

ABSTRACT

The Life and Words of Wisława Szymborska as Presented in the British and American Press in the Years 1996-2012

The purpose of the dissertation titled *The Life and Words of Wisława Szymborska as Presented in the British and American Press in the Years 1996-2012* is to show how the daily press of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of the United States of America covered the biography and the work of the Polish Nobel prize winner as well as to explain the reasons why only some newspapers referred to the poet in their articles. To achieve this aim firstly, following Geert Hofstede's findings and his insights into the dimensions of national cultures, the press discourse was set against the background of most important values of British and American cultures, through which the press "filtered" information about the representatives of other cultures and their literary output. Secondly, the synthetic description of the history of the development, segmentation and functions of the contemporary British and American press were provided and the rules of selection, shaping and transferring the information by the press about literature were presented. The analysis was rooted in, among others, Marshall McLuhan's ideas that "the medium is the message" and thus it influences the recipient and his perception of the information.

The analysis of primary sources – the articles from selected British and American newspapers, allowed for answering more specific questions: did publications related to the life and writings of Szymborska appear in the press only in the moments crucial for Szymborska's international career, that is mainly in the year she was awarded the Nobel prize in Literature; what was the frequency and form in which the publications appeared; what was the tone (e.g. critical or favourable) of the publications; what aspects of her life and literary output did British and American press notice and appreciate and which aspects were omitted, etc. The answer to these questions – it is hoped – will contribute to the broadening of the literary knowledge about how the readers of British and American dailies perceived the Polish Noble prize winner and how the press processed and presented cultural content.

The time frame for the analysis (the beginning of it) is the year 1996 when Szymborska was awarded the Nobel prize in Literature and the year 2012 (the end of it) when Szymborska died. Both dates are crucial not only from the point of view of the

poet herself but for the Polish and Western culture. By giving Szymborska the most highly regarded award in the Western world the Swedish Academy officially validated her model of biography and poetry and the press familiarized the British and American societies with the achievements of the Polish poet as well as explained the significance of Szymborska to the world culture. This way each volume of her poetry was read and commented upon not only among the readers of her poetry but also among other members of the Western world. Szymborska's death, like the death of other prominent people, resulted in a wave of extended obituaries, posthumous remembrance and summaries of her contribution to the world literature. In other words, in 1996 and 2012 Szymborska was most noticeable for the so called common people of the United Kingdom and the United States for whom media, including newspapers, were the source of knowledge about the surrounding world, including cultural events. It was in these years that the daily press had greatest impact: for the contemporaries it created and for the posterity established a specific model of Wisława Szymborska as a person and an artist.

Since the author of the dissertation was interested in the degree of knowledge about Szymborska among "common" newspaper readers and not people professionally involved in literature (the readers of literary and academic periodicals, anthologies or academic coursebooks), the primary materials for research come from the most popular dailies in Britain and the USA, representing most important sectors of daily and weekly press and most prominent political and ideological options. The material for the analysis was taken from the archival press releases and was published in the years 1996–2012. The articles that mentioned Szymborska or her poetry were taken into account. As the list of British and American press titles is long and the analysis of all of them would exceed the capacity of one person, the dissertation discusses publications coming only from most widely read newspapers in the UK and the USA. This is also explained by the fact that that few transatlantic newspapers, mainly the ones targeting well educated readers, published articles about Szymborska in the period of time covered in the dissertation. As far as the United Kingdom is concerned these were *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, and in the United States *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *USA TODAY*.

The primary sources come from the newspapers, weeklies and press releases, that are a part of the collection of Biblioteka Narodowa [the National Library] in Warsaw and from the national libraries of Britain (the British Library) and the United

States (the Library of Congress). All three institutions have access to the so called national bibliography. In Poland the latter consists of two catalogues: Polska Bibliografia Literacka [Polish Literary Bibliography] (available in a digital form, 1988–2003) and Bibliografia Zawartości Czasopism [Bibliography of Articles in Periodicals] – in paper form until 1996 and later in an electronic form on CDs. Since 1996 it has been a part of the current national bibliography of Biblioteka Narodowa. Additionally, American primary sources come from Newspapers.com website which is a main information source for the researchers of press published in the second half of the 20th century. Detailed description of these primary sources is included in the analytical chapters and their catalogue in the bibliography at the end of the thesis.

