

Teksty Drugie 2012, 1, s. 188-200  
Special Issue – English Edition



# **Ekphrases in the Poetry of Wisława Szymborska.**

Małgorzata Czermińska

Przeł. Paweł Pyrka

## Małgorzata CZERMIŃSKA

### Ekphrases in the Poetry of Wisława Szymborska<sup>1</sup>

A study of *ekphrasis* in Szymborska's work may seem a misguided idea. The poet dedicated few poems to works of art, and critics have already identified and analyzed them.<sup>2</sup> So far, however, I have come across no attempt to apply the concept of *ekphrasis* in the interpretation of Szymborska's poems (except some occasional uses by Joanna Grądział and Wojciech Lięża), although the eponymous poems in one of the volumes, namely "Ludzie na moście" (1986) [The People on the Bridge] is a model example. Other attempts appear quite early, at the very beginnings of the poet's work, namely in "Małowidło w Pałacu Zimowym" [The Painting in the Winter Palace] (in the volume *Pytania zadawane sobie* 1954 [Questions to Oneself]),<sup>3</sup> and in "Dwie małpy Breugla" [Brueghel's

<sup>1</sup> The following paper was written for *Wisława Szymborska's Poetry*, an international conference, which was organized in May 2003 in Stockholm by the Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in cooperation with departments of Slavic Studies of universities in Stockholm and Uppsala; it will be published in the volume of conference proceedings. Polish version is published by the organizers' gracious consent.

<sup>2</sup> Faryno, J. „Semiotyczne aspekty poezji o sztuce. Na przykładzie wierszy Wisławy Szymborskiej,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1975 vol. 4; J. Kwiatkowski „Arcydzielka Szymborskiej,” in: *Radość czytania Szymborskiej. Wybór tekstów krytycznych*, ed. S. Balbus, D. Wojda, Kraków 1996 (original sketch was prepared in 1977); J. Grądział „Świat sztuki w poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1996 vol. 2; W. Lięża *O poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej. Świat w stanie korekty*, Kraków 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Bikont and Joanna Szczęsna note (*Pamiętkowe rupiecie, przyjaciele i sny Wisławy Szymborskiej*, Warszawa 1997, pp. 113-115) that the poem's motto was „With authentic event In the background,” but asked about it the poet could not recall where she had

Two Monkeys] (*Wołanie do Yeti* 1957) [Calling Out to Yeti, 1957), while later we can find them in almost every volume. Only Leonard Neuger, when interpreting “Elegia podróżna” [Travel Elegy], noticed a hidden reflection on *ekphrasis*, but at the same time assumed that it is understood by the poet to be a challenge that cannot be met.<sup>4</sup> The critic comes to the conclusion that despite the ineffability of the experience and the resulting impossibility of *ekphrasis*, the poem speaks of the necessity of undertaking this task over and over again. The evidence of the poet’s belief in ineffability is, however, not completely convincing here, as it is supported by a quote from a different poem by Szymborska.

My reading of “Travel Elegy” emphasizes the problem of the unreliability of memory, which Neuger underestimates. In my opinion the motivation behind the elegiac mood in the poem (in fact quite humorously treated) is not so much the difficulty of *ekphrasis*, as the fleeting character of impressions of the journey. Evidence of this is in the first stanza, also repeated later in the text. Both the initial appearance with its particular semantic character, and the repetition bid the reader to treat the thought contained in the stanza as the key idea of the poem. It is an idea of the wealth of experience in the present (“everything”), which is opposed to the scarcity of what remains in memory (“nothing...to hold”):

Everything's mine but just on loan,  
nothing for the memory to hold,  
though mine as long as I look.

The theme of merciless oblivion returns two more times in the poem:

Memories come to mind like excavated statues  
that have misplaced their heads.

...

I won't retain one blade of grass  
as it's truly seen. (Szymborska 29, 31)<sup>5</sup>

Neuger is right to point out that the issue of necessity and at the same time impossibility or at least difficulty involved in *ekphrasis* appears in Szymborska’s texts as a matter of importance and one worthy of consideration, not in “Travel Elegy,” however. On the other hand, I would agree that we can observe the echo of that thought in the poem “Clochard,” which I will discuss soon.

