Brueghel’s Two Monkeys –
a Tiny Painting by Bruegel, a Very Short Poem by Szymborska
and the Biggest Problems of Mankind

Piotr Kołodziej
Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland
pako@up.krakow.pl

Abstract
There is a great power in works of art. Art provides knowledge about human experience, which is not available in another way. Art gives answers to the most important and eternal questions about humanity, even though these answers are never final. Sometimes it happens that works of some artists encourage or provoke a reaction of other artists. Thanks to this in history of culture – across borders of time and space – there lasts a continuous dialogue, a continuous reflection on the essence of human existence.

This text shows a fragment of such a dialogue, in which the interlocutors are a sixteenth-century painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder and a twentieth-century poet and Nobel Prize winner Wisława Szymborska. Szymborska, proposing a masterful interpretation of a tiny painting by Bruegel, poses dramatic questions about human freedom, formulates a poetic response and forces a recipient to reflect on the most important topics.

This text also brings up a question of a word – picture relationship, a problem of translation of visual signs to verbal signs, as well as a problem of translation of poetry from one language to another.

Keywords
literature, painting, word – picture relationship, Wisława Szymborska, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, freedom and enslavement

It is one of the smallest paintings by Peter Bruegel the Elder. Only twenty centimetres by twenty-three, though the artist is more known for works of a bigger format. No people, though very often the author of Massacre of the Innocents paints
crowds. Instead of that, just two monkeys. A view of the port, which is quite dim. And a few birds in the air out of whom only two can be actually clearly seen.

In the whole history of painting it is difficult to find a more inconspicuous painting, which at the same time would be so hard to ignore. There is something about it that draws one’s attention, tells us to take a look and even to wonder why it happens like that. One experiences similar feelings when suddenly realises that they are intensively observed by someone.

A friend of the painter, a famous Flemish geographer and an author of maps, Abraham Ortelius, used to claim that Bruegel’s works contain “always something beyond the painting that one has to understand” (Bruegel 10). In context of this miniature work, the aforementioned remark seems to be especially accurate. The depicted scene has more meaning, and this meaning can be seen only if one looks beyond the picture. An access to this invisible, but embedded in the work, content is possible though only by what we ultimately see in the picture. And this is a strategy which we are going to follow: at first, as much as it is possible, let’s describe a realistic “surface” of the work, and then let’s try “to go deeper.”

A tiny painting by Bruegel

Peter Bruegel the Elder, Two Monkeys, 1562, oil on panel, 20 cm × 23 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.
The work was painted with a great precision and a concern for details. The artist framed the view in such a way that a recipient has an impression of being inside of some enormous building, maybe a fortress situated near the port. We can see how thick and massive the walls are, even though we look from the perspective of quite a dark interior against the light. We can almost feel the cold of the wall, which is actually not much thinner than a height of the window.

The whole space of the painting is clearly divided into two parts. In the foreground, close to the onlooker, as if within a hand’s reach, there are the aforementioned two monkeys, sitting on the windowsill. Even though the work is very small and old (1562), it is easy to recognise that the animals belong to species called red colobus. Obviously a windowsill of some building in a big city is not their natural habitat. Their presence can be associated with the port seen through the window. Somebody must have captured these creatures in Africa and brought them to Europe as an exotic attraction, maybe as an original present for somebody important and rich. One might actually admit that the gift, taking into consideration those times and place, was probably quite attractive. It is not only the fact that they are monkeys, that is, animals coming from exotic countries to which many people would like to travel but only a handful succeeds, but it is also the fact that these species look very interesting as far as their colour is concerned. The monkeys are also not so big. Adult male red colobus individuals reach 70 centimetres at most. They do not look aggressive either.

