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**Compositional Paradoxes and Self-creation  
in Wisława Szymborska's  
Poetry Book "Sól" (Salt), 1962**

**1. Introduction**

A poet's self-creation through poetry can be linked with the way how she or he arranges a sequence or a book of poems; that means also that he or she is different in every new poetry book, poetic sequence or cycle. Szymborska's books show a remarkable concern with composition from the first one on, "Dlatego żyjemy" (1952), she gradually developed and refined her methods of arranging her poetry books, and she significantly changed her poetic persona from volume to volume. Paradoxes mark poems, composition and poetic persona in as early a volume as "Pytania zadawane sobie" (1954); their significance is increasing and reaches a first high point in the volume "Sól", 1962.

My study emerges from a greater research project dealing with the theory and the history of the European "poetical cycle", in English better known as "poetic sequence" or "ordered texts". Research into sequences is not new, its

beginnings go back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and it plays a role in Germany, Russia and North America (much less in France). Poland knew in the 1970's a trend in researching the composition of poetic cycles above all in contemporary Polish poetry; in the last years, cyclical compositions are being discovered in older Polish poetry.

What is especially interesting in reading poems as sequences or books? It is above all the effect of suddenly seeing far. You first carefully read and even analyse a poem in itself. Then you read it and reread it again and again in the context of the sequence or of the book, and through the links to neighbouring or distant poems, you sometimes discover entirely new meanings even in single words of your poem. The whole semantic hierarchy of your poem then begins to move. It certainly does not lose completely its identity with itself. But in the new context, it is assuming the additional function to be a part of a shadowy new whole. In a word, there is a specific aesthetic and intellectual pleasure in reading and analysing lyric cycles, but it is unfortunately true that this is rarely conveyed in learned composition analyses. I shall try to do at least a little better in my present paper.

The main problem I shall discuss is how the compositional

level of a poetry book like "Sól" contributes to what I call the cyclical subject, in other terms to the constitution of the auctorial subject which is gradually emerging from the interplay between the poems in a given poetry book. The cyclical subject is never to be simply identified with the real author; it is one of the semiotic dimensions of the given group of poetic texts. On the other hand, it is not pure logic or linguistic abstraction, either. There are unmistakable gender specifics in the cyclical subject of "Sól". —

One of the main paradoxes that mark the composition of "Sól" can be seen as a continuous antinomy between the cyclical subject's selfdegradation and its royal selfelevation. This antinomy is the main reason why readers get the impression of brilliant intelligence, humour and irony. In this, Szymborska remembers, and sometimes even evokes, Jan Kochanowski. The initial poem [1] "Małpa", a feminine word meaning the ape, contains elements of the poet's ironic self-portrait. But the she-ape is here also Cassandra who is not to be laughed at. The Troy-motif returns in [4] "Chwila w Troi", with a very explicit allusion to Kochanowski's "Odprawa posłów greckich"; here, we have the paradoxical metamorphosis of harmless and ridiculous little girls into relentless and triumphant Helena's, whose throat is worthy rebuffing the Greek envoys and the besiege of Troy. In [6] "

Reszta”, the poet addresses and incorporates an Ophelia who “will not totally die from love”: “Ofelio, mnie i tobie niech Dania przebaczy: zginę w skrzydłach, przeżyję w praktycznych pazurkach. Non omnis moriar z miłości”. Shakespeare (Ophelia) and Horace (Non omnis moriar — Horace, Carmina III, 30, incipit “Exegi monumentum aere perennius”) are here parodistically and seriously alluded to, and with them Kochanowski. A slight smell of Kochanowski’s proud self-irony is also to be felt in the fraszka-like epicedium or epitaphium

“Nagrobek”:

Tu leży staroświecka jak przecinek  
autorka paru wierszy. Wieczny odpoczynek  
raczyła dać jej ziemia, pomimo że trup  
nie należał do żadnych z grup...

In the following paragraphs, I shall illustrate this antinomy by paradoxical links between poems first in the centre, then in the ending and finally in the beginning of the book “Sól”.

