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In the Shadows of Russia

Wisława Szymborska and the Demystification of Poetry

The work of Wisława Szymborska, a Nobel Prize winning poet from Poland is highly regarded for many reasons, but one of the most important is her employment of demystification, which is a throughline running through much of her work. The official Nobel Prize website lists her prize as having been awarded

> "for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality." (Unknown)

Szymborska's poetry is dedicated to showcasing different aspects of the human condition and she is able to do this in a variety of methods. Whether it is by the employment of mythological figures or through her casual, conversational language, Szymborska is a master of simplicity. Her poetry engages the reader on topics in a way that makes them feel automatically connected to the narratives she is constructing, making all of her work feel incredibly accessible. Szymborska's demystifications are one of the most notable aspects of her work and bring a great deal of character to her voice throughout her entire bibliography.

Szymborska seems fascinated by Greek mythology, and employs it in many of her poems. What is most interesting about this is the way in which she describes the recognizable elements of the mythology, as she turns them into more modernized, demystified versions of

themselves. Two notable poems which employ this brand of demystification are “Interview with Atropos” and “On the Banks of the Styx”. As may be gleaned from the titles, these poems concern a figure and location of Greek mythology respectively, but they treat them in a manner that is irreverent, not like gods or places of power but rather working professionals and corporate environments, making godhood a job like any other. Take, for example, the treatment of Atropos in her titular interview. Despite her identity as one of the three Fates, in charge of cutting the string of life, the interviewer treats her like any other person with any other job. She is a conversation partner, someone who is regarded as a working professional. The interviewer questions whether Atropos receives awards for her work, treating the business of ending lives through preordained fate like a job with awards to encourage the workers. And Atropos is dismissive of this, criticizing the idea of a diploma as being too like something you would expect your hairdresser to have. One would think this would disconnect from the theme of demystification, but Atropos in this exchange reads more as an office worker who thinks their job is more important than that of a customer service employee, not a god offended with being compared to a mortal.

> But you’re not given commendations,
>
> orders, trophies, cups, awards?
>
> Maybe just a framed diploma?
>
> *Like at the hairdresser’s? No, thank you.* (Szymborska 73)

Atropos is also shown to be a workaholic, never taking breaks — which when thought about to a wider extent feels like almost opposition to the demystification of her as goddess. She is able to work non-stop, something no mere mortal could do. But this too is demystifying, for although

she is a never-ending arbiter of death, it is not described in a grandiose way, but rather as the lifestyle of someone too dedicated to their office job.

> You don't get bored or tired,
>
> maybe drowsy working nights? Really, not the slightest?
>
> With no holidays, vacations, weekends,
>
> no quick breaks for cigarettes?
>
> *We'd fall behind. I don't like that.* (Szymborska 71)

If you think about it in terms of the metaphor, of course Atropos could never take breaks, because death takes no breaks. But there are many ideas mentioned in this section that feel like ways in which Atropos is being shown as a working professional instead of a goddess. Perhaps one of the best demystifications is the mention of cigarette breaks, a concept that feels very human, not at all godlike. The idea of drowsiness is also very useful in demystifying Atropos, it feels like another very human concept. Of course, both of those are coming from the interviewer and not Atropos herself, perhaps indicating that the demystification is in some way stemming from the format of the poem as an interview. A mortal is interviewing Atropos in the same way she would interview any other mortal, and this is serving to make Atropos seem less like a goddess. The demystification is not only from the way Atropos speaks, but the way she is spoken to and the things suggested by the interviewer.

"On the Banks of the Styx" shows the Underworld as a place of bureaucracy, fully industrialized and treated like any other place of business. Much like the modernization and demystification of Atropos, the Greek Underworld is made into an example of business and hard work instead of one of godly power. Instead of a simple ferryman waiting to row you over to the

other side, there are a great many workers and different docking platforms, a fully outfitted, state-of-the-art complex on the river Styx to service the dead to their various locations.

Floodlights will reveal
piers built of reinforced concrete and steel,
and hovercrafts whose beelike buzz resounds
where Charon used to ply his wooden oar.
Mankind has multiplied, has burst its bounds:
nothing, sweet soul, is as it was before. (Szymborska 230)

As a whole, the Underworld is treated as business, remarkably similar to many ways in which methods of transportation are handled in the real world — it is in many ways evocative of the experience of being in an airport. The mysticism of the place is almost entirely taken away by how over-populated and industrialized it is. There is an overwhelming feeling to the poem, almost as if the scale of the operation being run out of the Underworld is standing right in front of the reader in all its unshaken energy. And there's even a feeling of overcrowdedness at the end, with the unknown narrator listing well known locations to someone already familiar with the Greek Underworld as overbooked and unavailable.