Of course in Europe it is impossible to keep these animals at large. They would run away very quickly and probably in this unfriendly environment they would also die very quickly, or become victims of people or wild animals. Their situation is obvious then: “for their own good” they are sentenced to enslavement and feeding. And this is what happens in Bruegel’s painting. The monkeys have been chained to a thick, round handle situated in the middle of the windowsill. The chains are very solid, maybe even too solid for small animals like these. Next to the monkeys, there are food leftovers, probably nutshells. The little animals sit and are cringed. One of them looks at “us”, and the other one, sitting almost turned back to us, keeps its head down. They are motionless. Of course they could make some moves, but only around the space of the small window. This is the maximum the short chain makes possible for them to do. The window, half-round at the top makes an impression of a tiny, concrete cell. This effect is achieved by means of a clever compositional solution of this work as this space actually could be graphically shown by means of two figures: a circle or a spiral.

The closed circle is a result of connecting the top arch of the window, which, through the side lines of the walls, ends with an optical continuation at the bottom, where one can see another arch, this time constructed by the monkeys’ tails (picture 1). The compositional spiral is much clearer and suggestive, though. It could be drawn, starting from the metal handle to which both chains are attached, and which is situated in the centre of the windowsill. The spiral “unfolds” anticlockwise: starting from the handle,
then going through the tail and the contour of the monkey’s back (the one sitting on the right side), and next through the contour of the back and tail of the monkey sitting on the left side. Next, the line has a continuation on the outward edge of the window on the right side and through the top arch of the window it closes on the left side, behind the back of the monkey which looks at “us” (picture 2). Schematically, both compositional figures could be presented in the following way:

![picture 1](image1.png) ![picture 2](image2.png)

Instead of a back wall of the “cell”, in which the monkeys are kept, we have a wonderful panorama of the port city. And this is the second, possible to distinguish space of the painting: an open, bright and sunny view. What we know is the fact that it is a view over Antwerp, a one-hundred-thousand metropolis, the then European capital of commerce. Bruegel knew this city very well because he lived there for a few years and that was also the place where he painted *Two Monkeys*.

Ships of the whole Old and the New World were coming to the port of Antwerp. “All of the major trading houses of Europe – the Gualterotti family in Florence, the Fugger and Weiser families in Augsburg, the Spinoli, Bonuisi and many other families had trading posts in Antwerp, “the city of wonders.” It must have been an incredible and astounding view for the newcomers to see thousands of foreign wagons and vehicles from nearby villages coming to Antwerp every day. And when sometimes a few hundreds of huge freighters were dropping their anchors into the sea” (Menzel 13).

And that is actually the image of the “city of wonders” which we can see behind the window of Bruegel’s painting: a huge port overlooking a broad water surface, dozens of ships of various size approaching the shore or leaving for their voyage, a densely
built-up shore, church towers, a windmill... The space reaching up to the line of horizon. Bright and sunny. Calm water, air, birds flying freely. It is difficult to resist an impression that Bruegel did care about the contrast between the narrow, dark window and the bright outside world. The difference becomes even clearer when the most important components of both spaces get juxtaposed in the table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the window space</th>
<th>the space outside of the window</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. two monkeys in an unnatural environment</td>
<td>two (clearly visible) birds in a natural environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. a small, narrow interior</td>
<td>a huge, open space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. stillness</td>
<td>motion (birds flying, ships sailing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. dark colours</td>
<td>bright colours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. cold of the wall</td>
<td>sunny warmth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. precision of details representation, clear lines</td>
<td>blurred view (air perspective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. here (the place of both monkeys and the recipient)</td>
<td>there</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above juxtaposition naturally results in oppositions going beyond literal meanings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the window space</th>
<th>the space outside of the window</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. closure</td>
<td>openness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. enslavement</td>
<td>freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. reality in which we function</td>
<td>reality that is for us inaccessible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 “Two basilicas, eight canals and seventy-four bridges which cross them, twenty-two plazas, forty-two huge buildings made Antwerp some kind of a museum of architecture, where one could find all the styles ever invented that were blooming with an unprecedented excess” (Francis 23).
And here we step out of the level of “the content which was painted”, as previously mentioned Abraham Ortelius wrote, to enter “the content which needs to be understood.” And what we probably “need to understand” most of all is the fact that Bruegel creates a work of allegorical character. He paints monkeys, but does not only talk about the monkeys. The content “which was painted” makes a much more profound sense. Let’s try to discover this sense.

