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# **The Limits of Lyric: Western Theory and Postwar Polish Practice.**

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### The Limits of Lyric: Western Theory and Postwar Polish Practice

I have felt that the problem of my time  
should be defined as Poetry and History.  
Czeslaw Milosz,  
“A Poet Between East and West” (1977)

#### I. The Lyric Under Seige

Poetry and history, poetry and society, poetry and politics: according to many recent Anglo-American critics, these phrases pair virtual antonyms. In the ideological criticism that has dominated the American academy in recent years, the lyric has come to serve as a convenient stand-in for “aesthetic isolationism” generally, that is, for art’s apparent “refusal of life actually conducted in actual society,” which in fact amounts to a “complicity with class-interested strategies of smoothing over historical conflict and contradictions with claims of natural and innate organization” (Lentricchia 94-5; Wolfson 191-2). With the advent of Romanticism, Terry Eagleton explains, all art was ostensibly rescued “from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish” (21). And Romanticism’s favored form, the lyric, is invariably the worst offender in such a socially irresponsible sleight-of-hand.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 94-95. Susan Wolfson, “‘Romantic Ideology’ and the Values of Aesthetic Form,” in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 191-192. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 21.

The sins for which the lyric has been taken to task are many. To critics reared on post-structuralist theory, lyric poetry manifests a suspicious commitment to a slew of discredited values. It stubbornly buttresses the bourgeois myth of individual autonomy, or so the argument runs. It privileges personal voice over postmodern textuality; it seeks to circumvent history through attention to aesthetic form; it turns its back on the public realm in its quest for private truths; and it places transcendental timelessness over active engagement in the here-and-now. The Romantic clichés from which these charges stem have been challenged by disgruntled New Historicists and die-hard formalists alike. Still they persist: they have become staples of recent criticism.<sup>2</sup>

The ideological critics have taken their lead in large part from Mikhail Bakhtin in creating a lyric antipode to the particular vision of art and society that they themselves wish to advance. The lyric, as Bakhtin sees it, is a deplorably anti-social genre. The poet's "utopian" goal is to "speak timelessly" from an "Edenic world" "far removed from the petty rounds of everyday life." "Authoritarian, dogmatic, and conservative," Bakhtin's poet struggles to assume "a complete single-personed hegemony over his own language," destroying in the process "all traces" "of other people," "of social heteroglossia and diversity of language" (Morson and Emerson 322-3; Bakhtin 287, 296-298).<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising that this reactionary foe of otherness and diversity should find itself under fire in the American academy. Not surprisingly, recent critics also overlook the distinctive role that poetry has played in modern Eastern European history. And this is unfortunate, since that role runs directly counter to the assumptions informing current discussions of the lyric. Plato famously expelled all trouble-making poets from his ideal kingdom of the mind: Plato's poet, a natural democrat, was "of no use to heads of state," as Mark Edmundson remarks. The Polish poet Aleksander Wat was quick to see the analogy between Plato's republic and the repressive regimes of post-war Eastern Europe. "Plato ordered us cast out/ of the City where Wisdom reigns./ In a new Ivory Tower made of (human) bones,"

<sup>2</sup> For recent accounts of the lyric under siege, see inter alia: Paul Breslin, "Shabine among the Fishmongers: Derek Walcott and the Suspicion of Essences" (unpublished essay); Mark Edmundson, *Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defense of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Eileen Gregory, *H. D. and Hellenism: Classical Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 129-139; Mark Jeffreys, "Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics," *PMLA*, vol. 110, no. 2 (March, 1995), 196-205; Susan J. Wolfson, "'Romantic Ideology' and the Values of Aesthetic Form," in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 188-218; Sarah Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 322-323. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Mikhail Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 287, 296-298.

he writes in his poem "Dark Light" (11).<sup>4</sup> But why should the lyric poets who, according to current doctrine, complacently uphold the bourgeois status quo prove to be so troublesome to left-wing dictators? How do the self-absorbed reactionaries of recent theory become Eastern Europe's subversives?