*Ekphrasis* is one of those devices adapted by literature from rhetoric which has aroused great interest recently among literary theorists, because of its relevance

---

read about it. The two authors suggest that the anecdote might have been referring to the painting in the so-called “Hall of Fame” or The War Gallery of 1812 in the Winter Palace (reprint of “The Painting...” in *Wiersze wybrane*, Warszawa 1964; without the motto)

<sup>4</sup> Neuger, L. „Biedna Uppsala z odrobiną wielkiej katedry (Próba lektury “Elegii podróżnej” Wisławy Szymborskiej),” in: *Radość czytania...*

<sup>5</sup> Szymborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997: 29, 31.

to the consideration of the linguistic capabilities of presenting extraverbal reality, and of the relationship between word and image. It is not the goal of this text to elaborate on the subject discussed in many book and even more articles.<sup>6</sup> However I will reiterate, on the basis of various sources, that *ekphrasis* (or *descriptio*) as a figure of thought, also called *hypotyposis* (*evidentia*) is a description which visualizes with such clarity that the listener, according to Quintilian, will have the impression that they can actually see the described object, rather than simply hear the sound of words. Over time, the meaning of the term *ekphrasis* was limited to the description of a work of art (painting, sculpture or buildings), which is either incorporated into a larger whole (e.g. narrative), or is a separate text then treated as a realization of the genre.<sup>7</sup> *Ekphrasis* acquired its genological distinctiveness in late antiquity in the Byzantine Empire, and it owes its permanent presence in the literary tradition in part to the fact that for centuries (until the eighteenth century) it was one of the mandatory exercises in the teaching of rhetoric in schools. (Ziomek 91, Michałowska 94-5)<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary poets are not concerned about the requirements of *Ratio Studiorum*, but traces of genre conventions have survived in poetic realizations, such as in the standard example of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or explicitly classicist, not only in style, but also in its theme, "Na biust rzymski w muzeum w Spirze" [On the Roman Bust in the Museum in Speyer] by Iwaszkiewicz from the volume *Powrót do Europy* [Return to Europe]. The title or the text of a poems should include a reference to the described work of art – its author, title or a characteristic feature that allows it to be identified. Sometimes the subject of the description may not be a single work of art, but a whole class of them, e.g. representing the work of a famous artist, a school, a genre or an era. *Ekphrasis* involves the belief in the visual potential of words and their superiority over images. Michał Paweł Markowski notes that the concept of *ekphrasis* contains a paradox, which is at the same time the paradox of any representation:

On the one hand, it seeks to visualize the object (by showing the object of description), on the other hand it does everything to emphasize the method of its presentation (narration or description). (Markowski 13)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Markowski, M.P. „*Ekphrasis*. Uwagi bibliograficzne z dołączeniem krótkiego komentarza,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1999 vol. 2; and *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza*, Gdańsk 1999 (especially the chapter *Prolog. Ikony i idole*).

<sup>7</sup> Krzywy, R. „Konwencja i autopsja w opisie dzieł sztuki na przykładzie ekfraz kościoła Mądrości Bożej w poezji barokowej” *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis* no. 2011, *Prace Literackie* XXXVI, Wrocław 1998; R. Popowski „Retoryka w późnoantycznych opisach dzieł sztuki” in: *Retoryka antyczna i jej dziedzictwo*, ed. J. Axer, Warszawa 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Ziomek, J. *Retoryka opisowa*, Wrocław 1990. 91; T. Michałowska, „Poetyka i poezja (problemy interpretacji poezji staropolskiej)” in: *Zagadnienia literaturoznawczej interpretacji*, eds. J. Sławiński, J. Święch. Wrocław 1979. 94-95.

<sup>9</sup> Markowski, M.P. *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza*, Gdańsk 1999. 13.

