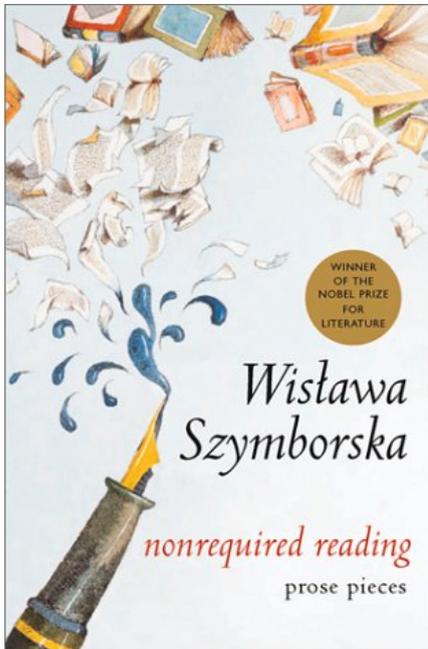

Nonrequired Reading: Prose Pieces (*Lektury nadobowiązkowe*), by Wisława Szymborska, translated by Clare Cavanagh (2002), 234 pages.



At first, it was a surprise for many of us to learn that the 1996 Nobel Prize winner has written a book in prose. This late in life, would this be a novel, a collection of short stories, or perhaps a philosophical essay? But it will be recalled that another poet, Czesław Miłosz, keeps writing prose, mostly reminiscences, so could the present work bear some similarity? Ultimately, however, one soon realizes that the "Prose pieces" listed in the subtitle are minor sketches prompted by various books to be exact, one hundred of them, half of them by Polish authors.

The writer herself warns us that these are definitely not book reviews. Let it be stated that the average reader should be forgiven as he searches for specks of wisdom from a prominent writer who has had an opportunity to read these books. Actually there were 300 of them over the period of thirty years (1967-2001), but this excellent English translation was cut to 100. An example: having read three volumes of Thomas Mann's memoirs, all she offers is the conclusion that "Mann was no angel." Jules Verne both read and wrote many travel adventure books, but we are only told that he was a repulsive individual, an egotist, and a tyrant. Regarding Dostoyevsky, his lovely wife leaves us with no doubt that he was a sick, manic, and petulant character.

To be sure, some statements offer a little entertainment. The old nobility generally receives poor marks. Guests of King Stanisław Poniatowski plopped right into the mud while descending from their elegant carriages in time for dinner at the royal palace. Poor Henry III of England occasionally did not know who he was or where he was. The sins of don Carlos were unspeakable, and the way Napoleon Bonaparte used his servants was revolting. All these people disappeared into history, although we are surely getting our share of brutes in modern times. Interestingly enough, political affairs of the past century are not mentioned in any of the sketches.

The West gets a gentle slap here and there, particularly when the shocking noise in museums, incorrect tourist behavior, or the ever-nodular "how-to" books are mentioned. The author is rather unmerciful towards the lifestyle of opera singers whose existence, with obligatory breathing exercises, vocal practice, rehearsals, custom fittings, and interviews must be dreary, boring, unglamorous. Here we are left a little speechless: this was and is the life of artists such as Caruso or Placido Domingo, who have earned the gratitude of millions for their tremendous achievements. After all, every art form demands its own kind of effort to reach perfection.

George E. Suboczewski