"In Central and Eastern Europe," Czeslaw Miłosz observes, "the word 'poet' has a somewhat different meaning from what it has in the West. There a poet does not merely arrange words in beautiful order. Tradition demands that he be a 'bard,' that his songs linger on many lips, that he speak in his poems of subjects of interest to all the citizens" (175).<sup>5</sup> In Poland and Russia alike, poets have been called upon for nearly two centuries to serve as their nations' "second government," in Solzhenitsyn's phrase. The heavy load of social and civic responsibility that Poland's writers were expected to shoulder was, if anything, still greater than that of their Russian counterparts. The partitions that erased their nation from the map of Europe in the late eighteenth century meant that Poland's great Romantics – Mickiewicz, Norwid, Slowacki – and their literary offspring felt compelled to replace their vanished state itself through their own poetry and prose. And, as Miłosz's remarks suggest, both the poets and their oppressed compatriots took such obligations very seriously.

The political aspirations of England's and America's romantics remained unrealized: hence Shelley's famous "unacknowledged legislators," who stand unfailingly on the side of "great and free developments of the national will," but are spurned by the very nations whose interests they seek to serve. Perhaps for this reason the Anglo-American critical tradition has tended to highlight lyric poetry's impracticable utopianism over its complex engagement with human history and society. It is not just the ideological critics who see the lyric chiefly as the creation of literary isolationists in search of an aesthetic Shangri-La that lies beyond the reach of human history. This tradition has a far deeper pedigree. The Anglo-American New Critics famously placed a frame around the lyric's iconic text with their well-wrought urns and verbal icons, as they sought to move it beyond the reach of erring adherents to various biographical heresies and intentional fallacies. And indeed each lyric poem appears to come complete with its own built-in margin of safety in the shape of the white page that seemingly serves to preserve it against unwanted incursions from the outside world. Of all literary genres, the lyric poem would seem to come closest to the ideally self-enclosed *objets d'art*, be they Grecian urns or calligrammes, that modern poets from Keats to Yeats, from Baudelaire to Apollinaire, have been celebrated in their verse.

This is precisely the vision of lyric poetry espoused in Sharon Cameron's influential *Lyric Time* (1979), to give just one example. In lyric poetry, Cameron explains, experience "is arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history": "[Lyric poems] insist that meaning depends upon the severing of incident from context,

<sup>4</sup> Edmundson, *Literature against Philosophy*, 6. Aleksander Wat, *Ciemne swiecidlo* (Paris: Libella, 1968), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Czeslaw Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, tr. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 175.

as if only isolation could guarantee coherence. The lyric's own presence on a page, surrounded as it is by nothing, is a graphic representation of that belief." (71).<sup>6</sup> According to friends and foes alike, then, the lyric strives to be a text without context; it aspires to absolute freedom from contingency, to unconditional deliverance from the vicissitudes and ambiguities of time-bound human being.

The way we perceive individual literary works is conditioned by our cultural and personal "horizon of expectations," Hans Robert Jauss cautions (44).<sup>7</sup> The same holds true for genres. Polish history has placed very different demands on the lyric than the Anglo-American tradition, and has activated different possibilities in the process. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Poland's acknowledged legislators have met with a reception that Shelley and his contemporaries could scarcely imagine.<sup>8</sup> To give one particularly vivid example – the Warsaw student riots of 1968 were sparked by the closing of a production of Mickiewicz's romantic verse drama "Forefathers' Eve, Part II," which contained, so the authorities feared, inflammatory anti-Russian sentiments. Shelley could only dream of such a reaction to his "Prometheus Unbound" or "Cenci." And as my example suggests, modern history only widened the rift that divided East from West for much of the century just past: perhaps it takes the fate of the lyric and its makers in an explicitly utopian state to underscore the powerful *antiutopian* strains at work in modern poetry.

In any case, the Anglo-American critic requires a radically shifted angle of vision in order to do justice to the place of poetry in modern Polish history. The lyric might just as easily be conceived – or so the poets of modern Poland imply – not as a utopian genre, but as a genre based on a recognition of boundaries and limits, the limits that its own form so graphically displays. It is arguably the genre best equipped to explore the parameters that both define and restrict human existence. The lyric may give voice to dreams of another, better world. But it must also address, not least through its very form, the realities that resist such flights of fancy: the lyric traveler to distant lands must keep checking, in Adam Zagajewski's phrase, "to make sure he still [has] his return ticket/to the ordinary places where we live" (38). The lyric, by its nature, is forced to take up the question of what it means to have a individual point of view, to be rooted in a particular time and place, even a particular species: "Why after all this one and not the rest?/ Why this specific self, not in a nest,/ but a house? ... Why on earth now, on Tuesday of all days,/ and why on earth...?" Wislawa

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<sup>6</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 71.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, tr. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 44.