The monkeys’ fate is foregone. They are enslaved and sentenced to a wretched existence forever. They live in stillness, chained, literally and metaphorically, to the window. They are dependent on their master, who wields absolute power over them and who – from their perspective – is basically some kind of an absolute. The master feeds them when he wants and with food that he chooses. And the monkeys need to reconcile with that. What is more, they must be grateful for that. This is a condition to survive. Rebellion does not make sense and actually it is even impossible. The only gesture which the little animals can make is a desperate try to jump further than the chain makes it possible for them to do. Towards one or the other direction: the outside or the inside. Every time the effect would be similar. A little bit funny, a little bit grotesque, a little bit pathetic. In an extreme case it would be death. But even this death would not mean setting oneself free from the chain, but rather hanging in emptiness, void. So there is a following alternative: you live enslaved, fully aware of your situation, or you do not live at all.

Bruegel shows the desperate existential situation of the monkeys in many different ways. One of these are already mentioned compositional solutions. What indicates the enslavement and an inability to get out of the given space is a closed figure of circle. The compositional spiral, thrust into the niche of the window, evokes an additional tension, which even more exposes the tragedy of the prisoners’ fate. What also cannot be ignored is the fact that the painting – if we can say something like this – does not have a central plan. We can see the space of enslavement (the window) and the space of freedom (the outside panorama), in which elements like, the bird flying, the ship sailing, the sky, the water, take on a particular, symbolic meaning. Between the first and the latter world a huge precipice appears. And this precipice is impossible to cross, even if the monkeys were not chained to the window. The perspective used by the painter suggests that the window is very high. Too high to make the desperate monkeys survive a potential jump. It is cruel to seemingly make freedom within a reach of one’s hand, but to make it so inaccessible. The invisible boundary (the back wall of the “cell”) is impossible to cross. The prisoners can watch the freedom space which is so close to them, but cannot get there. This awareness makes them suffer even more.

Freedom turns out to be only an illusion, something unreal, inaccessible. Maybe that is actually why (not only because of the requirements of the air perspective) the world outside of the window is blurred, deprived of clear contours, a little bit out of reality. However, what is depicted with a great realism, it is the situation of a brutal enslavement
in which the monkeys have to live. It is a well-known place, it is tamed. Here we can see every single detail, even the smallest piece of the nutshell or piece of the damaged wall. The appearance of the animals, their behaviour and the poses they make cannot be surprising then.

It is difficult to say which of the little animals looks more pathetic. Monkeys, in a normal environment, creatures very lively and energetic, here live in immobility, in a total numbness. They surrendered, lost any hope. They are both cringed in such a way that they evoke feelings of mercy and compassion. But each of them seems to “tell” the observer something else. One of them sits turned back to us, keeping its head down, totally defeated. It is not interested either in the outside or the inside world anymore. The monkey is lost in itself. The other animal, on the other hand, looks at us very intensively, but it is a type of look that we would probably prefer to avoid. The monkey looks at us, but seems not to see. That is, as if it did not focus on our superficiality, but rather infiltrated us with its eyes. Its gaze is very human, and it makes us feel anxious, does not let us pass by indifferently. It is like remorse. In the animal’s eyes there is a boundless despair, sadness, melancholy, but also grievance. The monkey seems to pose the most dramatic questions about its lot, but also forces us to ask ourselves about our own lives. Maybe a hopeless situation of the monkeys chained to the window could be similar to the situation of human beings living in this world? If that painting were Bruegel’s diagnosis on humanity, this diagnosis would be very bitter and ironic. All in all, it is embedded in the eyes of animals that are despised by human beings. One is certain: both monkeys, in their appearance and behaviour are very similar to a man…