The effect of this paradox is well illustrated by Szymborska's poems, since the poet always makes use of stylized language, specially chosen vocabulary and word building techniques, which characterize the work of art no less vividly than the actual meaning of words. The poet translates visual signs in literary ones not only thanks to such stylistic treatments, but also through appropriate structures of discourse. In addition to description, which is typical of *ekphrasis*, she introduces dialogue, narration in the form of mini-anecdotes, or chooses to dramatize what is shown in the picture. These operations allow for the proliferation of metaphorical meanings and associations which can produce a much richer, subtler and more concise interpretation than would be possible through literal language and with the use of scientific terminology of art history.

The author of "Rubens' Women" not only wrote about a dozen poems that can be located within the above definition of *ekphrasis* as a genre of expression, but also spoke out openly about her way of understanding the possibilities of description of works of art. In one of a series of short sketches called *Lektury nadobowiązkowe* [Optional Reading], while discussing the book by Aleksandra Ołędzka-Frybesowa *Z Paryża w przeszłość* (1973), she gives praise to the value of literary description, even though we live in the age of the ubiquitous visual culture and the possibility of direct access to original works of art:

Even today there exist in literary description certain aspects that have by no means been devalued. First of all, in the description the time passes much slower, if not quite differently. There is room for reflection, far-reaching associations and all the other delights of contemplation... So let's observe whatever is to be observed, let's journey whenever the opportunity arises, let's sightsee as much as possible. But if we sometimes feel sorry that the image on the screen flashes before our eyes never to return, if, while travelling, it suddenly turns out that we have ten minutes to see Van Eyck's altar, or that we cannot see Vermeer for the endless crowds, that tight shoes have spoiled the joy of exploring the Alhambra, let's get the book and return to the staid literary description... Having said that I could now move on to another topic, but I would like to bring up one more advantage of this quiet and honest prose. It is the ability to describe architecture. For if painting can be quite easily described, architecture reluctantly surrenders to words. When capturing spaciousness, we lose the details, and vice versa. And it is horribly difficult to express its mobile immobility. I'm talking, of course, of the treasures of old architecture. (Szymborska 43)<sup>10</sup>

The statement about the relative ease of describing painting in comparison with architecture may seem surprising at first, but we should remember that when the poet said this, she had already written poems such as "Brueghel's Two Monkeys," "Rubens' Women" or "A Byzantine Mosaic," all dedicated to the interpretation of pictures. And "Clochard," in which she decided not to describe the Notre-Dame Cathedral in the belief that"

<sup>10</sup> Szymborska, W. *Lektury nadobowiązkowe. Część druga*. Kraków 1981. 43.

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

(not built, no, rather  
played upon a lute)

Even the supplicatory sigh: “save me, sacred folly of description!” did not help in this task. Here the poet truly abandoned *ekphrasis* as impossible, unable to even finish the sentence:

in a Paris like —  
in a Paris which — (Szyborska 25)<sup>11</sup>

And, as we remember, instead of describing Gothic architecture, decided to speak about the tramp sleeping in the garden outside the walls of the Cathedral in a pose reminiscent of medieval sculptures found upon tombs.

Belief in the visualizing power of the word is not always as unwavering in Szyborska's texts as it is in the discussion of Ołędzka-Frybesowa's book. A little earlier in *Optional Reading*, when mentioning the release of an album with reproductions of Vermeer's works (1970), the poet wrote:

To describe Vermeer's paintings with words is a futile task. A much better means of expression would be music for a string quartet, with two violins, a bassoon and a harp. (Szyborska 33)<sup>12</sup>

Emerging here is a sort of private hierarchy of arts, in which Szyborska seems to place music at the highest position, because, after all, even the indescribable beauty of Notre-Dame is not in the fact that it was built, but “rather played upon a lute.” However, when writing further on Vermeer, the poet grants art historians the right to attempt an effort to create a verbal description, “as such is their vocation and profession.” (n.b. this type of *ekphrasis* is called critical by scholars, to differentiate it from literary *ekphrasis*<sup>13</sup>). Szyborska herself immediately makes use of the right of description granted to art historians, but mainly in order to enter into a dispute with an author writing about Vermeer, one whose interpretations did not convince the poet. She ends her essay with two miniature ekphrases, of which I will quote the second one because of its polemical vigor:

I look and it all seems wrong. I can see the miraculous light of day touching different kinds of matter: the human skin, the silk of robes, the chair's upholstery and the whitewashed wall; a miracle that Vermeer repeats constantly, but ever in new versions and with fresh glare. Where is that coldness and alienation? What would those even refer to? The woman puts her hands on the spinet, as if she wanted to play a passage, perhaps for fun or to recall it. She turns her head towards us with a pretty half-smile on a not very comely face. In that smile there is thoughtfulness and a pinch of maternal indulgence. And so she has looked at us, including the critics, for three hundred years. (Szyborska 34)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Szyborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Szyborska, W. *Lektury nadobowiązkowe*. Kraków 1981. 33.

<sup>13</sup> The difference between literary and critical ekphrases, introduced by M. Rifaterre is discussed by A. Dziadek in the essay “Problem *ekphrasis* – dwa Widoki Delft (Adam Czerniawski i Adam Zagajewski)” *Teksty Drugie* 2000 no. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Szyborska, W. *Lektury nadobowiązkowe*. Kraków 1981. 34.

This trust in the word and in poetry, expressed directly in the above sketches, and culminating in the poem “Radość pisania” [The Joy of Writing], although always counterpointed by a slight shadow of irony, is present in all of Szymborska's poetic ekphrases. Let us now briefly review the poems that can be included in this genre, starting with the most striking and undeniable examples. “Brueghel's Two Monkeys” and “The People on the Bridge” are texts that could illustrate a dictionary definition of *ekphrasis*. The first includes the exact title of the painting and the artist's name together with a brief, but extremely precise description of the background and the two monkeys. Its interpretative framework is a nightmare in which one needs to retake the matriculation examination. The poet decodes the message of the painting as a bitterly ironic accusation of cruelty, known from her other poems, such as “Małpa” [Monkey], “Tarsjusz” [Tarsier], and “Tortury” [Tortures].

In “The People on the Bridge” the description of what is in the painting is again concise and detailed at the same time, the name of the painter, Hiroshige, appears in the text, and the identity of the specific work can be found in the English collection of Szymborska's poems, *People on a Bridge*, translated and published by Adam Czerniawski, which reproduces on its cover the Japanese artist's color woodcut from the British Museum's collection, entitled “Ohashi Bridge in the Rain.”<sup>15</sup> Here, too, the precise description of the image is not an end in itself, but a means to formulate a useful reflection on the artist's victory over time, a reflection similar to that which is found in the final sentences of “The Joy of Writing”:

The joy of writing.  
The power of preserving.  
Revenge of a mortal hand. (Szymborska 63)<sup>16</sup>

In Szymborska's other ekphrases we can no longer as surely identify a particular work as a prototype for the description. In the case of “Miniatura średniowieczna” [A Medieval Miniature] critics cite as the probable source of inspiration “Matins” painted by the Limbourg brothers for the Duke de Berry, except that the poem depicts a scene more or less corresponding to the two miniatures “July” and “August” with the addition of elements not present there. (Kwiatkowski 356, Ligęza 179)

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

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

<sup>15</sup> Czerniawski In a translator's note thanks Richard Edgcumbe for his help in identifying which of the color woodcuts by Hiroshige Utagawa was the inspiration for the poem. (Cf. W. Szymborska *People on a bridge. Poems*, introduced and translated by A. Czerniawski, London–Boston 1996. xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Szymborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 63.

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

And not even the eaglest of eyes  
could spy even the tiniest of gallows —  
nothing casts the slightest shadow of a doubt.

Thus they proceed most pleasantly  
through this feudalest of realisms.