<sup>8</sup> I don't wish to idealize the lot of acknowledged legislators. Szymborska, Herbert, Zagajewski, Baranczak: all have followed Miłosz's lead in their attempts to revise or even reject outright the politically engaged stance that the Polish tradition demands from its national bards, a stance that often operates at cross-purposes, so these poets have argued, with the very lyricism that animates their verse.

Szyborska asks in her lyric “Astonishment” (128).<sup>9</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the lyric is a self-consciously historical and social genre to its core.

## 2. Reframing the Verbal Icon

“The Soul selects her own Society-/ Then shuts the Door”: in their study of Mikhail Bakhtin, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson take Dickinson’s defense of lyric privacy to speak for the innately solipsistic nature of the genre generally. But the picture looks rather different in Eastern Europe. The subversive potentials of lyric poetry are perhaps clearest in a society committed to the eradication of the individual both in theory and, not infrequently, in practice. What Mandelstam calls the “accidental, personal” voice of lyric poetry acquires a singular power under such circumstances (Bakhtin 320).<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, one of Dickinson’s greatest Polish admirers, Stanislaw Baranczak, hints at the threat that the lyric poses in a totalitarian state in his poem “Fill Out Legibly,” which suggests how Eastern Europe’s purveyors of Orwellian Newspeak might have perceived Dickinson’s “letter to the World/That never wrote to Me.” “Does he write letters to himself? (yes, no),” the unnamed framers of an ominous questionnaire demand – and it’s all too clear what the right answer should be (Baranczak 69). “Poetry is not heard, but overheard,” John Stuart Mill remarks in one well-known definition of the lyric’s audience (qtd. in Benfey 53). But lyric eavesdropping takes on new meaning in cultures where the walls have not just ears, but microphones: in “Moscow’s evil living space,” “the walls are damn thin,” Mandelstam complains, just in case state-monitored poets should take a notion to deviate from their assigned task of “teaching the hangmen to warble” (196-7). In the lyric, T. S. Eliot insists, the poet speaks “to himself – or to nobody” (96). But just such soliloquys come under scrutiny in Wislawa Szymborska’s “Writing a Resume”: “Write as if you’d never talked to yourself/and always kept yourself at arm’s length,” the solicitous speaker advises (205).<sup>11</sup>

Even the seemingly harmless confession that William Carlos Williams tapes to his refrigerator in “This is Just to Say” – “I have eaten/ the plums/ that were in the icebox// and which / you were probably saving for breakfast” – could be given

<sup>9</sup> Adam Zagajewski, *Mysticism for Beginners*, tr. Clare Cavanagh (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 38. Wislawa Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected 1957-1997*, tr. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 128.

<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 320.

<sup>11</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 55, 103. Stanislaw Baranczak, *Wybor wierszy i przekladow* (Warsaw: Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1997), 69. Mill is quoted in Christopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 53. Mandelstam, *Sobranie sochinenii*, v. 1, 196-197. T. S. Eliot, “The Three Voices of Poetry,” *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1961), 96. Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 205.

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a sinister spin by a suspicious state, or so Baranczak's "2/8/80: And Nobody Warned Me" suggests:

And no one warned me that liberty  
might also lie in this: I'm  
sitting in the station house with drafts of my own poems  
hidden (how ingenious!) in my long johns,  
while five detectives with higher educations  
and even higher salaries waste time  
analyzing trash they've taken from my pockets:  
tram tickets, a dry cleaning receipt, a dirty  
handkerchief and a baffling (I'll die laughing) list:  
celery carrots  
can of peas  
tom. paste  
potatoes;

and no one warned me that captivity  
might also lie in this: I'm  
sitting in the station house with drafts of my own poems  
hidden (how grotesque!) in my long johns,  
while five detectives with higher educations  
and even lower foreheads have the right  
to grope the entrails wrested from my life:  
tram tickets, a dry cleaning receipt, a dirty  
handkerchief and most of all that (I can't bear it) list:  
celery carrots  
can of peas  
tom. paste  
potatoes;

and no one warned me that my entire globe  
lies in the gap that parts opposing poles  
which can't be kept apart. (212-3)<sup>12</sup>