It is also worth underlining that even though the “prisoners” experience the same tragedy, they suffer in loneliness. “My suffering is only mine” claimed the main character of The Sorrows of Young Werther. Bruegel’s characters, only if they could talk, they could say the same thing, but with no satisfaction. Only with bitterness. Chained to one handle, they are sentenced to slavery, and what is more, they are also sentenced to each other, which apparently does not help them at all. They do not comfort each other, do not hug, do not make any friendly gesture. Maybe they are sitting in this way, turned away from each other, separately, because they have just fought over the nut? In some comments on the painting people refer to the Dutch proverb: “to fight over a hazelnut” , that is, to have a conflict about something trivial, insignificant. If one interpreted the painting as a reference to this proverb, we could come to the conclusion that the monkeys’ brutal lot is a consequence of their life attitude, their own foolish behaviour. That it is an effect of being focused on the immediate profit, which “covers the horizon of freedom to the inhabitants of the fortress forced to live there” (Bruegel 28). Actually it could refer not only to the ones forced to live in the fortress, but also to the inhabitants of Antwerp. Let’s remind: it was a city “where merchants from all over the world used to display perfumes and roots of the East, furs of the Urals and cloths woven at the end of the world (Francis 23). Being after a quick profit, inhabitants of this
world trade capital did not avoid dangerous financial speculations, in this way putting themselves at risk of bankruptcy.

Interpretation like this, however, seems to be too narrow. That is why Bruegel’s allegory had different interpretations as well. These are mentioned by Jacek Brzozowski:

This picture has been understood in many different ways: as “one of the handful of testimonies on the painter’s private life” in which “he seems to talk about (...) his own misfortunes”; as a symbolic picture of Flemish “provinces subjected to Spain and Rome”; as an allegory of evil that has been tamed, trammelled satan, or in the other way round: a man – prisoner of sin; as a grotesque portrayal of “slaves who renounced freedom” (Brzozowski 19).

All of these proposals of interpretation are sometimes more and sometimes less convincing, but they all seem to make sense, especially when we take into consideration an existential situation of a painter in 1562, and last but not least, if we think of a political and social situation of the then Netherlands. It was a region of conflicts and religious oppressions. “While Bruegel was painting, Flemish Protestants were being slaughtered or tortured by forces loyal to their Catholic supervisors – that was a reality outside of the artist’s workshop; his Massacre of the Innocents from 1563 […] is somehow a reflection of the then events, a reflection full of horror and sympathy (Bell 209–210).

It could be stated that the earlier painting Two Monkeys relates to the same topic, but in a more subtle and allegoric manner. Even though “outside of the artist’s workshop” much less subtle things were taking place. Supported by Spanish army that was looting Dutch provinces, the Inquisition was gaining more power: “when some heretic was being dragged to the old part of town, to the dungeon of the convicts, amongst the anxious, unfriendly crowd there was Bruegel as well. He was there when, at the market square, at the end of des Claires Street or in Galgenveld, terribly mutilated people were being thrown into the fire. He suffered and screamed along with the murdered ones” (Francis 37).

It is difficult to clearly state whether the artist supported the Reformation, or he was a Lutheran, Calvinist or Anabaptist, or even if he belonged to any “heretical” organisations. It is believed that he was a member of a sect called “Schola Charitatis” and one of the reasons why he left Antwerp (departure to Brussels in 1563) was the fact that he wanted to avoid persecution (Rose Marie and Reiner Hagen 160). What is certain though, it is the fact that “his artistic input is a part of the nonconformist trend of that century, aimed at the abuse of both the Church and the government. [Bruegel] Defends the human right to debate, right to the freedom of thought. Even if it takes place within Christianity, whose contours blur more and more, it is all about an independent thought” (Francis 12).
In the painting *Two Monkeys* we can see not only whole “provinces subjected to Spain and Rome” (Francis 57), but also a single man subjected to a religious and political system, a man who is being or was deprived of the right to an independent thought, an independent point of view. It is a man enslaved, experiencing an existential tragedy. And it is a man fully aware of their lot. At the same time, though, it is a person who does not want to reconcile with this state of affairs and that is why, with such an enormous bitterness and rebuke this man looks at us through the eyes of an enslaved monkey. If we consider this gaze also as a form of rebellion, certainly it is a rebellion deprived of hope for any change.