## **2. The paradoxical role of the unhappy love motif in “Sól”; some remarks on the centre of the book.**

Narrative components are one of the essential problems in poetic cycle theory. Maybe they do not necessarily occur in every sequence or poetry book, but in many they do, so in “Sól”. And if they do, they generally follow two rules:

they undergo lyrical deformation (roughly as they do in the context of a single lyrical poem when occurring there), and they must not dominate the whole but stay reduced to mere reflexes, echoes and hints.

## **2.1. Manifold epic threads in “Sól”**

In “Sól” we encounter many a narrative or epic thread. One of them recalls the history of the human kind. It begins with the she-ape chased away from paradise earlier than human beings ([1] “Małpa”), mentions the invention of fire ([31] “Notatka”), quotes motifs from the Gilgamesch epics ([27] “Woda”), from biblical stories (Job, [28] “Streszczenie”), from ancient Greek myths including Homer ([4] “Chwila w Troi”). It evokes the history of Alexander the Great ([2] “Lekcja”) and the catastrophes of World War II ([13] “Obóz głodowy pod Jasłem”, [26] “Sen”). Strangely enough, this epic thread reminds of Victor Hugo’s “La Légende des siècles”, with whose high-sounding poetry Szymborska otherwise has little in common. Now in “Sól”, this epical thread is of course not presented in its linear chronological order, as I did in my little résumé, but forms an associative, non-linear pattern. It so reminds an arbitrary journey through times and spaces. This journey motif obtains concretisation in some poems speaking of “real” journeys in our times, one nearby journey to the former hunger camp Jasło ([13]

“Obóz głodowy pod Jasłem”), or longer journeys to France and other destinations ([7] “Kloszard”, [8] “Słówka”; [9] “Elegia podróżna”). The link between the lyrical “narration” of mankind’s evolution and individual journeys can be seen as a method to give the generally male vision and version of great history and great myths of humanity a subjective and even feminine turn.

## **2.2. The “narrative” theme of love treason**

But the greatest effect to arrive at that turn comes from the unhappy love story, elements of which we find in all parts of “Sól”, especially in its central part, poems [15] to [18]. In [15] “Ballada”, a loving woman sings in the style of a kitchen maid or street ballad the story how she has been murdered by her lover without blood and how she now paradoxically is living on, “even singing when combing my hair that grows”. [16] “Przy winie” repeats the rhythmic pattern of “Ballada” in order to convey the effects of wine, dance and love, but changes stylistic register. Here, a woman (the same woman?) tells how she imagined to have been created by the caresses and the regards of her lover and how she discovered to exist now only like a plain nail on the wall to which formerly her image was hung up. This becomes a starting point for sober poetic self-creation (cf. also “Non omnis moriar z miłości” — [6] “Reszta”) instead of being

created by mere male inspiration as a mere male illusion. Women as mere male phantasms are shown in [17] “Kobiety Rubensa” (“tłuste dania miłosne”) and [18] “Koloratura”. The cyclical subject’s poetical self-creation or new creation is the hidden topic of the whole volume.

The motif of refused love is quite explicitly linked to [20] “Wieczór autorski”, where we find the ironical self-portrait of a poet reading before a small, annoyed or even sleeping audience.

There is an element of overt selfdegradation in this unhappy love story and its link to the poet’s presentation of her lack of real popularity. But this is again a selfdegradation that paradoxically contributes to the image of sovereignty and superiority, which the cyclical subject conveys. To this effect, the unhappy love story is embedded into the great epic dimensions of mankind’s evolution and myths, and these two contexts relativise and ironise each other mutually. This can be seen in a rather long series of poems that show the ridiculous sides of pretended male strength of thought, will or brain in general or private history. We shall comment on them in a later paragraph. The image of sovereignty emerging from selfdegradation is furthermore strengthened by a practical demonstration: our poet speaks to us about her degradation but demonstrates us without words her

masterly capacity to create ingenious links between her seemingly naive poems.