The accidental and personal take on unexpected weight in a state designed to eliminate any accident or personality that might impede history's unencumbered progress towards a radiant collective future. It is not surprising that Mandelstam should add a final, foreboding adjective to his thumbnail definition of the lyric. Poetry in the modern age is not just "accidental and personal," he warns; it is also "catastrophic." Certainly Polish poets have met with more than their share of catastrophes in the century just past. War, invasion, disease, privation, censorship, persecution, Nazi atrocities, totalitarian terror: this litany of horrors took its toll upon writer after writer (to say nothing of the legions of more prosaic victims for whom these poets struggled to speak). Notions of the poem as a well-wrought urn, as an impermeable verbal icon, could hardly withstand the battering to which modern history submitted

<sup>12</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 55. Baranczak, *Wybor wierszy*, 212-213.

art and artists in this part of the world. Not surprisingly, then, the poets of post-war Poland, writing from a decimated nation caught at the crossroads between two brutal regimes, focus in their own poems not only on the lyric's potential power to defy time, but just as importantly, on the vulnerability it manifests in the face of what Wat calls "Enormous History" – a vulnerability it shares, incidentally, with history's more corporeal victims.

In "Anecdote of a Jar," Wallace Stevens conquers nature by way of a jar strategically placed "upon a hill...in Tennessee":

The wilderness rose up to it,  
And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground  
And tall and of a port in air. (76)

The jar, an emblem of artistic form, "[takes] dominion everywhere," Stevens writes. But similar objects suffer a very different fate in Milosz's exquisite "Song on Porcelain" (1947), as translated by the author and Robert Pinsky:

Rose-colored cup and saucer,  
Flowery demitasses:  
You lie beside the river  
Where an armored column passes.  
Winds from across the meadow  
Sprinkle the banks with down;  
A torn apple tree's show  
Falls on the muddy path;  
The ground everywhere is strewn  
With bits of brittle froth—  
Of all things broken and lost  
Porcelain troubles me most.

Before the first red tones  
Begin to warm the sky  
The earth wakes up, and moans.  
It is the small sad cry  
Of cups and saucers cracking,  
The masters' precious dream  
Of roses, of mowers raking,  
And shepherds on the lawn.  
The black underground stream  
Swallows the frozen swan.  
This morning, as I walked past,  
The porcelain troubled me most.

The blackened plain spreads out  
To where the horizon blurs  
In a litter of handle and spout,  
A lively pulp that stires  
And crunches under my feet



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Pretty, useless foam:  
Your stained colors are sweet  
Spattered in dirty waves  
Flecking the fresh black loam  
In the mounds of these new graves.  
In sorrow and pain and cost,  
Sir, porcelain troubles me most. (100-3)

Stevens' jar subdues the surrounding wilderness only after it is exempted from more mundane, utilitarian purposes. By setting the jar on his mythical Tennessee hilltop, Stevens strategically removes it from the less exotic contexts in which we typically encounter such objects, on kitchen counters or grocery store shelves. But Miłosz's shattered crockery operates differently. It is moving precisely because it mediates between daily existence and the realm of art, as it demonstrates how easily both worlds fall prey to the forces of history: "You lie beside the river/ Where an armored column passes." The broken cups exemplify both the fragile forms of a vanished quotidian and the no less fragile human beings that once inhabited it: "Spattered in dirty waves/ Flecking the fresh black loam/ In the mounds of these new graves." But they also embody the "precious dreams of master craftsmen (sny majstrow drogocenne)," as the frozen swan from Mallarmé's famous sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" abandons the realm of pure art in order to adorn the rims of now-shattered saucers. (In the Polish text, the craftsmen's dreams take the shape of the "feathers of frozen swans" („pióra zamarych łabędzi") that presumably adorn the porcelain). The English translation makes the original's hints of a vanished pastoral more explicit by adding "roses...mowers raking,/ And shepherds on the lawn" to the poem's litany of lost objects. It might almost be a rebuke to Keats' "unravished bride of quietness," whose pastoral scenes are preserved in perpetuity from the ravages of mere mortality.<sup>13</sup>

