explanations. Without naming it, Szymborska’s poetry evokes something beyond the natural world, for which we have no ready-made mental slot. It is there nonetheless. Because her touch is so light, so devoid of confrontational arguments, it allows the mystery of our own self to sneak in sideways, without our awareness. Poets have been dangerous to regimes of power, in this case, the power of scientific discourse to define the human, not because they wrote directly against that power but because they, as if absentmindedly, followed another authority.

References