Interpretation of the painting *Two Monkeys* as some kind of Bruegel’s bitter auto-reflection, certainly making sense if one takes the artist’s personal experiences into consideration, might make even more sense if one thinks of a detail that has not been mentioned yet. Of course if it is right to assume that this detail is an effect the artist wanted to achieve, and it is not only an accidental optical illusion. When the reproduction gets magnified (again it is worth underlining that the painting is of a very small format) the stern of one of the ships entering the Antwerpian port (between the monkeys’ heads) looks like… a hidden portrait of a man.

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2 Besides the ideological context, there are also marriage issues. It is believed that Bruegel left a woman in Antwerp with whom he was in a relationship for a few years. Requested by his future mother-in-law, he moved to Brussels, where he married Maria van Aelst, a daughter of his master-painter, Pieter Coeck van Aelst.

3 This plot was discovered by one of my students, Jakub Korpusiński, during our private conversation about the painting.
Is it the painter’s self-portrait? Bruegel’s images, which we know today, could indicate that this hypothesis might make sense.

In the context of deliberations on Bruegel’s personal tragedy, whose freedom of thought is so limited, and also in the context of a tragedy of occupied Dutch provinces one could risk a thesis that the hidden portrait represents a face of hated king Philip II of Spain. That fervent slayer of “heretics” by Protestants in the Netherlands was called “The Devil of the South.” His symbolic presence in Bruegel’s painting could be justifiable then.

1. Titian, (Tiziano Vecelli or Tiziano Vecellio), Portrait of Philip II of Spain (1527-1598), 1551, oil on canvas, 193 cm × 111 cm, Prado Museum, Spain.


The alleged hidden portrait is so faint though, that other suppositions are possible as well. Maybe Bruegel in this unusual way depicted his master Pirter Coeck van Aelst...
who was teaching him the art of painting for so many years? Or maybe it is somebody who was supposed to receive the painting as a present. Or maybe all of it is just an accidental overinterpretation, because in the picture there is no hidden portrait, but only a random layout of shades... However, the longer I gaze at the work, the more convinced I become that there is something about it.

Let it be another secret of a tiny painting by a great Dutch master.

A Very Short Poem by Szymborska...

In 1957, at first in press, and then in a volume of poetry Calling out to Yeti, a very short poem by Wisława Szymborska called Brueghel’s Two Monkeys was published. There is no doubt: the future Nobel prize winner certainly refers to the tiny work of the Dutch painter. The title suggests that a subject of reflection will be either the painting itself or the monkeys depicted in it. Let’s take a look at it, making use of a translation by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavaanagh (Szymborska Nothing twice... 145):

Brueghel’s Two Monkeys

This is what I see in my dreams about final exams:

two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill,
the sky behind them flutters,
the sea is taking its bath.

The exam is History of Mankind.
I stammer and hedge.

One monkey stares and listens with mocking disdain,
the other seems to be dreaming away —
but when it's clear I don't know what to say
he prompts me with a gentle
clinking of his chain.

The first sentence already suggests that Szymborska’s poem, similarly to Bruegel’s painting, describes something more than a lot of the two little monkeys. Paraphrasing Abraham Ortelius’s statement that we mentioned before, one could conclude that in Szymborska’s poem, besides “things that are written” there is also “the thing one has to understand.”