"Like Rembrandt, martyr of chiaroscuro,/ I've entered into numbing time" (Mandelstam 249)." So runs the opening of one of Mandelstam's cryptic late lyrics, which date from his years in internal exile in Voronezh, not long before his final arrest and death in a Stalinist camp. In Mandelstam's elliptical apostrophe to the Dutch painter, is "noble brother and master, father of the black-green dark" becomes an unexpected fellow sufferer, subject, like the Russian poet himself, to the onslaughts of "numbing" history. Mandelstam anticipates ways in which the poets of post-war Poland conceive of visual artworks – and by extension, the "verbal icons" of their own verses – in their writing. Neither paintings nor poems, they imply, are immune to the forces of history. Far from seeking solace in some airtight aesthetic refuge from reality, the poet looks rather to negotiate the shifting, permeable boundaries that divide the work of art from the larger world that both informs and, all too of-

<sup>13</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 76. "Piosenka o porcelanie," in Miłosz, *Poezje wybrane: Selected Poems* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo literackie, 1996), 100-103. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, tr. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

ten, imperils it: “Not many works escape the sands and fires of history,” Zbigniew Herbert reminds us (101).<sup>14</sup>

The Polish poets, in other words, invariably call attention to the world that lies outside the picture’s frame. Thus, Adam Zagajewski concludes his tribute to “Dutch Painters” by imagining the kind of society that fosters the untroubled domesticity their paintings celebrate.

They [the Dutch] liked dwelling. They dwelt everywhere,  
in a wooden chair back,  
in a milky streamlet narrow as the Bering Straits.  
Doors were wide open, the wind was friendly.  
Brooms rested after work well done.  
Homes bared all. The painting of a land  
without secret police

Only a “traveler from Eastern, so-called Central Europe,” where concealment was until recently an unavoidable way of life, would be so quick to register the implications of this wide-open Dutch domestic space, where in art, as in reality, “apartments are put on display, illuminated in such a way that every passerby can check what’s going on inside.” And perhaps only such an observer, privy to the darkest spots in Europe’s recent past, would be so attentive to all that this luminous art omits. “Tell us, Dutch painters,” Zagajewski asks

what will happen  
when the apple is peeled, when the silk dims,  
when all the colors grow cold.  
Tell us what darkness is. (133)<sup>15</sup>

This speaker knows the powers that oppose the ordering of art and life too well to exempt even the seemingly imperturbable Dutch tableaux he loves from the onslaughts of history.

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” Walter Benjamin remarks (256).<sup>16</sup> The poets of post-war Poland did not have to go far afield to test the truth of his observation. They were eyewitness to the devastation wrought on European civilization by cultured Germany and progressive Russia alike; and they saw in both the invaders and their fellow countrymen how easily the trappings of cultivation fall away from even the most seemingly civilized members of our species. Their recent past has taught them to suspect any worldview that rests upon unflinching faith in progress and a commitment to the final perfect-

<sup>14</sup> “Kak svetoteni muchenik Rembrandt,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 249. Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, tr. Michael March and Jaroslaw Anders (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 101.

<sup>15</sup> *Mysticism for Beginners*, 12, 7. Adam Zagajewski, *Another Beauty*, tr. Clare Cavanagh (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000), 133.

<sup>16</sup> “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 256.

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ibility of human nature. “Progress in our civilization,” Herbert comments, “consists mainly in the fact that simple tools for splitting heads” are replaced by equally deadly “hatchet-words,” such as “‘mind-debaucher,’ ‘witch’ and ‘heretic’” (141). In her poem “Tortures” Szyborska casts doubt upon even this dubious achievement. “Nothing has changed,” she insists.

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. (202)

The Polish artist is the “barbarian in the garden” of European civilization, in Herbert’s phrase – and not just because of his or her backward Eastern origins. “A historical steam-roller has gone several times through [this] country whose geographical location, between Germany and Russia, is not particularly enviable,” Miłosz observes in the introduction to his anthology of *Postwar Polish Poetry* (xi-xii).<sup>17</sup> The poets of such a country are by necessity acutely aware both of a culture’s costs and of its terrible fragility.