This same, however, has seen to the scene's balance:  
it has given them their Hell in the next frame. (Szyborska 199, 201)<sup>17</sup>

I think that these absent elements, drawn from a “second picture,” could have been found by the poet in a much later cycle called “Seasons” by another favorite painter of hers, whose style creates a clear counterweight to the sweetness of Limbourg brothers’ miniatures, namely Pieter Brueghel the Elder. In “A Medieval Miniature” the most important means of characterizing the style of painting is the stylization of language: the humorously treated archaism and the word-building experiments with forms of superlatives, which probably would have been appreciated by Gombrowicz, the author of *Trans-Atlantyk*:

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

...  
all chivalry and rivalry,  
so if the first is fearsome of countenance,  
the next one strives to be more daunting still,  
and if he prances on a bay steed  
the third will prance upon a bayer,  
and all twelve hooves dance glancingly  
atop the most wayside of daisies. (Szyborska 199)

In several other poems can be found a synthetic characterization of style, rather than reference to a specific, individual work. In an interview, the poet said:

“I was asked ... which of Rubens’ paintings inspired me to write “Rubens’ Women.” Of course there is no such painting. It is a description of the style” (Szyborska 96).<sup>18</sup>

It seems that a similar situation can be found in “Mozaika bizantyjska” [A Byzantine Mosaic]. Yet even in those ekphrases where the depicted work can be identified with certainty, or at least very high degree of probability, Szyborska’s poems direct the attention of a reader through specific elements toward the impression of style as a whole. In “Rubens’ Women,” the description of a painting which does not exist, but is still most “probable” in terms of subject and style, can serve not

<sup>17</sup> Szyborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 199,201.

<sup>18</sup> *Powrót do źródeł. Rozmowa z Wisławą Szyborską*, in: K. Nastulanka *Sami o sobie. Rozmowy z pisarzami i uczonymi*, Warszawa 1975, p. 306; qtd. in J. Grądział *Świat sztuki...*, p. 96.



only to characterize the painter, but also to juxtapose the two types of femininity, or rather two different ways of presenting the female body in art. One is precisely the lush sensuality of full, baroque shapes, relying on physiology, the other an ascetic spirituality of slim, fleeting, bird-like women of the Middle Ages, in whose presentation the poet finds a surprising foreshadowing of the contemporary worship of the slender figure of movie stars:

The thirteenth century would have given them golden haloes.  
The twentieth, silver screens.  
The seventeenth, alas, holds nothing for the unvoluptuous. (Szymborska 35)<sup>19</sup>

The same opposition emerges in “A Byzantine Mosaic” where the ascetic ideal of early medieval carnality, modestly hidden under a loose and rigid garment is contrasted with the nudity of a baby whose beauty is that of baroque putto and clearly belongs among “Rubens’ Women”:

Pink and shameless as a piglet,  
plump and merry, verily,  
all chubby wrists and ringlets came he (85,87)

“A Byzantine Mosaic” is comprised wholly of dialogue. It might seem a violation of the rules of *ekphrasis* which relies completely on description; however, some features of mosaic-style representations from the time of the late Empire and some elements of Byzantine culture are perfectly depicted not only through the attribution in the title, but also thanks to the archaic stylization of language, appropriate vocabulary and epithets. Wojciech Ligęza convincingly showed the presence of slightly humorous stylization which recalls the lovers’ exchanges in “Song of Songs” and the subtext of such knowledge about the life of the Byzantines as can be gained for example from *Secret History* by Procopius of Caesarea (Ligęza 184-6). We can guess that the imperial couple do not neglect their marital duties, since at the beginning of the conversation they assure each other of mutual admiration for their attractiveness, and since there is a fruit of their relationship: a newborn son. The dialogue of the spouses allows us to also draw conclusions about the mentality of the era. The model of physical beauty is clearly ascetic; it assumes shyness and fear of nudity, as in the case of the thirteenth-century painting contrasted with Baroque presentation in the poem about Rubens.