As far as a literal meaning is concerned, the poet just describes one of her dreams. Describing the setting of the dream, Szymborska performs a brilliant ekphrasis of Bruegel’s work. Maybe even the most brilliant ekphrasis in whole literature. It is as tiny as the painting and equally rich in content. The poet shows what the real art of a poetic
summary is about. I needed a few pages to express something for which she needed just three short verses…

The first verse of the ekphrasis ("two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill") relates to Bruegel’s "space of enslavement", so static and gloomy. The poet describes it in a very down-to-earth and literal manner, which corresponds with Bruegel’s realism. On the other hand, next two verses ("the sky behind them flutters, / the sea is taking its bath") describe a dynamic and cheerful "space of freedom." This time Szymborska enlivens it by means of clever metaphors (in the picture the view is blurred), thanks to which she managed to condense the content of Bruegel’s painting to the maximum. What we should bear in mind as well is the fact that this trick corresponds with a poetry of dreams, in which, as we know, everything can happen.

Despite the inevitable imperfection, which occurs while translating poetry from one language to another, in this case the translators almost completely managed to maintain the "contrast of versification" corresponding with the contrast of Bruegel’s two spaces. That is, the first verse of the ekphrasis is long and calm, and the next two verses are short and dynamic, but if one joined them together, they would perfectly match the construct of the first verse (as in the original version).

The rest of the verses of the poem are not a description of the painting anymore, but they are a description of events which take place in it. And actually – if it is appropriate to say something like this – it is a description of something which happens between the painting and a recipient, who somehow becomes another character. The painting had to "revive", and the recipient had to "enter" the depicted scene, which as a result stopped being only a scene, a still frame, but changed into a place of action. This type of transformations is obviously impossible in a real life. In a dream, as we already mentioned, everything can happen, though.

A character from the dream and the poem at the same time talks about a traumatic experience through which they go at present (that is why a lyric subject uses the present tense). Final exams are obviously very stressful for a young person, but in this particular case there must be something more about it.

First of all, let’s underline that Szymborska talks about taking an exam on a subject that is not taught in any of high schools: "History of Mankind." The one that sits the exam does not handle it well ("I stammer and hedge."). Writing about it, the poet specifies a separate part of the poem, which consists of two short verses and two categorical sentences at the same time. In the original version both of the verses, if joined together, they would be an analogical verse to the first verse of the poem (additionally, joined with it by a rhyme). The poet; however, divides (like in the case of the previously mentioned ekphrasis) these regular structures, thanks to which she achieves a strong dramaturgic effect and reinforces the message.

The one who is being examined, cannot absolutely cope with it and at some point he/she even stops “to stammer and hedge.” The person does not know what to say. In
the original version Szymborska writes that “silence sets in” and then a quiet, but terrifying sound is heard. One of the monkeys prompts the lost man “with a gentle clinking of his chain.” It is the best prompt both for the person who takes this exam and any single reader. Thanks to this it suddenly becomes clear what “History of Mankind” is about… The way this “history” is shown can be summarised in one short and silent “clinking of a chain.” If so, we should not be surprised to see that the examination board consists of real professionals, true experts in their field, that is the enslaved, desperate and terribly sad monkeys from Bruegel’s painting. Thanks to the brilliant reference to the work of the Dutch master, the diagnosis on humanity given by Szymborska becomes very ironic and because of it even more disturbing. What an irony: a monkey, an animal despised by a man, just a little bit human-like, takes pity on us and prompts us as much as it can. The poet even strengthens this already strong punch line by means of a rhyme (the translator managed to use an analogical rhyme: “disdain” – “chain”) and also uses an appropriate segmentation of the work. In the original version all the verses which appear in the third part of the poem have the same structure already known from the two previous parts. Besides the last verse, which is unusual as far as a number of syllables is concerned.