Dissertation has been divided into seven chapters.

Chapter one, titled *The Biography and Writings of Wisława Szymborska – the Polish Perspective* gives selected, crucial facts about the life and the stages of Szymborska's writing and shows how Polish press presented her and her life and verse before 1996.

The second chapter, titled *The Nobel Prize and Wisława Szymborska* discusses the issue of the international status of the Nobel prize: the ideas close to Alfred Nobel, the history of the prize and the criteria for the award. What is more, the dynamics of the translation of Szymborska into foreign languages outside Poland, including Swedish, German and English in the period before the poet had been awarded the prize in the field of literature are presented, and the reception of her poetry abroad elaborated on. The issue is of paramount importance since the availability of the translations of the potential Nobel prize winners determines, to a large degree, their chances for winning since the members of the Academy read mainly in these three languages.

The third chapter, *The Role of the Press in Social Communication*, briefly describes the most important media theories and the influence of media on society. In line with the main theme of the dissertation, the chapter focuses mainly on such issues as the function of the press, the role of creators and recipients of press messages and media-cultural mechanisms observed and analysed by such researchers as Marshall McLuhan, Dennis McQuail or Geert Hofstede. On a more general level, the information can be useful in understanding intercultural differences; on a detailed level it may facilitate understanding the way the press presented Szymborska.

Chapters four and five, *Daily Newspapers in the United States of America* and *Daily Newspapers in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* respectively, present the main stages of the development of the transatlantic press, its main kinds and reading trends. The status of literature in this press is mentioned too.

In chapters six and seven, *American Press and Wisława Szymborska in the Years 1996–2012* and *British Press and Wisława Szymborska in the Years 1996–2012* respectively, information about the presentation of high culture, including Szymborska and her poetry, in various kinds of newspapers is given. Values crucial for American and British cultures and the characteristics of the countries' poetry are introduced which may help to notice and understand the reasons why there are differences between American and British newspapers' coverage of Szymborska's poetry and the reasons for the popularity of the Polish poet. Data related to the ambassadors and translators of the poet's output in the Anglo-Saxon countries is presented too.

What allowed for the more detailed presentation of the problems mentioned above was the analysis of the primary sources, that is the catalogue of the materials related to the person and the writings of the Polish prize winner, published in the British and American daily papers. The questions to be answered were: at what stages of Szymborska's life British and American press published articles about her; what aspects of her life and writing individual newspapers noticed and appreciated and which ones were neglected or omitted; what tone – positive or negative accompanied these press opinions; and what genres these opinions assumed. The results of the analysis show that the majority of these publications, in particular those from the local press, repeated the same information that appeared in the national press, with only slight changes introduced to them, mainly on the level of article titles.

Due to the (great) number of primary sources, the author of the thesis started the analysis with the discussion of texts published in the most widely read British and American dailies, the ones printed in the broadsheet format. In the British Isles these are: *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, and in the United States *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *USA TODAY*, the latter being a popular and accessible alternative and compromise between challenging broadsheet market and intellectually lighter though still reliable information source. In chapter six publications that appeared in local press were briefly presented which allowed to see how the newspapers create, filter and replicate information. However, the aim was not to characterise all local newspapers since there is too much

material for one person to analyse. What was of importance here was showing general tendencies and supporting conclusion with evidence.

Before final comments are given, one can say that the material published in the local press is to a large extent either a compilation of information already published by American press agencies or a reprint of broadsheet dailies. The analysis neglected minor regional newspapers which narrow their interest to a given region or town only, and British and American tabloid press that focused mainly on controversial content and scandals. Since the great majority of these dailies remain indifferent to high culture, the fact that Szymborska had been given the award was not widely covered there or was acknowledged but briefly, with one sentence note.

In the section titled *Conclusion*, the findings about the image of Szymborska and her artistic output in the columns of American and British press are summarized. The main differences related to the reception, processing and the presentation of the material about Szymborska in the British and American press are elaborated on. This is because, as the analysis has shown, the American press emphasized different information related to Szymborska than the British press. It has been explained that the reason for this might be fundamental cultural values through which the representatives of both cultures filter their reality, including literary and cultural contents related to Szymborska.

The bibliography was meant to be not only a necessary addition and supporting material for the main text but also a separate entity everybody can make use of to explore other aspects of the dynamics of Szymborska's popularity in Britain and the USA.