This is the consciousness Wislawa Szyborska brings to bear on her imaginative recreation of early French art in “A Medieval Miniature.” She begins by inventing hyperbolic verbal equivalents for the extravagant elegance of paintings like those found in the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*.

Up the verdantest of hills,  
in this most equestrian of pageants,  
wearing the silkiest of cloaks.

Towards a castle with seven towers,  
each of them by far the tallest.

In the foreground, a duke  
most flatteringly unrotund;  
by his side, his duchess  
young and fair beyond compare

Superlatives abound in the poem’s first six stanzas, which recreate the unnamed medieval miniature of the title. But a more sinister reality emerges in the poem’s final stanzas, as Szyborska turns her attention to what has been omitted from the aristocratic paradise evoked by this “feudalest of realisms.”

Whereas whosoever is downcast and weary,  
cross-eyed and out at elbows,  
is most manifestly left out of the scene.

<sup>17</sup> *Barbarian in the Garden*, 141. Szyborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 202. *Postwar Polish Poetry*, selected and edited by Czesław Miłosz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xi-xii.

Even the least pressing of questions,  
burgherish or peasantish,  
cannot survive beneath this most azure of skies.

And not even the eaglest of eyes  
could spy even the tiniest of gallows—  
nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt. (156-7)<sup>18</sup>

As in Zagajewski's "Dutch Painters," Szyborska begins by sympathetically recreating life as seen from within a given worldview and aesthetic only to undermine its claims to comprehensiveness by stepping outside its seemingly sacrosanct borders. Szyborska lost her faith in the class-free utopia promised by Polish Communism early on. But in "Medieval Miniature" she apparently finds a partial truth in the Marxist vision of a history shaped by governing classes whose task is to suppress all traces of the labor that makes their dominion possible. For Szyborska, the pleasures of medieval art cannot be divorced from the price they exact. It is not only the "least pressing" of "burgherish or peasantish" questions that may not survive "beneath this most azure of skies." The "burgherish" or "peasantish" types who persist in asking such questions may find themselves dangling from the little gallows that the picture keeps carefully out of sight – or so the poem implies.

For Szyborska, though, Marxist ideology is hardly the universal master key that its twentieth-century adherents have claimed it to be. It can no more explain the miracles achieved by medieval art than the "feudalist of realisms" can do justice to the peasants and burghers who violate its aristocratic code. "Feudal realism" may be a product of a given historical moment, with all its limitations – but then of course so is its latter-day Soviet variant, socialist realism, or so Szyborska's poem hints. (And of course the Soviet state was at least as assiduous in purging class enemies as any feudal prince might be.) But the heights scaled by medieval "realism"—"each [tower] by far the tallest"—tacitly underscore the aesthetic poverty and formulaic monotony of its distant, less imaginative, descendant. Not all realisms are created equal, the poem implies.

For Szyborska and Zagajewski, the truths of art are partial in a double sense: they are both incomplete and partisan. And this is precisely what makes art human – partial truths are the only kind to which we humans are privy, these poets suggest—and what engages it in history. For only those who claim to have access to the full picture, the final point of view, can imagine themselves to be free of any merely human limits, and thus exempt themselves from history. But the lyric poet, first-person singular by definition, cannot pretend to comprehensiveness in the way that a novelist, philosopher or epic poet might. Through its commitment to the individual vision in all its particularity and partiality the lyric works to undermine precisely those versions of human history that negate the weight of individual experience by subordinating it to one Hegelian grand scheme or another. This is what I take Zagajewski to mean when he remarks that "once one divides the world into

<sup>18</sup> *Poems New and Collected*, 156-157.

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history and poetry, then one obliterates the difference between a history...which is habitable and human, and the kind which produces concentration camps” (260).<sup>19</sup>

What earthly use is any icon, be it verbal or visual, that has been “arrested, framed, and taken out of the flux of history,” in Cameron’s phrase (101)? This is the question that activates Zbigniew Herbert’s poem “Mona Lisa.” “Inquisitors and troubadors” are equally at home in Herbert’s essays on Western culture, in which art, society, ethics and politics form “an entangled knot of many threads”: it could hardly be otherwise, it would seem, for a veteran of modern history in its unusually brutal Polish incarnation (79). But “Mona Lisa” tells a different story. The speaker is also a survivor of Poland’s devastation in the war and its aftermath, as the grim landscape of the poem’s opening lines reveals.