The subject of the imperial couple’s conversation: the birth of unexpectedly plump baby reinforces the impression that we are not dealing with an exact *ekphrasis* of the mosaic depicting the Empress Theodora and the Emperor Justinian together with their accompanying retinue in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna. However, the humorously pathetic names –Theotropia and Theodendron – and their “godly dignity” make the mosaics of San Vitale one of the possible sources of inspiration. The hieratic stiffness of appearance and behavior suggested in the poem reflects the type

<sup>19</sup> Szymborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997: 35.

of silhouettes presented in Byzantine mosaics that Ravenna is famous for. Therefore a minor detail in Lięża's otherwise thorough investigation might be corrected: “

The association of women's palms with palm leaves probably refers to the famous mosaics in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna (sixth century), presenting the retinue of the Empress Theodora” (184).

No palm leaves can be found in the mosaic of Theodora, nor in that of Justinian, but they are a characteristic and frequently repeated element in the mosaics of another church in Ravenna, namely San Apolinar Nuovo. If these are indeed the source of inspiration for the poet, we are dealing with a cross-contamination of several works of art, analogous to the case of synthetic characterization of Rubens' style or the presentation of medieval miniatures.

The landscape with trees, a path which “undoubtedly reaches its goal,” a peasant woman and a house, which is shown in the poem “Pejzaż” [Landscape], could have come from the brush of one of the Dutch masters. Lięża's findings indicate that the subject of *ekphrasis* here is Meindert Hobbema's painting from the National Gallery in London “The Road to Middelharnis” (1689). The description in the poem indeed corresponds to a number of details in the painting which is known as an example of perfectly balanced and symmetrical composition, in which the artist “has achieved great level of expression, conveying a desire for escape and the poetry of infinity” (Gennaille 98).<sup>20</sup> The first lines of the poems pretend to be descriptive, but soon turn out to be the beginning of a monologue delivered by a modern woman, suddenly embodied in the figure painted in the picture. At the same time she addresses her man who remained in the present time and is standing in front of the painting. Her monologue includes two points of view, as in the trick of dependent speech, when the speaker in the same sentence combines the mentality of a seventeenth-century peasant with the intellectual distance of a contemporary woman. The idea which can only be realized in literary work: that the viewer of the painting “enters” into it and identifies with the painted figure, at the same time retaining the ability to talk about it to another viewer standing in front of it serves as a reflection on the boundary between life and art, past and present, as well as on the sense of strangeness that can suddenly come between people who are close to each other, and invasive feeling as if they were separated by centuries.

“Fetysz płodności z paleolitu” [A Palaeolithic Fertility Fetish], so far Szymborska's only poem describing a sculpture, relates to yet another concept of femininity. Although details presented in the poem correspond exactly to the appearance of the famous Venus of Willendorf, the poet decides not to use this name for the character, instead calling her the Great Mother, a name from ancient fertility cults.<sup>21</sup> This primal femininity is also abundant in shape and presented exclusively in a physical and impersonal dimension as we have seen in the *ekphrasis* of Rubens, yet its

<sup>20</sup> Gennaille, R. *Słownik malarstwa holenderskiego i flamandzkiego*, trans. E. Maliszewska, H. Secomska, Warszawa 1975. 98. Cf. also M. Praz *Mnemozyne. Rzecz o powinowactwie literatury i sztuk plastycznych*, trans. W. Jekiel, Warszawa 1981. 224.

<sup>21</sup> Grądziel, J. *Świat sztuki*. 99.

meaning does not refer to sexual desire, but to the nature's power of motherhood, its elemental life-giving force. In the description of the figurine we encounter the style of everyday speech, simple phrases typical of spoken language and characteristic of someone who focuses on a few basic categories outlined by a narrow horizon of everyday life, without resorting to thinking about something as useless as beauty, decoration, ornament.

In this poem, as in "A Medieval Miniature," "A Byzantine Mosaic" and "Landscape," there is a playfully ironic distanced attitude to the convention that appears between the image and the speaker as something palpable, and thus complicates full identification; an ironic duality, noticeable at the level of style. In ekphrases which refer to works from the Paleolithic period, the Byzantine Empire, the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century, the poet uses different means of language archaization and customizes the choice of vocabulary, but at the same time maintains a clear style and vocabulary of the twentieth-century point of view. The convention of the past is indeed clear and in this sense acceptable from the perspective of the primary consciousness of the subject in the poem, but it makes it impossible to approach art in the same way as in the case of "Brueghel's Two Monkeys" or "The People on the Bridge," where the sense of the poem was identical with the meaning read from the painting.