Now Tartarus (let me pull up the file)
is overbooked, too — no way we could stretch it.
Cramped, crumpled souls all dying to get out,
one last half drop of Lethe in my phial… (Szymborska 231)

In this way, the Underworld is made to look like old news, something that once held great power and now, because of the great number of people who have joined the ranks of the deceased. Tartarus, the great pit of hell, is too full to hold anyone else, overused and easily dismissed. The

narrator pulls up a file on it as well, a fascinating way to incorporate the bureaucratic nature of the Underworld in this poem. Lethe is also an interesting mention, the great river of the Greek Underworld which was meant to take the memories of the dead. Although there is not a drop left in the phial that the narrator holds, the use of a phial to hold this legendary river is also a demystifying choice. Something so powerful being carried around by an employee of the Underworld is a great way to turn it into a more casual item, especially if it has been all used up.

The language of Szymborska's poetry is another demystified aspect of her work. Although much poetry is built on overly flowery language, Szymborska prefers to take a more casual approach, writing her poetry in a conversational tone which engages the reader and makes the poetry feel very accessible. For example, in "Interview with Atropos," the poem is structured like an interview, but one that is relaxed and a conversation, instead of overly formal. Both the interviewer (implied to be Szymborska herself) and Atropos use everyday language, talking as if catching up over a cup of coffee rather than in a professional interview setting.

Still you, Madame, hold the scissors.

And since I do, I put them to good use.

I see that even as we speak…

I'm a Type A, that's my nature.

Although the title of Madame feels a bit formal of an address, the way in which the narrator and Atropos discuss is clearly more relaxed than a quite professional interview. The narrator is casual in her addressing of Atropos' behavior, trailing off on her question about Atropos working as they speak instead of fully detailing the actions she is taking. The sort of stopping and starting of the conversation makes it feel like an exchange between friends, and Atropos' response is also

evocative of a very accessible way of speaking. Calling herself Type A isn't the type of language that one necessarily expects from the personification of death, but it is a term which makes the poem feel set in modernity, easy for the reader to connect to.

In "On the Banks of the Styx" the entire poem is written as an address to the reader by an employee of the Underworld. The tone is less casual and more instructional, but still uses simple language throughout the entire text. One of the ways in which this is done is through the use of parentheses, which makes the poem seem more like a direct address then the general one of many poems.

> As soon as Charon reads the prepared text
> over the speakers, let the nymphs affix
> your name badge and transport you to the banks.
> (The nymphs? They fled your woods and joined the ranks
> of personnel here.) (Szymborska 230)

This is the first instance of parentheses in the poem, and they are used as a useful aside to the reader. Although obviously a demystification of Greek mythology, as previously discussed, is clear in this quote, there is also a very pleasant connection between the narrator and the reader established. It is as if the narrator is responding to an unasked question by using the parentheses to describe why the nymphs are working in the Underworld. The asides continue throughout the poem and always feel like a really good way to convey the conversational tone of the narrative.

Another example of this casual, conversational language is in "On Death, Without Exaggeration." The poem talks about death extensively, but it is in a very relaxed manner, showcasing it as a simple conversation topic and not becoming mired in purple prose. From the very beginning, the poem is uncomplicated in its descriptions.

It can’t take a joke,

find a star, make a bridge.

It knows nothing about weaving, mining, farming,

building ships, or baking cakes. (Szymborska 246)

Instead of Szymborska’s language rendering death incapable of great and complex feats she sticks to very simple, everyday topics. Common employments are what she lists, instead of greater concepts of the human condition. The list itself is also part of this demystified language of poetry, not pausing to spiral out into great descriptions of each of its mentions, but rather staying in a more straightforward realm of simply stating and moving on.

These three poems also have another very notable demystification in common. Throughout all of them are themes that are very common in Wisława Szymborska’s work, those being the themes of death. Death is greatly demystified throughout Szymborska’s work, and the poet herself is greatly fascinated with the topic. These three poems are very wonderful examples of the demystification of death, turning it into a casual, conversational topic just like the rest. Take “Interview with Atropos,” to start. Atropos’ work is written about as a very bureaucratic thing, almost darting around the exact specifics of death and yet still discussing and lighting on causes. Atropos’ casual attitude towards her work is really fascinating as well, she doesn’t regard it as grand but rather as any other job, listing her sisters’ jobs as well to show how they also have an effect of death as a whole.

Clotho spins the thread of life,

but the thread is delicate

and easily cut.

Lachesis determines its length with her rod.

They are no angels. (Szymborska 71)

This sharing of supposed blame also feels like demystification in effect. Death is not only held by one all powerful figure, but shared between many who all take part in the causation in some way. Another step towards the demystification of death in this poem is the mention of mortals as the assistants to Atropos.

Who, if anyone, assists you?

A tidy little paradox — you mortals.

Assorted dictators, untold fanatics.

Not that they need me to nudge them.