Through seven mountain frontiers  
barbed wire of rivers  
and executed forests  
and hanged bridges  
I kept coming-  
through waterfalls of stairways  
whirlings of sea wings  
and baroque heaven  
all bubbly with angels  
-to you  
Jerusalem in a frame (85-7)<sup>20</sup>

This pilgrim makes his way through this Eastern European waste land to the *sanctus sanctorum* of Western culture, to the Louvre and Leonardo’s famous painting. And, as the last line suggests, the speaker’s attitude towards the painting he approaches is radically different from what we find in “Dutch Painters” or “A Medieval Miniature.” He does not strive to enter into an artwork of another era on its own terms; nor does he wish to engage it from his distinctive, present point of view. Instead he looks for “Jerusalem in a frame,” for spiritual redemption through a pure art set apart from a recent past too terrible to contemplate. He seeks, in other works, precisely that kind of transcendent release from history that so many critics have seen as the final aim of lyric poems generally. But the painting he views from “the dense nettlepatch/ of a cook’s tour/ on a shore of crimson rope/ and eyes” fails to meet his expectations. The lady he finds is not enigmatic, but mechanical, even monstrous. The landscape he passes through, with its barbed-wire rivers and executed trees, has been dehumanized through an excess of history. But Mona Lisa, the goal of his quest, is finally no less inhuman – though she has fallen prey not to history, but to what appears to be an excess of artifice:

<sup>19</sup> Zagajewski, *Two Cities: On Exile, History and the Imagination*, tr. Lillian Vallee (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 260.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, 101; Herbert, *Still Life with a Bridle*, tr. John and Bogdana Carpenter (New York: Ecco, 1991), 79. *Selected Poems*, tr. Czesław Miłosz, Peter Dale Scott (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), 85-87.

laboriously smiling on  
resin-colored mute convex  
  
as if constructed out of lenses  
concave landscape for a background . . .  
  
only her regulated smile  
her head a pendulum at rest  
  
her eyes dream into infinity  
but in her glances snails are asleep

History and art as worlds kept apart are equally uninhabitable and inhuman, the poem suggests. History as brute machine is countered here by what looks to be an equally mechanical artistry, and the speaker cannot bridge the gap that divides his “living heels” from “the empty volumes” of the Mona Lisa’s flesh, that separates his specific historical experience from the static artifact before him:

between the blackness of her back  
and the first tree of my life  
  
lies a sword  
a melted precipice

These are the poem’s closing lines. But are the speaker’s final thoughts also the poet’s? The pilgrim’s description of his unsatisfactory icon suggests otherwise. Mona Lisa, he complains earlier,

has been hewed off from the meat of life  
abducted from home and history  
  
with horrifying ears of wax  
smothered with a scarf of glaze

“Hewed off,” “abducted,” “horrifying,” “smothered”: the language evokes not so much an ahistorical vacuum as the brutalized post-war Poland of the poem’s opening lines. Indeed, the phrases the speaker uses to describe the painting could just as easily be applied both to the war’s individual victims and to the fate of entire peoples and nations.

It is not just the museum setting, with its frothy angels, Cook’s tours, and crimson ropes that divides the speaker from Leonardo’s portrait. Nor is it chiefly the image itself that offends him, for all his complaints. His own desire to escape a history too harsh to be borne leads him to seek out not simply a painting, but salvation itself: “Jerusalem in a frame.” What he finds in its place looks suspiciously like the unbearable past he struggles to outrun. And one suspects finally that this horrific past, more than the painting’s purported flaws, now fills the black void that blocks him from the vanished world he mourns: how does one recover “the first tree of my life” from a wilderness of “executed forests”?