### **3. Paradoxical links between ending and other parts of the cycle.**

#### **3.1. "Rozmowa z kamieniem" and "Jestem za blisko".**

Szymborska's art of composition can be seen in the link between the last poem of the book, [32] "Rozmowa z kamieniem", "Conversation with a Stone", and the poem [24] "Jestem za blisko", "I am too close". "I am too close" is the monologue of a woman holding in her arms her sleeping lover and feeling that she has no chance to enter into the world he is actually dreaming of. She is too close to him to be an object of his dreams, "too close to him to drop to him from the sky". This motif returns in modified form in the final poem "Conversation with a Stone", where in sarcastic words, the he-stone (very male grammatically ("kamień") and in his behaviour) refuses a curious woman access to his inside. The alienation between the she-lover and the he-lover is transformed here into the general problem of female and male human being's forbidden access to any kind of metaphysical transcendence, be it the very essence or inside of a stone, a drop of water or a leaf (or even of a single hair on your head). It has been said that Szymborska does not know of any metaphysics or otherworld. This is not quite



true, since the place of metaphysics is taken in her poetry by the great realm of pre-human and extra-human natural objects and beings, which mankind has left behind in the course of evolution, and to which access is now hermetically closed. But Szymborska did not make this poem a cold, abstract philosophical ode on Kant's famous epistemological problem with *das Ding an sich* whose essence man cannot know. The he-stone even makes a joke on this problem saying ambiguously "Możesz mnie poznać, nie zaznasz mnie nigdy". Nor did Szymborska follow the romantic lament on our impossibility to find the way back to nature's magic and secrets. Instead, the situation of a woman who does not find any access to or dialogue with her male partner remains perfectly recognisable, and this is also owed to the paradoxical link with [24] "I am too close". It is no coincidence that the stone in the final poem speaks words that could be those of the sleeping lover:

Całą powierzchnią zwracam się ku tobie,  
a całym wnętrzem leżę odwrócony.

With all my outside I turn to you,  
with all my inside I lie turned away from you

### 3.3. Final and initial poems

At first glance, it seems difficult to discover specific links between the final [32] “Rozmowa z kamieniem” and the initial [1] “Małpa” poems of the volume. But having recognised the overall paradoxical structure of the book and of the interplay between the individual poems, we can observe some striking correspondences between them. The most important one is the common motif of the poet’s interest in empathy and human intimacy with the pre-human or extra-human. In the final poem these were the stone, the drop of water and the leaf; in the initial one, we have the she-ape, “earlier than human beings chased away from paradise”, as we read in the first line. The reason for this was, as we learn, the she-ape’s too sad eyes when looking around in the garden Eden. She made the angels unhappy by her contaminating eyes; she disturbed not by words but by her regard that general harmony within God’s creation, which Job dared not criticise (cf. [28] “Streszczenie”). We may assume that the paradise, from which the she-ape was chased away, has something to do with the fascinating interiors or inside of the he-stone the woman of the final poem is so eager to enter. There is also a considerable thematic equivalence between the woman in [32] “Rozmowa z kamieniem” and the lyrical speaker of [1] “Małpa”. The woman is able to talk to a stone and to get an answer from it or him, and the lyrical speaker of

“Małpa” is able to feel with a pre-human being. There is also a common element of auctorial self-identification in both of the poems, which is particularly striking in the case of the she-ape. Not only is the she-ape given the dignity of a Cassandra (“Kassandra. Z czego tu się śmiać?”) but also the female capacity of self-irony: “kpi z siebie, czyli daje dobry przykład / nam, o których wie wszystko jak uboga krewna, / chociaż się sobie nie kłaniamy” — a comparison taken from explicitly feminine ways of behaviour.

As in Szymborska’s later poetry books, “Sól” contains some poems with motifs from the domain of pre-human beings or extra-human objects. Among them, [32] “Rozmowa z kamieniem” and [1] “Małpa” seem to be especially linked to [29] “W rzece Heraklita”, the heroes of which are fish, ryby, feminine in Polish like małpa, the ape. The great Greek male philosopher’s river is peopled here by a grammatically exclusively feminine world of subjects, objects and ideas; it is like a quiet practical triumph of feminine life over male philosophical abstraction:

W rzece heraklita  
ryba łowi ryby  
ryba ćwiartkuje rybę ostrą rybą  
...  
ryba kocha rybę

...

ryba wymyśliła rybę nad rybami,

W rzece Heraklita

ja ryba pojedyncza, ja ryba odrębna

...

pisuję w poszczególnych chwilach małe ryby

w łusce srebrnej tak krótko,

że może to ciemność w zakłopotaniu mruga?