They're eager to get down to work. (Szymborska 73)

The partial placing of responsibility onto those who will one day die themselves creates this distinction between Atropos as goddess and Atropos as merely a coworker of those who wish to cause death, who will strike down their fellow humans for power. And she is in many ways portrayed as more benevolent than them, for she simply cuts the thread when it must be cut, she does not seek to end lives earlier than need be. So in these ways, Atropos is shown as both a bringer and executioner of death, but she is simply doing it as a job. It is merely employment like any other, and not indeed godlike power, because the mortals are helping, ending lives by their own hands.

"On the Banks of the Styx" follows as another demystification of death with a clear source, since it is based on the Greek Underworld, something that feels like a clear connection to themes of death. As with Atropos, the narrator in this poem seems to view death as a bureaucracy, treating it as something that different people have different specializations in

regards to and explaining to the reader the way in which the business of the Underworld operates.

Among the gods it's Hermes, my dear soul,
who makes all prophecies and estimations
when revolutions and wars take their toll —
our boats, of course, require reservations. (Szymborska 230)

Although there is a mention of prophecy here, on the whole this feels like another demystification of death, as it is turned into something that can be charted and estimated, in a similar way to the profits of a business. The use of reservations as the term in reference to entrance to the Underworld further demystifies, after all, it is making the afterlife sound similar to a hotel. It's presumable that every person has a reservation for the specific time of their death, but it is also interesting to think about this in the terms of the aforementioned over-crowding — death is so commonplace that it must now circle back around to being something to keep exclusive. In addition to the industrialization of the Greek Underworld in the poem, there is also the idea of the expansion of humankind being in some ways responsible for the way the Underworld has had to expand. After all, with so many more people, all of whom will someday die, there is a need to demystify death, to accept it as simply another boring and bureaucratic aspect of life. It is something that happens to everyone, and because of this it is something that can be manufactured, turned into something repetitive and droll.

Safe and efficient transportation (millions
of souls served here, all races, creeds, and sexes)
requires urban planning: hence pavilions,
warehouses, dry docks, and office complexes. (Szymborska 230)

In this way, the industrialization of the Underworld is turned into a responsibility of the mortals, something they have built out of the overwhelming toll of death in the world as a whole. The normalization of the Underworld expanding is also the normalization of death. Death is such a benign and uninteresting concept in this poem that it becomes demystified entirely, making the Underworld seem entirely like a commerce hub.

"On Death, Without Exaggeration" is perhaps the best example of demystified death out of these selected poems. The central conceit of the poem is the dismissal of death as an all powerful force, and this is accomplished through a multitude of methods. One of the most fascinating of these methods is the use of "it" as the pronoun in reference to death. Despite being the topic of the poem, death is only referred to by name once, being called "it" the rest of the time. Because of this, there is a natural disrespect to the way death is seen in the poem.

> It can't even get the things done
> that are part of its trade:
> dig a grave,
> make a coffin,
> clean up after itself. (Szymborska 246)

Death is incompetent, demystified through its inability to operate properly, not even worth being addressed by name. It has a simple task which it cannot branch out from, and is disregarded as a failure at the surrounding tasks. Rending death incapable of branching out from its singular task into the connected themes feels like a really great way to take away from its mystical power. And in the continued use of "it" for the address of death, it becomes something unworthy of note. There is also an idea in this poem of death not being the end.

> Whoever claims that it's omnipotent

is himself living proof

that it's not.

There's not life

that couldn't be immortal

if only for a moment.

Death

always arrives by that very moment too late. (Szymborska 247)

Death being omnipotent is easily dismissed in this poem, shown to be untrue. For if death is the most powerful force in the world, then no one would be alive. Claiming that death is all powerful is seen as a silly act, not at all likely to be true. Life being momentarily immortal is a really wonderful way to demystify death, making it into something not of note, easily stood against even just in small moments. The use of the word immortal stands in contrast to death's presumed omnipotency. Every person is alive in every moment except one, and in those moments when they are alive, they can never die. The one name drop of death in the poem is also formatted fascinatingly, kept on its own line and separated from the rest of the text. Through doing this, it isolates the idea of death in a way, demystifying it by containing it. And the idea that it is always arriving late, simply unable to properly do its job, to stop life from existing is a really wonderfully demystifying conceit.

Throughout all of her work, Szymborska creates a very demystified view of the world, focusing instead on the real and relatable ideas of the world. To Szymborska, mythology and death are simply facets of the world, not meant to be given undue reverence. This serves to make her poetry incredibly easy to understand and connect to, drawing in the reader and making them

feel like they are simply experiencing a conversation, rather than being given an explosion of flowery language and themes. In her Nobel lecture, Szymborska reflected on how poetry related to the world as a whole.

> Granted, in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like "the ordinary world," "ordinary life," "the ordinary course of events" … But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world. (Szymborska)

Ordinary and extraordinary are the same to Szymborska, especially in the world of poetry, where everything is weighted in the same way. There is nothing greater than the other things, no word greater than the other words. And in this way, her poetry demystifies even death, even mythology for death and mythology are no greater than any other thing. They are simply, like Szymborska's casual language, another aspect of life.

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