“Don’t even think about it,” the speaker warns. But Herbert’s poem reveals that there can be no thinking, no seeing, outside of history. “Mona Lisa”’s haunted speaker finds the past he flees everywhere. It haunts the tainted landscape of the opening lines, as human villains and victims are displaced onto bridges and trees; and it infects the failed sanctuary of Leonardo’s portrait, with its “fat signora” brutally hewed “from the meat of life.” “What is poetry which does not save/ Nations or peoples?” Miłosz asks in his famous poem “Dedication” (96-7).<sup>21</sup> For Herbert, Szymborska, and Zagajewski poetry is not subservient to history, as it was for their more orthodox colleagues. But neither does it exist in isolation. In “Dutch Painters,” “Mona Lisa,” and “Medieval Miniatures,” we find not celebrations of art’s iconic autonomy from time, but stories of the complex interaction between art and human time, art and human history as embodied in an individual perceiver who stands before a work from a distant era. And these stories, in turn, speak to each poet’s conception of the lyric, as in each case, a speaker rooted in a specific time and place supplements and complicates the story told by the images he or she works to recreate.

The speakers in Zagajewski’s and Szymborska’s lyrics do this consciously. They seek first to enter the artwork and the world it represents, and then to address it from what is recognizably a modern Eastern European perspective. Zagajewski and Szymborska thus offer us a model for approaching individual lyrics, a model in which we both seek to enter the poem’s world and bring our own individual context, our own rootedness in history to bear upon the work before us. Poetry that seeks to keep itself at arm’s length from merely human time is doomed to failure – or so the fate of Mallarmé’s frozen swan in the “Song on Porcelain” suggests. But the viewer – or reader – who looks to remove himself and art from history, however understandably, impoverishes both himself and art in the process; he refuses even the partial knowledge, the imperfect redemption that is all art can offer at best. One might at any rate read Herbert’s “Mona Lisa” this way; it is a cautionary tale against the mistaking of icons, be they visual or verbal, as a safe haven from history.

“Historicize, historicize,” the cultural critics cry. Yet they themselves overlook large chunks of culture and history that might complicate or challenge the limits of their own brand of historicism. Both their neglect of Eastern Europe – whose troublesome history of Marxism in practice might undermine the Marxist theory that underpins so much recent scholarship – and their distortion of lyric poetry are telling in this respect. The call to historicize carries with it an implicit condemnation of some earlier, spurious form of “pseudohistoricism” or “ahistoricism,” the crime with which the lyric in particular has been charged. But if the lyric struggles to be context-free, as such critics argue, it is because human beings likewise try, time and again, to rise above the contexts that confine them: Keat’s Grecian urn yields its secrets, if indeed it does, only in response to the insistent questioning of the poem’s mortal speaker to whom its glimpses of transcendence remain forever out of reach. All efforts to step outside time, the lyric reminds us, are doomed to fail in advance, which is why the lyric poet must struggle time and again to achieve the “revenge of

<sup>21</sup> “Przedmowa,” *Poezje wybrane: Selected Poems*, 96-97.

a mortal hand,” the temporary reprieve from mortality that is all we can hope for at best (Szyborska 68).<sup>22</sup>

Herbert’s speaker in “Mona Lisa” goes in quest of a timeless icon that will release him, if only temporarily, from history’s shackles; what he finds is inevitably distorted by the history he tries to leave behind. Attempts to read the lyric as the antithesis to legitimate, historically engaged writing –whatever that might be – likewise tell us at least as much about the genre’s interrogators as they do about the mode of writing such critics claim to illuminate. The lyric is, as I’ve been arguing, a genre of limits – but as its Polish practitioners reveal, its limitations are self-conscious and self-critical. This heightened self-consciousness, moreover, is itself a response to a specific historical situation, in which Poland’s foreign-backed rulers claimed to have uncovered a historical master key, a Metahistory or Megahistory that rendered all earlier versions obsolete. The “new” in “New Historicism” inevitably calls to mind the language of advertising, where the adjective “new” is invariably paired with its Madison Avenue twin, “improved.” The very idea of a “New Historicism” rests on the notions of intellectual progress and superior vision, if not outright omniscience, that its adherents claim to reject. They would do well to learn from the spurned lyric, which, particularly in its postwar Polish incarnation, teaches us to test the limits not just of the thing perceived, but of its all-too-human perceiver.

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<sup>22</sup> Szyborska, *Poems New and Collected*, 68.