Szymborska as Commentator on the 20th Century

Today we will look at some poems that address the more serious side of 20th century life. Some of these poems refer to specific historical events or figures; others reflect more general topics such as terrorism, war, or torture. Most of these poems are more serious in tone than other Szymborska poems we’ve looked at; some of them are graphic or disturbing. However, some of them maintain a light or even jolly tone—think about how Szymborska uses irony to make us think about things in unexpected ways.

1. By yourself, read the following poems (and the notes on the back of this page):

“Starvation Camp Near Jaslo” (42)

“Vietnam” (90)

“Written in a Hotel” (91-93)

“The Terrorist, He’s Watching” (154-155)

“In Broad Daylight” (192-193)

“Hitler’s First Photograph” (196-197)

“Tortures” (202-203)

“An Opinion on the Question of Pornography” (208-209)

“The End and the Beginning” (228-229)

“Hatred” (230-231)

“Reality Demands” (232-233)

“Photograph from September 11” (back page)

2. Choose one of the poems. Take notes on it/mark it up, considering the following questions:

* How do you respond emotionally to this poem/how does it make you feel?
* Does the poem refer to a specific historical event/place/moment? If so, what is it? If not, what general aspect of 20th century human experience does it reflect? In either case, what is it saying about humanity, about life, about the world?
* What is the tone of the poem?
* What style elements or techniques create that tone or communicate ideas about the subject? (You might consider elements such as syntax, word choice, imagery, form, irony, point of view/perspective, use of fantasy/imagination/alternate reality…)

3. Repeat #2 for as many poems as you have time for.

NOTES ON SELECTED POEMS

“Starvation Camp Near Jaslo”: During World War II, Jews were taken from Jaslo, Poland, to a concentration camp at Srebrenica, but this poem more likely refers to a camp in the same region where Russian soldiers were held in open air/exposure to elements and starved to death by Nazis.

“Written in a Hotel”: Kyoto was originally one of the cities being considered as a target for the atomic bomb in World War II. It is said that Henry L. Stimson, U.S. Secretary of War, having spent his honeymoon in Kyoto forty years earlier, was so attached to Kyoto and so aware of its cultural and artistic significance that he insisted on it being dropped from the target list and actually wept in a high-level government meeting. Kyoto was removed from the list. Nonetheless, Stimson was a proponent of the use of atomic weapons against Japan and was more or less in charge of the Manhattan Project and the decision to use atomic weapons, which ultimately targeted Hirshoma and Nagasaki.

“In Broad Daylight”: See footnote below the poem. Baczynski was a member of the resistance against the Nazi occupation of Poland; he was killed by German sniper fire during the Warsaw Uprising at the age of 23, so he never lived to become the old man Szymborska imagines in this poem. (The 1944 Warsaw Uprising, not to be confused with the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, was a 63-day effort by the Polish resistance Home Army to liberate Warsaw from the Nazis; it was timed to coincide with the Red Army’s approach to Warsaw, but the Red Army stopped short and the Home Army was ultimately forced to capitulate.)

“Hitler’s First Photograph”: Adolf Hitler was born in Braunau am Inn, Austria (then Austria-Hungary), in 1889. Vocabulary notes: An L.L.D. is a person who holds a doctoral degree in law. A Burgermeister is similar to a mayor. “-chen” is an affectionate diminutive suffix in German, so “heartchen” would mean something like “little heart.” “Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunau” would essentially be the address of the house.

“An Opinion on the Question of Pornography”: It is helpful to remember that Communist Poland lived under strict censorship laws and heavy suppression of the free exchange of ideas. This poem isn’t about pornography!

“Reality Demands”: All the places listed in this poem are locations of battles, bombings, or other conflicts, from ancient Rome to the 20th century.