No doubt, that these grammatically feminine "ryby" mean occasionally also he-fish, or men, but the general category is feminine, and so is the lyrical voice we hear in the end of and throughout the volume.

[29] "W rzece Heraklita" is linked to a whole series of poems containing more or less overt criticism or even sarcasm aiming at the strong half of mankind. It begins with the ridiculous cutting of the Gordian knot by Alexander the Great and his army consisting of little knots ("armia węzełków"), little knots to be cut later. One high point is the remarkable caricature of a body builder in [19] "Konkurs piękności męskiej" ("Rozkroku mistrz i przykucania"). Sublime is the criticism on the cowardly attitude of Job ([28] "Streszczenie) who dares not criticise God's cruelty to him, because he

could disturb general harmony. At the end of the climax we find the sarcastic praise of a male zero in [30] “Wiersz ku czci”.

This leads me to one more remark on the book’s beginning. We remember that it opens with [1] “Małpa”, something like a modern ode to praise the she-ape (which in Polish can also mean the he-ape) that contains some hints to the poet’s self-portrait. The following poem, [2] “Lekcja”, combines a lesson about the bases of Polish syntax and morphology with another lesson on brutal male force and its prevailing over philosophy. The example is Alexander the Great, who by cutting the Gordian knot ridicules all philosophers who did not find a solution to the problem. Nothing seems to link these two first poems of the book, but it is precisely this non-link that obtains paradoxical meaning within the whole of the book “Sól”. It is the cut link between female and male that paradoxically makes a strong thematic linking thread between the poems of this book.

There is one thing in “Sól” that smoothes this gender confrontation: in many poems, a male perspective is clearly evoked, ironically or not. Male appreciations, opinions, stylistic features of typically male speech, are quoted everywhere; the cyclical subject’s female voice is emerging from between manifold male registers, intonations and

thoughts that function a bit like "free indirect discourse". Examples can be found in [1] "Małpa", [2] "Lekcja", [7] "Kloszard", [17] "Kobiety Rubensa", [18] "Koloratura", [19] "Konkurs piękności męskiej", [23] "Wizerunek", [24] "Jestem za blisko", [30] "Wiersz ku czci", [32] "Rozmowa z kamieniem".

#### **4. Some final remarks**

It seems that Szymborska criticism has not found one simple convincing solution to the enigmatic title word of the book "Sól"; why salt? The question is justified since as good as nothing in the main text does directly or indirectly repeat the motif of salt. This motif unites as different things as the salt in tears and in the sea, as well as the evangelical salt ("ye are the salt of the earth", St. Matthew 5, 13), and finally the attic salt of the wit. Maybe the attic salt of the wit is a good solution. Maybe also, that it hints already to the idea of the later poem "Żona Lota" (see the volume "Wielka liczba", 1976), a praise of Lot's disobedient wife whom God transforms into a salt pillar. In any case the female gender, *ta sól*, should also be taken into consideration. We have seen more than once in our analysis, that the grammatical gender of words plays a significant role in this poetry book. We can link the salt motif with the tears about the end of a

love (no tears are shed in the poems), or with the oceans of the journeys, myths and historical episodes (seas, together with lakes and rivers, are mentioned in [27] “Woda”), or with the cyclical subject’s undeniable wit and quiet metaphysical disobedience. In any of these cases, the female gender of the title and key word acquires poetic sense. The whole volume “Sól” reverses the traditional hierarchy of what is universal; this universe is generally female and includes men.