Similarly, this identifying, rather than ironic, attitude towards Rembrandt's art can be found in the poem "Pamięć nareszcie" [Memory Finally], which is not a properly *ekphrasis*, but uses elements of its poetics. The theme of the poem is a dream of dead parents, whose vision in a dream echoes the style, theme and coloring techniques of Rembrandt's portraits in interiors. The whole lyrical monologue, its reaching into memory, is inscribed in the depiction of imagined scene with the parents sitting at the table, a dreamed up image, which, however, has a strangely strong relationship with painting, since the awakening is both touching the real world and "a chiseled picture-frame."

We find *ekphrasis* in Szymborska's work not only in relation to traditional forms of high art. The poet has expanded its use to the phenomenon now appearing in the modern, technicised culture, and having a utilitarian, rather than artistic character. Such decision is characteristic for the imagination of the poet, who can creatively see poetic themes even in areas foreign to literature, such as scientific inquiry or the most common aspects of everyday life. In fact, Szymborska has applied the venerable form of *ekphrasis* to photography, and not just the purely artistic kind, but also to atelier portraits, press photography and private amateur photography.<sup>22</sup> The clearest example here is the poem "Znieruchomienie" [Frozen Motion], carefully describing the picture of Isadora Duncan standing in the atelier in an awkward, stiff

<sup>22</sup> The descriptions of photographs have already been pointed out by J. Faryno ("Semiologiczne. . .", p. 137), but he incorrectly contrasted them with descriptions of paintings and decided that the poet sees photographs as having exclusively negative value. A much more nuanced interpretation of the poems about photographs was carried out by W. Ligęza (*O poezji...* 260-269).

pose. The theme of the poem is the contrast between the mundane details of a star's everyday life (a corset) and what was the legendary about her art – the freedom and lightness of a dancer's movement.

The poem “Pierwsza fotografia Hitlera” [Hitler's First Photograph] presents a much starker contrast between the tone of a photographic image and what we know about the life of a famous person. The wording of the title meets the requirements of the poetics of *ekphrasis* exactly, as the poem contains a number of details which allow us to relate it to a specific, named object (though not one that can be defined as a work of art). The subject of the description is the first known photograph of Hitler.<sup>23</sup> The future Führer is one year old. At the bottom of the picture there is information about the photo studio: “J.F. Klinger, Braunau, Stadtgraben.”

Sh-h-h, let's not start crying, sugar.  
The camera will click from under that black hood.

The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunau.  
And Braunau is a small, but worthy town — (Szyborska 269)<sup>24</sup>

The photograph is usually reproduced together with the newspaper section containing the news of the birth of Alois Hitler's son, published in the society pages of local newspaper on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1889, so two weeks after birth. This, rather than the photograph itself, gives rise to memories of his birth:

Precious little angel, mommy's sunshine, honey bun.  
While he was being born, a year ago,  
there was no dearth of signs on the earth and in the sky: (269)

The poem parodies the mythical pattern of the narrative of the birth of a hero accompanied by extraordinary circumstances, since these “signs” are in the style of petty-bourgeois kitsch:

spring sun, geraniums in windows,  
the organ-grinder's music in the yard,  
a lucky fortune wrapped in rosy paper.  
Then just before the labor his mother's fateful dream.  
A dove seen in a dream means joyful news — (269)

Perhaps this style hides the belief in the banality of evil? The boy in the photograph is “like the tots in every other family album” (269). There is no description of his appearance in the poem. The poem is a kind of sentimental and adulatory monologue about the baby and to the baby just before having a picture taken by a photographer in a provincial town. The ironic style parodies the chattering enthusiasm, full of diminutives, and the names of baby accessories. Only in the last three lines of the

<sup>23</sup> Reproduced e.g. In K. Grünberg *Hitler prywatnie*, Toruń. Troja or in R.Ch. Brooken *Adolf Hitler. Wzlot i upadek tyrana*, trans. J. Kalinowski, Gdańsk 1994.

