



PASSWORDS

Teaching Wislawa Szymborska

In Praise of the "I Don't Know"

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So much goes into writing a poem that even the greatest poets have difficulty pinning down its vital elements. As teachers and writers of poetry, we can speculate about them, even try to break them down. But what is that illusive thing that makes a poem leap from the page?

To answer this question we often rely on the fundamentals: lines, stanzas, couplets, repetition, and metaphor. We admonish generalities and embrace details like they were long lost friends. We tutor students to open up sources of inspiration that make poems sing like foolhardy buskers. We discuss poetic sensitivity and mandate that each student see the world as only he or she can see it. But none of this ensures that we are teaching them to write poetry that is bold, adventurous, and close to the bone.

As a teacher, I am particularly troubled by students' weakness for hyperbole. Someone once said that hyperbole is the boldest device in language because it lies without deceiving. Of course, historically speaking, the marriage between poetry and hyperbole has not always yielded bad results. Where would we be if ghosts hadn't driven Shelley's West Wind, or if his winged seeds weren't each like corpses? What if Walt Whitman hadn't heard America singing? We all need to interject an exclamation point once in a while, but more often we use hyperbole not to illustrate but to disguise ourselves. We amplify when we ought to observe. What about the power of suggestion? How can we show our students the beauty of understatement? How do we keep them honest?

For this, there is Wislawa Szymborska, the Polish poet, essayist, and translator. Born in the small town of Kórnik in 1923, Szymborska learned firsthand about the political repercussions of hyperbole. As part of a generation that grew up in the shadow of World War II and Poland's Communist regime, Szymborska and her contemporaries were forbidden to write directly about politics. As a result, Szymborska developed what

critic Frances Padorr Brent calls “an appreciation of silence.” Brent writes: “In Szymborska’s work there is hesitancy and modesty...an emphasis on the difficulty of telling the truth, to get it right, to thread one’s way through a maze of official half-truths.” In 1996, Szymborska won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The author of 16 volumes of poetry, she still lives in a fifth-floor walk-up in Krakow.

The poet Charles Bukowski once said that if you take away a writer’s typewriter all you have left is the mess the writer meant to write down. For Szymborska, this is not the case. Her poems are never sentimental; her intention is never to embellish or obscure. “Under One Small Star” is a kind of *ars poetica* of her humble and guileless approach:

My apologies to the felled tree for the table's four legs.
My apologies to great questions for small answers.
[...]
Bear with me, O mystery of existence, as I pluck the occasional thread
from your train.
[...]
Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words
then labor heavily so that they may seem light.¹

Szymborska believes poets pursue truth by engaging in what she calls the continuous and unutterable, “I don’t know.” In her Nobel Prize speech, Szymborska declared, “Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift that’s absolutely inadequate to boot.” According to Szymborska this declaration of uncertainty “expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended.” In this, she joins a long tradition of poets who engaged in what Keats called *negative capability*, or the state “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

For students, this can be terrifyingly difficult to grasp. In fact, it can be so overwhelming that teachers, writers, and students alike prefer not to acknowledge it at all. We rarely teach our students to embrace what they don’t know, and how to investigate it with subtlety.

TEACHING EXERCISES

To begin engaging students in the process of exploring what they don’t know, teachers need to convince them that clarity and understatement require as much imagination as hyperbole and exaggeration. Szymborska’s work is a perfect starting point. I often bring in her poem “Starvation Camp at Jaslo” to show how instead of describing the blood and guts of thousands of people ravaged by war, Szymborska focuses on the mouth of a single man:

Poets pursue truth through engaging with what Szymborska calls the continuous and unutterable *I don't know*.

On a spit of barbed wire
 a man was swaying.
 They were singing with soil in their mouths. A lovely song
 about the way war hits you right in the heart.
 Write about the silence here.²

In my third and fourth grade classes at P.S. 30 in East Harlem, I tackle hyperbole by confronting it head-on. I begin by writing the word *hyperbole* on the board and asking students if they've ever heard of it. If they tell me they haven't, I ask them if they've ever heard of the Super Bowl. "Of course," they moan. Well, I tell them, hyperbole is kind of like the super bowl of language: it's making a big, showy spectacle out of something that in the end is just another football game. Who likes to listen to someone brag or watch someone show off? It's boring, and worse, it's fake and everyone knows it. By the same token, the fact that something is overstated doesn't necessarily make it poetic.

I encourage my students to write about what they don't know, to address it directly, instead of pretending to a knowledge they don't possess. I show them how Szymborska never offers up neat and tidy solutions to life's mysteries and how some of the greatest poems in literary history have been written on subjects that are confusing and hard to understand. To illustrate this, I bring in Szymborska's "A Speech at the Lost and Found," which remains consistently tentative: "I'm not sure exactly where I left my claws, / who wears my fur, who dwells in my shell." In "Lot's Wife," I ask the students to consider how we trust the narrator because she admits that she is uncertain:

It was then we both glanced back.
 No, no. I ran on.
 [...]
 It's not inconceivable that my eyes were open.
 It's possible I fell facing the city.

I particularly recommend using Szymborska's poem "Pursuit," in which the narrator is on the trail of something or someone she can't name or find:

I have long known their talent for vanishing in time,
 their divine ability to elude grasp by horn, by tail,
 by the hem of a gown billowing in flight.

In the final stanza, the narrator wonders if "they" (or "it") ever existed:

and though it wriggles still,
 and emits a prolonged silence,
 it is but a shadow, too much my own to feel I've reached my goal.

What the narrator was looking for is inside her. “Pursuit” is wonderfully imaginative and seems to be about finding the quiet, understated parts of our selves: “No hubbub, no trumpets, no applause, but still.” After reading the poem and brainstorming about things we consider small and quiet, I ask students to forgo the hubbub and trumpets and write the slowest, tiniest (though not in length), quietest poem they can. I ask them to lead us down a path to the smallest, quietest place they can imagine, pointing out objects, people, sounds, and structures along the way.

In all of its naked splendor and skeletal radiance, Szymborska’s poetry illustrates what it means to be genuine. The courage to write about our thoughts and doubts is a fundamental component to writing poetry that we rarely talk about or teach. We might even rely on clichés and hyperbole—the escape hatches we all use to avoid being honest—to teach these lessons. But we get better at it each day that we acknowledge how little we know and how much there is to write. As Szymborska says in her poem “The Silence of Plants”:

Just ask and I will explain as best I can:
 what it is to see through eyes,
 why my heart beats,
 and how come my body is unrooted.

When we do manage to teach as honestly as we can, and with due respect to the unknown, we are rewarded with poems, such as this one by P.S. 30 fourth grader Naeemah Massey.

The dark room with
 no lights, that makes
 me lonely
 The kids screaming like a
 horror room makes
 me feel lonely
 The light blue
 walls make it
 lonely and empty
 The colors in the
 room make it quiet
 and the trees outside
 seem frozen so that
 makes me feel
 lonely
 The dark sky
 that makes me
 lonely
 Most of the world is
 lonely but just
 doesn't know why

1. Translated by Stanislaw Brananczak and Clare Cavanagh.
 2. Translated by Joanna Trzeciak. Note: All translations in this article are by Trzeciak, unless otherwise indicated.