“Sól” is a poetry book of paradoxical inner compositional coherence and consistency, if we accept contrasts as a legitimate way of linking poems. Each poem can be read for itself, together they form a loosely, but well structured whole. Ending, centre and beginning are brought into hidden relationship. The narrative elements, which do not dominate in this book, allude to natural and mankind history as well as to the unhappy ending of a love affair which in a way becomes a starting point of poetical creation and self-creation. In [15] “Ballada”, we found the motif of the poet as an undead female victim of murder through betrayed love. This can be understood in the sense that she has now become also part of an extra-human world, able to show compassion with she-apes and change words with a stone. This reminds of Mickiewicz’s early “Ballads and

Romances” (1822), where the motif of mental death from unfulfilled love makes the poet fit to leave the narrow limits of subjective individuality, to communicate with the petty people and with the world of ghosts. Post-war poets like Różewicz or Szymborska herself make frequent use of the motif of a survivor’s existence between life and dead, surrounded by the faces and gestures of the unforgotten dead. They speak of a second hand life with a short way to the dead and to death, and they were certainly aware that Mickiewicz did so, too, in his first two poetry books.

But Mickiewicz is most probably not the main literary context of this poetry book and its peculiar composition, even if we admit that Mickiewicz’s ”Ballads and Romances” contain likewise many rather witty and paradoxical elements, also on their compositional level. One hidden motif in ”Sól” hints to Bolesław Leśmian. We find it in [26] ”Sen”, a woman’s dreamed meeting with her lover who died in the war. Here we read: ”Zaczyna istnieć łąka między nami”, what we should translate as follows: ”A meadow/a link comes to exist between us”. The semantic neologism of the word ”łąka” exploits the common etymological root of ”łąka” (meadow) and ”łączyć” (to link; cf. roz-łąka ”unlink”, ”separation”); it had been invented by Bolesław Leśmian, the outstanding Polish lyrical poet of the 20th Century, author of the famous



volume "Łąka" 1920. The motif "łąka" had occurred in [13] "Obóz głodowy pod Jasłem", as the now idyllic place where years ago a hunger camp was installed and all prisoners died from starvation. The two poems are linked in quite a special and enigmatic way.

The nearest context obviously consists of Szymborska's own former poetry books including the first ones, "Dlatego żyjemy" and "Pytania zadawane sobie". From the beginning on and up to "Sól", Szymborska composes her poetry books carefully. Quite evidently, the composition of "Sól" is the fruit of foregoing experiments and experience. If we look at the poetry books of authors from Szymborska's generation like Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Różewicz and Miron Białoszewski, we can see that all of them take much care to arrive at a convincing composition of their poetry books. I think that in this like in many other respects the example of Julian Przyboś and his after war poetry books "Póki my żyjemy" (1944), "Miejsce na ziemi" (1945), "Rzut pionowy" (1952), "Narzędzie ze światła" (1958) have had their effects. Great must also have been the impact of Czesław Miłosz's "Ocalenie" (1945). But we should also think of the contemporary European context of Szymborska's "Sól" (and other volumes). French poetry books or lyrical sequences certainly did play an important

role (presumably especially Paul Eluard and Francis Ponge); but the dialogue with contemporary East and Central European poetry books, especially the Czech ones, should not be underestimated.

But as we have seen, the "genre memory" of "Sól" as a sequence of poems is not limited to modern poetry. By its allusions to Kochanowski, it implicitly hints also to at least one his poetry books, the book of epigrams ("Fraszki" 1584). One less known Kochanowski sequence shows a distant similarity to humour and self-irony in Szymborska's "Sól", "Lyricorum libellus" (Little book of lyrics), published in 1580 and known under the somewhat misleading title "Odes". Szymborska could have read it in Leopold Staff's Polish translation (Lyrica. Wybór 1956; cf. Kochanowski 1982) as well as in the "memorial edition" of 1884 in the full Latin original and its Polish prose translation of T. Krasnosielski. Kochanowski put together here his old praises of the unfortunate French candidate to the Polish throne, Henri Valois, and a new one to the new king, Stefan Batory, and stylises himself as a man who has fallen from his horse, the horse of his life, of his political views and of his poetry. Szymborska must have read this with much interest and pleasure, and she uses in "Sól" the motif of refused love with the same kingly sovereignty, as Kochanowski used the motif

of the poet who fell from his horse.

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