<sup>24</sup> Szyborska, Wisława, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, and Clare Cavanagh. *Nothing Twice: Selected Poems*. Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1997. 269.

poem the voice of a hidden narrator, speaking from a different historical perspective, breaks through. This narrator is already acquainted with the little boy's future deeds and therefore can note that at the time of that picture:

No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps.  
A history teacher loosens his collar  
and yawns over homework. (271)

The two discussed poems about photographs talk about the crossing of boundaries of time. This theme, which we already know Szymborska's previous ekphrases, also dominates the two descriptions of photographs from the latest volume. *Chwila* [Moment] includes two texts which already in the title indicate the subject of description: "Negatyw" [Negative] and "Fotografia z 11 września" [A photograph from September 11]. The former describes a negative image of an anonymous, private photograph of a man sitting at a table in the garden and is built on the principle of antithesis. The opposition of light and dark areas which on the negative is the reverse image of reality shows the contrast that exists between the world of the dead and the living. At the level of language the reversal is present in the modifications to fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions ("a ghost/ trying to summon the living," "offer him questions to any answer," "life/ the storm before the quiet"). The personal tone of the monologue, addressed to a close person now dead, bears similarity to that of the adjacent "Słuchawka" [Receiver] or "Pożegnanie widoku" [Parting with a View] from the volume "Koniec i początek" [The End and the Beginning], which makes us read it as an elegy.

"A photograph from September 11" describes a well-known press photograph, showing small silhouettes of people jumping from the burning tower, one of the countless images of the terrorist attack in New York. Stylistically speaking, this is not a description of an object, but a dynamic unfolding narration of what is happening. The reflection in this *ekphrasis* once again returns to the topic of time being frozen in an image. This time, however, it is not accompanied by the confident, even triumphant note known from "The Joy of Writing" or "The People on the Bridge." Instead there is horror, similar to the presentation of the last moment before the explosion of a bomb in "Terrorysta, on patrzy" [The Terrorist, He's Watching].

The characteristic feature of all of Szymborska's ekphrases is in my opinion the fact that their presentation of a selected work of art is not an end in itself, but a means to another end, which is some reflection stimulated by the original work. The descriptive element in ekphrases is always dependent on the interpretative idea which allows us to say something interesting about the problems which interest the poet also in her other works, thematically unrelated to the aesthetic qualities of any painting. These problems are mainly time, the creative power of an artist, human cruelty throughout history and different ways of understanding femininity. Ultimately, these ekphrases say more about the imagination of the poet than about the works of art they depict. However, they say it differently than in poems where the space between the poet and her readers is not occupied by any painting, sculpture of photograph serving as an intermediary.

## Czesław Miłosz and the Polish School of Poetry

Finally, there is one more, this time half-facetious, argument for the vital role of ekphrases in Szymborska's works. The evidence of their inspirational power is for me the fact that another author wrote a poem, an *ekphrasis*, which as in Szymborska's case is dedicated to a photograph. And as in Szymborska's poems it is not simply a description, but has been formulated as a living monologue addressed to the portrayed person. The level of detail and the accuracy of the description (it mentions the time indicated on the watch on the wrist resting next to a cup of coffee!), as well as the direct reference to the title and author of described image make it a model example of the genre. I am of course referring to the poem by Agneta Pleijel entitled "Do fotografii Wisławy Szymborskiej, wykonanej przez Joannę Helander" [To the Photograph of Wisława Szymborska taken by Joanna Helander].<sup>25</sup>

*Translation: Paweł Pyrka*

---

<sup>25</sup> Polish translation by Leon Neuger along with the reproduction of Joanna Helander's photograph can be found In: *Radość czytania Szymborskiej...*, 5-6.