It is a strange experience when two monkeys try to rescue an ashamed and oppressed human being. It only intensifies our trauma. It is a strange examination board, which consists of chained animals. It is a strange exam, which is nowhere to be taken, in none of the schools in this world: “History of Mankind.” But let’s not forget that everything what is happening, it is a dream. The fact that Szymborska decided to talk through the description of a dream, of course cannot be an accident, though.

A Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung underlined that dream is “a spontaneous and symbolic self-portrait of a current situation in subconsciousness” and a commentary on individual complexes of the one who dreams (Samuels, Shorter, Plaut 110). Dreams, according to the creator of analytical psychology, are of a compensatory function; however, what is compensated through a dream is usually not so obvious straightaway. Reaching the truth that might take the form of a dream requires a patient interpretation. Jung also underlines that “there are dreams whose aim is to disintegrate and destroy (these are nightmares). They perform their compensatory task in an especially unpleasant manner. Such dreams, which bring so many strong emotions, very often become so called “powerful dreams” and they even might have an influence on the way a man’s life changes” (Samuels, Shorter, Plaut 110).

Szymborska, writing about the final exams, does use a phrase “powerful dream” (which is not present in the English translation). That is why one could say that the character of the poem experiences a “nightmare”, which performs its “compensatory task in an especially unpleasant manner.” It is some kind of a “self-portrait” of an internal state of a man who dreams, a “self-portrait” in which individual complexes rise to the surface. “A powerful dream” is a difficult and terrifying experience, but –
according to Jung – it can also “have an influence on the way a man’s life changes.” It can also be a change for something better.

In the Polish language a synonym to a word “matura”, used in the poem Brueghel’s Two Monkeys, it is a formula “the exam of maturity.” Passing this exam in a way can be acknowledged as a symbolic “change”, a transition from childhood to adulthood, from naivety to maturity itself. Szymborska takes her poetic exam very late. When she writes Brueghel’s Two Monkeys she is already 34 years old… To understand what this specific and belated transgression in Wisława Szymborska’s case is about, one has to listen to some confession that the poet made many years later. Not until 1991 in a speech given on the occasion of receiving a prestigious Goethe Prize, for the first time in public (Bikont, Szczęsna 107) the poet commented on a very troublesome and painful issue. An issue that many Polish people could not forgive her, that is, the engagement in communism. In Frankfurt, while giving the speech, Szymborska was saying: “Reality sometimes can be so chaotic and frighteningly incomprehensible that one would like to find some more durable order, to divide this reality into something what is important and not important, what is dated and new, disruptive and helpful. It is a dangerous temptation, because very often at that point, between the world and progress some kind of ideology appears. An ideology that promises to segregate and explain everything. There are writers who resisted that temptation and preferred to trust their own instinct and conscience rather than confide in any mediators. Unfortunately I yielded to this temptation, which my first two volumes of poetry give evidence to. It has been many years since that time, but I remember very well all the phases connected with that experience: from happiness and belief that thanks to the doctrine I can see the world clearer and wider – to the discovery that what I see so clearly and widely is not the real world anymore, but an artificial construction, which covers it” (“Cenię wątpliwość”)

As we can see, while receiving such prestigious award, Szymborska felt the need to talk in public about a problem of enslavement by a communistic ideology. In a poetic manner though, she did that many years before in her third volume of poetry, Calling out to Yeti. At that time, when a deep mental and psychiatric breakthrough entered the poet’s life, the problem disclosed “by itself” in a shape of “a powerful dream about the final exams”, a nightmare which – as Jung would say – was a sign of “a change in man’s life.” When one analyses the whole lot of Szymborska’s artistic input, one could say that this painful exam taken in front of Bruegel’s monkeys had a profound meaning. That was the moment when Szymborska’s poetic maturity began, and its crowning achievement was the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Szymborska, when talking about herself, never hid her naive faith in a communistic ideology. Memories from that period, though, were always accompanied by a feeling of profound sadness. “I was completing my <<verse-formed tasks>> with a belief that I was doing the right thing. It is the worst experience of my life” – she said in 1991. (Michajów) However, this “the worst experience” was not denied by the poet, it was
not forgotten, but, becoming a subject of a profound reflection, it brought a positive “change in man’s life”, it turned out to be a painful, but useful lesson for the future. In another conversation from 1991 Szymborska admitted:

“But for that sorrow, that feeling of guilt, I might even never regret the experiences from those years. Without them I would never know what it is like to believe in some one and only equity. And then it is so easy not to know about something that you do not want to know about. (...) I also understood that love for the mankind is a very dangerous feeling, because the most often it leads to making people happy by force. And finally one more conclusion: that it is possible to shake off this blindness, that it is possible to recover, though…” (“Przepustowość owiec”)

Stanisław Balbus, a literary critic, summarising Szymborska’s artistic input in 1996, wrote that publishing the third volume of poetry, Calling out to Yeti, was actually an appropriate, “the second debut” of the poet. But it was also, Balbus writes, one “of the most important factors for Polish poetry after the October 1956 to resurrect” at all (Balbus). It is true – Szymborska’s personal transformation should also be seen in a wider, political context. Talking about the October 1956, Balbus meant so called October breakthrough, that is a process of changes in Polish culture, taking place in years 1954-1956. Everything started from Stalin’s death (1953), and its climax it reached in October 1956 (this is where the name comes from), when changes in Polish communistic party occurred and a programme on the liberalisation of the country was announced. At that time in Hungary a bloody anti-communistic uprising broke out.

In such context a personal and deeply auto-ironic poem by Szymborska Two Monkeys takes on wider meanings. In some way she also becomes a voice of the generation. In a poem To my Friends, which found its place in the same volume of poetry, Szymborska is very direct about the process: “On a route from the lie to the truth you stop being young” (Szymborska Wiersze wybrane 42). It is time to grow up. The dream is about to be over, it is high time to shake off the naivety and clearly look at the brutal reality. It is time to report back to yourself, like Szymborska did in Two Monkeys, being earnest and auto-ironic. It is also time to settle with “the long night of history” (Brzozowski 1996). The Powerful History as well.

Conclusion

Similarly to the case of Two Monkeys by Bruegel, Two Monkeys by Szymborska can be interpreted at least through three dimensions. Firstly, in relation to the poet’s personal experiences and also experiences of the whole generation of people forced after the World War II to function in communistic Poland. Secondly, in relation to the Powerful History – as a reflection on the “subjected provinces”, that is, Poland and other countries of so called Eastern Bloc, enslaved by communistic forces, terrorised and censored. If Bruegel painted his Two Monkeys in times of Stalinism, “the hidden portrait” in his work probably would not depict the face of “the Devil of the South”, that is, Philip II of
Spain, but the face of “the Devil of the East” – a dictator of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin.

And thirdly, finally, maybe the most important dimension – Szymborska’s poem can be interpreted as a universal diagnosis of man’s situation in this world. This is what “History of Mankind” is about. The monkey “prompts me”, the poet writes, and this “me” obviously relates to the character from the poem, talking about their dream, but it can also relate to us, to every single reader. The merciless prompt “with a gentle clinking of his chain” is heard very loudly above the time and space. All of us, including the monkeys, we are stuck in Bruegel’s “space of enslavement.” But not all of us have to agree with this state of being.

Bruegel and Szymborska are soulmates. There is something which connects them, as Jacek Brzozowski writes, something “which sooner or later tells independent and wisely sceptical minds to meet and inducts them into, of course changing due to time lapse, but also lasting above the time, an eternal republic of free and wise spirits – artists, thinkers, poets” (Brzozowski 21).

Let’s hope that ordinary people from time to time can also be inducted into this “republic of free spirits…”

References
Contact
Piotr Kołodziej PhD
Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland
pako@up.krakow.pl